

# MANUFACTURED

THE VEXTON SERIES

BOOK ONE



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# CHAPTER 1

It was *the thing* everybody was talking about.

Over the last year, there had been an incredible buildup to this day. Many had even camped out for the last several days. And now, as the red, white, and blue neon lights of the VT logo illuminated the entire area, a murmur of anticipation ran through the capacity crowd. At precisely 8:00 p.m., when Vexton-Tech chairman Gerald Levin made his way to the stage, followed by his son and CEO, Skip, the crowd cheered with sheer excitement, knowing the moment was at hand.

Gerald stepped up to the podium and scanned the crowd with enthusiasm. “Good evening, everyone. Thank you so much for your support!” he said. “Many doubted this day would ever come. But I always say, when someone tells you that you’re incapable of doing something, ignore them. The doubters said this would never work; they said we could never make it affordable to the average American. Well, they were wrong!”

Once again, the crowd erupted into thunderous applause. Smiling, Gerald stepped back, and Skip stepped forward and took over the sound-blast. “Friends of Vexton-Tech, the moment you’ve all been waiting for is finally here. You’ve heard about it for quite some time. Believe me when I tell you, we are every bit as excited about this as you are.” He paused for effect. “I now present to you the first in our planned series of consumer robots: the Home Servant.”

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US President William T. Westgale shook his head and looked around at those gathered for an emergency meeting of his Environmental Safety Department. “Just six months ago, all three consulting reports we had performed on these SD10 acid rain air pockets recommended we stay the course for the next eighteen months, and now you’re telling me these damn things are emitting an advanced form of sulfur dioxide we have never seen before!”

“That’s correct, sir. Nobody expected this to happen,” replied Evan Ryder, the department’s director.

“Well, that’s not correct, Director Ryder,” Westgale snapped, his scowl deepening. “You know very well Professor Kinsley warned of this happening sooner rather than later, and as usual we ignored his advice. This administration is going to face all kinds of criticism over this, and I must admit, it’s most certainly deserved.”

“With all due respect, sir, if we listened to Kinsley and Forever Green’s fearmongering, we would constantly be generating paranoia across the country. Besides, we can’t accept the majority of their studies because they never follow our rules and standards,” said Director Ryder.

“I have Dr. Muller on the flash-screen, sir,” said Nicole Kratz, the president’s executive director and the country’s second in command.

Westgale gave her a short nod and a moment later directed toward the flash-screen, “Charles, I want you to be blunt. What are we looking at here?”

“The experts I’ve consulted with have told me that the effects felt will be minimal at this stage, and there is no need for panic. We’re looking at a very basic form of hay fever. I’ve also consulted with Dr. Ahar, who has informed me he will continue to monitor the situation,” replied Westgale’s medical chief.

“I must inform you, Mr. President, our view-file response patches have been overwhelmed with concerned citizens wanting to know what exactly is happening. I think it’s important we address the public tonight,” Nicole interjected.

Westgale nodded. “Yes. Set something up.”

Later that evening, in his address via the World Connect on the impact of SD10 acid rain, President Westgale stressed the fact that this matter was now in the very capable hands of Dr. Jack Ahar.

The Westgale Administration placed great confidence in Dr. Ahar. Revered by the American public, Ahar was unique in the fact that his expertise did not just lie in medical science, but in many scientific areas. His extremely informative program on the World Connect had garnered him celebrity status, bringing him admirers around the globe. He often lectured at the highly acclaimed Summit University in New York City, and acted as a consultant to medical and scientific agencies from around the world. Although he had become a scientific icon, when it came time to apply himself to his profession, Dr. Ahar was all business.

Following the address, as expected, Forever Green's leader, the nonpolitical Professor Trent Kinsley, lashed out at Westgale on the World Connect. "Whether it's President Westgale or Military Alliance Leader Devan Bedlam running this country, it is highly pertinent we begin to show respect to our home: our treasured Mother Earth. For years on end, our government has been lying to the people of this country, pretending to care for our environment. This latest situation exemplifies that reprehensible deception. This government was well aware of those SD10 pockets of acid rain and could very well have had them eliminated. But no, they didn't do a single damn thing about it! And now we have the president telling citizens of this country that some of us will be affected by his negligence. This is totally unacceptable."

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At this time, besides dealing with the SD10 acid rain matter, Westgale was also facing the challenge of rescuing a farming industry that was in dire need of financial assistance on a massive scale. His recent plan called for subsidies of \$60 billion.

On the positive side of things, Westgale took great pride in the World Harmony Program, which he had developed with Executive Director Kratz. The program established intricate, systematic measures

with the goal of nonviolent cooperation via education, aid, and unity with the rest of the world. “The time has come for the greatest country in the world to escalate its tremendous leadership capabilities,” he proclaimed when he introduced the program to the American public. “Sure, we must steadfastly defend ourselves when the need arises, but my vision of America is one of a guiding light, a beacon for the rest of the world through its darkest hours. The World Harmony Program will serve as a symbol of hope for everyone on this planet.”

This met with mixed reactions. Those who supported Westgale’s administration, the Peace Bringers Association of America (PBA), thought the program was a tremendous proactive move, helping to create those ever-so-elusive footprints toward world peace. But those Americans who backed the Militant Alliance of America (MAA) believed this program was a complete waste of time and money—mostly because the PBA announced the program would be funded from its national security budget.

The program’s acceptance by the PBA Strategic Council so enraged MAA leader Devan Bedlam that he declared, “This is a sad day for America, my friends. In his speech this evening, Westgale referred to America as the greatest country in the world. That’s probably the only thing he has ever said that I’ve agreed with. The problem is, Westgale has no idea whatsoever why it is that America reigns supreme. Our supremacy is based on the fact that we are the lifeblood of this planet. We are not only the most productive and innovative country in the world, we are a force to be reckoned with! To those who question our greatness as a nation, we will continue to prove them wrong. Those who try to obstruct our treasured freedom, we will crush. Unfortunately, Westgale and his World Harmony Program will continue to drain resources from the very thing that enables us to remain supreme: the almighty American war machine!”

In the days following Bedlam’s speech, MAA supporters publicly displayed their disdain for the World Harmony Program with hostile rallies that prompted a direct response from Devan Bedlam: “To the dedicated supporters of the Militant Alliance, I ask you to please refrain from forms of aggression in your protests. This



movement is not about setting fires, looting, violently confronting police, or threatening opposition leaders. I realize you're angry and want to be heard, but we will not condone violence against fellow Americans or their property."

Although Bedlam's words helped to calm the uproar, they had little effect on groups of youthful Americans who were establishing underground extremist movements focused on the idea of complete American supremacy with absolute disregard for others around the world. They viewed themselves as the answer to America's rebirth.

The country's second-highest-ranking military man, General Clifford Sims, became the lead man in the investigation of AXE, one of these emerging groups. He enlisted Johnny T, an undercover New York City federal agent, to help infiltrate AXE. The agent learned that they were planning a major domestic terror attack as a direct response to the World Harmony Program.

When Sims revealed the frightening level of hatred this group felt toward the PBA, a saddened Westgale asked, "What have we come to, General? The thought of fellow Americans planning to attack their own country... How can this be?"

"They're like a pack of jackals," Sims growled. "At some point in their lives they had to have been brainwashed by a severe form of paranoia. It's as if only in conflict can they find peace."

"What has your source been able to find out?" asked Westgale.

"Since he found his way into the group a few weeks ago, he's made great inroads into learning how they operate. The group's leader is claiming to have recruited hundreds of members from across the country, but Johnny believes that he may actually have only twenty members or so on board. Either way, he's on top of this—we're going to nail these guys," Sims assured him.

## CHAPTER 2

Johnny T had managed to get into the inner circle of AXE leader Dwight Wagner—known as Dagger to members. They met frequently at a dilapidated abandoned warehouse that served as the group's central meeting place.

“Hey Dagger, what's Bedlam's problem? How come that idiot is so afraid of MAA supporters actually showing how they feel?” Johnny drawled after they'd watched the latest World Connect broadcast. “After all, he's supposed to be their leader.”

“Devan Bedlam is not the champion of a true militant movement,” Dagger replied, his tone animated by disdain. “He's merely a marionette for the affluent orchestrators of that party. I tell ya, Johnny, true militant extremism can only be rooted in the underground. That's why I've put this group together. We need to make people see past all the bullshit and realize America stands alone as the only country that matters.” Dagger punctuated his words by slamming his fist into the palm of his other hand.

Dwight had been a street urchin in his early teen years and was extremely street savvy. He had a charismatic appeal that had brought him and his younger brother Lucas to the forefront of several extremist street gangs. With AXE, he aimed at attracting a group of like-thinking young adults who shared his beliefs and his anger. He'd been delighted when he'd managed to recruit the disenchanting sons and daughters from very wealthy MAA-supporting families—finally, he began to receive the funding and connections he needed to develop his

master plan. Johnny had managed to record an incriminating conversation between Dagger and one such son, Morris Johns, confirming that the funding he'd promised was in place.

As the days went by, Johnny T could sense Dagger's anger growing. "We need to be heard, Johnny. These bastards have finally taken things too far with all this World Harmony garbage. Have you heard that idiot Westgale talking about leading the rest of the world through its darkest hours?" He paused and looked at Johnny, who had time only to nod before Dagger continued his tirade. "Yeah, that's right, let's just hand them money so they can find a way to bring *us* to our darkest hour!"

Dagger became increasingly emotional, and Johnny T knew he'd have to tread carefully to continue gaining Dagger's trust. When Dagger punctuated his vitriolic pronouncements by demanding loudly, "Are you with us, man? Can I count on you, bro?" Johnny knew his response needed to be filled with raw emotion.

"I'm with you, brother. I have two uncles who died in battle for this country." He swiped a hand over his brow as if overcome with anger himself. "I'm not about to stand by and watch some slick-talking PBA politicians just stomp all over their memories, as if their lives didn't matter. We need to send a message—loud and clear!"

Dagger nodded once, vigorously. "And if we go down for this, at least we'll be martyrs for a great cause. And for those who are willing to enable this Peace-Bringer government by entering those buildings on the day of reckoning... well, their demise will be highly welcomed," he finished ominously.

As the next few days passed, the plan started to take shape. The group had acquired a massive collection of artillery, including several high-tech explosive devices.

"Where's all this stuff coming from, man?" asked Johnny T.

"Let's just say I've got some very good contacts," replied Dagger with a smirk.

"Seriously, brother, you have some amazing stuff here. It has to be coming from somewhere," said Johnny, hoping Dagger would open up.

“My own connection won’t even tell me exactly where the stuff’s coming from,” Dagger admitted.

Johnny T backed off; no point jeopardizing the trust he’d earned so far. Instead, Johnny sent loads of flash images and audio recordings back to General Sims’s office to help build a solid case against AXE. He also relayed the most crucial information of all: the targets would be six government buildings, which would be attacked simultaneously at 9:30 a.m. on a Tuesday.

Two days before the attacks were to take place, Johnny T had relayed enough incriminating evidence that General Sims ordered his federal agents to move in and begin making arrests. Sims, along with a select team of agents, also moved on the warehouse headquarters, seizing the group’s artillery, along with \$25 million in cash, while Dagger was down the street at Stacy’s Diner, where Johnny T had set up a meeting.

Johnny had arrived early and ordered the diner cleared, then settled into a booth by the window to wait for Dagger to arrive. Minutes later, Dagger swaggered into the diner, dressed in his usual camouflage garb.

“Johnny, my man,” he practically crowed as he slid into the booth opposite Johnny T. He leaned over the table and dropped his voice to an exultant undertone. “Just a little less than forty-eight hours from now, our mission will be accomplished.” He whooshed out an amazed sigh and sat back, eyes on Johnny, shaking his head. “Wow! I feel an amazing rush, bro.” He looked around for the waitress and realized the diner was empty. “Whoa, it’s really dead in here this morning; usually this place is crammed at this time of day. I don’t even see Stacy.”

“Oh, she told me she had to step out for a bit,” Johnny said, rising quickly and moving around behind the lunch counter. “She said we could help ourselves to some coffee,” he said, returning with a carafe and a mug, which he filled for Dagger.

“To hell with the coffee. Come on, man.” Dagger leaned forward and raised his voice as Johnny returned the carafe to the counter. “You feel it, don’t you?”

Johnny turned and leaned his hands on the lunch counter. “Don’t mind me, Dagger, I may not show it on the outside, but inside I’m roaring like a hungry lion, mate.”

Dagger sat back. “Phew, for a moment I thought you were backing out.” He grinned and gushed, “Six government buildings all at one time—hell, this is going to be glorious.”

“You’re right, man, it is dead in here. Let’s at least get a little background noise happening.” Johnny T turned on the flash-screen mounted to the wall above them. “I think we can catch the New York World Connect news... Oh, good timing, it’s just starting. I don’t know about you, Dwight, but I like to stay informed.”

There was a silence for a beat. Then: “Hey, how the hell do you know my name?” Dagger demanded, but the newscast began, and the announcer dragged the extremist’s attention back to the screen.

“We are just receiving word that numerous arrests are being made involving a domestic terror group that refers to themselves as AXE—”

“Hell! Let’s go!” Dagger sputtered, leaping from the booth. “We’ve gotta get out of here!” He ran to the exit, and slammed into the locked door. He jiggled the bar violently and ineffectively for a few seconds before turning back toward Johnny, his face a mask of confusion. “What’s going on?”

“Place your hands on your head, Dwight!” shouted Johnny as he pulled out his laser-gun. Behind him, two agents emerged from the diner’s kitchen and moved quickly to handcuff the extremist.

“Sit him down,” Johnny told the agents.

“You’re a son of a bitch! A rotten rat!” shouted Dagger, his face red, spittle flying.

“And you, Dwight Wagner, are under arrest for conspiring to launch terror crimes against the United States of America. Good luck getting out of this one, *bro*,” Johnny sneered.

“Go ahead, take me in, you lowlife slave, but just remember: the forgotten never forget!” Dagger shouted as he was hauled back to his feet and taken away.

## CHAPTER 3

Freedom Home, formerly known as the White House, was a lively place on this particular evening—a presidential gala was celebrating both the World Harmony Program and General Vance Gibson, the US defense director, who was being honored for thirty-five years of dedicated service to the American military. Before festivities began, the general and President Westgale shared drinks in private, welcoming the chance to “talk shop” before invited dignitaries arrived.

“I’m confident the progress we’ve made internationally will really provide an opportunity for the World Harmony Program to be a massive success, Mr. President,” said General Gibson, ice clinking as he swirled the liquor in his glass.

Westgale looked down at his own glass to hide a mild frown of concern. “I’m just hoping we’re able to maintain our leadership in order to see it through,” he said.

Gibson chuckled, lightening the mood. “Yeah, if Bedlam were to take things over he’d probably change it to the World Destruction Program.”

Westgale smiled, then grew serious. “It’s going to be a difficult road ahead, Vance. If those farming subsidies are approved by the Strategic Council, we’ll see anger from the MAA supporters like we’ve never seen before.”

“And what are you supposed to do, William? Watch America’s farming industry collapse? Even the staunchest Militant Alliance supporters occasionally need to eat their fruit and vegetables.”

Now Westgale didn't hide his frown. "When they hear that my plan is to support those subsidies by depleting more funds from the national security budget, they'll become hungry, all right, but not for fruit and vegetables—hungry for my flesh, is more like it."

"Ah, Peace-Bringers, Militants, the battle never ends," Gibson sighed. "But hopefully one day we can find a way to peacefully coexist for the betterment of this amazing country."

A quick knock on the door prefaced it opening, and Beverley, General Gibson's daughter, strode into the room, carrying a large file box. She apologized breathlessly for the interruption as she dropped the box on a sideboard and stepped back, running a flustered hand through her curly auburn hair. "The school board warehouse delivery guy just dropped these off—two hours late," she said, still breathless. Westgale wondered why she hadn't commandeered an aide to carry the box for her. "These are the final two hundred entries that were chosen by your staff," she said, looking at Westgale, "and now Dad, it's your turn to choose the winner. It sure won't be easy. From what I've heard, some of these students really outdid themselves."

"Well, that's fantastic. I'm glad to see the youngsters here in Washington are so eager to express what it means to be an American." The general glanced at his watch as he moved over to the box. "Oh boy, there's only about twenty minutes before the ceremony begins, so I'd better get down to it and choose a winner."

"You do realize that we could have had these transferred to flash-files," Beverley told him. "It sure would've saved a lot of paper."

"Yeah, I guess we could have... but then it would have lessened their authenticity—the impact of the actual art, my dear," Gibson said with a smile as he lifted the box and headed for his office.

Westgale knew he'd have to leave soon to greet arriving dignitaries, but he paused to speak with Beverley. "So, from what my staff has told me, you've been doing terrific work in Agriculture, Beverley."

"Thank you, sir. Being one of the department's lead coordinators has provided me with such tremendous experience, and now with Secretary Adams retiring, I'm hoping I'll be given the chance to fill her

shoes. I'm especially excited now that Agriculture and Environmental Safety are going to be operating under one department."

Westgale nodded. "Your father has told me on many occasions that both farming and the environment are very dear to your heart."

"They most certainly are. The splendor of Mother Nature never fails to leave me in awe. And as far as farming goes, I'll never forget, as a child, visiting my uncle's farm in Texas. I was totally captivated by the beauty of it all—the fields, the crops, the animals—it was just all so amazing."

Westgale smiled. "It is a fantastic sight to behold, isn't it?"

A memory softened Beverley's expression. "I vividly recall watching this beautiful team of horses while on the farm. They were all chestnut and black except for this one little white colt named Bluesy. I stood by the fence watching them, hoping they would approach so I could feed and pet them, but they were busy grazing in the distance. Just as I was about to turn away, Bluesy looked over at me. It was as if he sensed I was upset. He came dashing over to the fence and stared right into my eyes. And I realized why they called him Bluesy. He had eyes the color of a blue summer sky. He came up against the fence and lay down, and he let me pet him. It's something I'll always remember."

"Did you ever have a chance to see Bluesy again?"

Beverley looked down and shook her head. "Unfortunately, my uncle lost the farm due to financial hardship."

"I've heard far too many of those stories in recent years," Westgale said. "Believe me, Beverley, I plan to do my part to help fix that, and if the Strategic Council votes you in as secretary, then I guess you'll be coming along for the ride."

She flushed pink, but smiled. "That would be a true privilege and an honor, sir."

The beginning of the ceremony was now close at hand. Westgale ushered Beverley out of the room before him, and they made their way to the ballroom where the evening's guests were taking their seats.

One of the president's aides intercepted Beverley at the door. "I'm sorry to bother you, Miss Gibson, but we're only a few minutes



from beginning the presentation, and I was wondering if you know where your father is.”

“Yes, he went to his office to choose a winner for the contest—the one where he asked young students here in Washington to draw what best epitomizes the meaning of America.”

The aide smiled. “Yes, both my kids submitted drawings. My eleven-year-old son created one where he wrote the word peace in several languages, then connected the words to form an American flag.”

“Ah, very creative... maybe he’ll be the winner. I’ll go see where Dad’s at,” Beverley said as she left for her father’s office.

“Hey Garrett, is he still in there?” Beverley asked her father’s personal security guard as she approached the door.

“Yes he is, ma’am. I’m sure choosing a winner isn’t an easy task,” replied the burly guard with a chuckle.

Beverley knocked on the door. “Come on, General, you have a room full of people waiting for you. I know the showman in you wants to keep them waiting, but it’s going to be a long night, so we should get things rolling.” She laughed, then waited. There was no response.

Garrett stepped up beside her. “General Gibson? General Gibson,” he called.

“Are you sure he’s still in there?” asked Beverley.

Garrett hid a frown as he glanced at her, then looked back to the door. “Yes, I’m sure. I’ve been on guard since he went inside.”

Nervous now, Beverley reached for the door lever, but Garrett gently removed her hand. “Ma’am, please, let me. It’s my job... proper security protocol.” He shrugged, then said formally, “Please step aside, ma’am.”

Beverley moved to one side as Garrett knocked again on the door. “General Gibson?” He pushed the door open, then whirled aside, blocking Beverley, and drew his gun as he pressed his emergency flash-pin, calling for assistance.

“What’s wrong?” Beverley cried, pushing past Garrett to stop in the doorway, frozen by shock and horror. “Oh my God!” she whispered.

Vance Gibson was slouched over his desk, his face pressed against its top.

Garrett pushed past her and took a step into the room. “Sir, can you hear me? Sir... General Gibson... can you hear me?”

“Get out of the way!” Beverley shrieked, trying to run past him. “He needs help!”

Garrett held her back. “You can’t go in there, Miss Gibson. I’m sorry, I know you’re concerned and afraid, but I can’t let you in there. Help will be here any second now.”

“I’m going in! That’s my father! I don’t care about your bloody protocol!” She struggled in Garrett’s grasp.

A Freedom Home Emergency Task Force unit finally came charging down the hall, equipped in full hazmat suits. Five members of the unit, along with two medics, entered the office, while the others spread out to search the rest of the floor. A piercing alarm began to blast through the building, along with a loud announcement ordering a complete evacuation. The cacophony drowned out Beverley’s sobs.

After officially being informed that her father was dead, Beverley anxiously waited all evening and into the morning for an explanation as to how he died. Being the daughter of a dedicated military man, she had always feared for her father’s well-being. But she’d never thought he’d be in danger in the Freedom Home.

Beverley was eventually brought through heightened security to Westgale’s office. As she entered, she saw tears glistening in the corners of the president’s eyes. He gestured her into one of the chairs facing his desk, but he remained standing beside a sideboard.

“I’m so sorry, Beverley,” Westgale murmured, pouring and handing her a glass of water. “We were just able to contact your mother in France, and my staff has arranged for her to be flown here to Washington.”

Beverley didn’t respond. She just sat there and stared vacantly before her. After what seemed like an eternity, she spoke. “Thank you for doing that, sir. Even though they’ve been separated for several years, my mother truly loved Dad, and he loved her.”

“I have grief counselors available for you if you wish to meet with one.”

“I appreciate the offer, but that won’t be necessary.” She paused for a long time before she continued. “My entire life I’ve feared I would lose my father to war. I would have nightmares of him being killed by gunfire or some horrific explosion in the midst of battle. But to learn he died while sitting at his desk, looking at drawings from school children, it’s just so surreal. Was it a heart attack?”

Before Westgale could answer the question, a knock came on the door.

“Come in, gentlemen,” said Westgale. “Beverley, I’m sure you know Dr. Muller, and my head of security, Agent Gil Robichaud.”

“Yes, hello gentlemen. Does anybody know how my father died?”

Gil studied her a moment before saying gently, “Your father was murdered, Miss Gibson.”

For a moment Beverley couldn’t breathe. Then she sputtered, “Murdered? He was sitting in his office looking at drawings by grade school students. How could he have been murdered?”

“He was poisoned,” replied Gil.

“How in the world did that happen?” Beverley blurted.

“The poison came from the drawing that was sitting on his desk, right in front of him. We’ve concluded that the toxin, once inhaled, prevented blood from reaching your father’s brain. It’s unclear at this point exactly how long it took the toxin to do its job, but from the position we found him at his desk we can conclude that your father would have, at the very least, been unconscious within seconds of removing the drawing from its envelope. We believe it was a painless death, Miss Gibson. We now have experts working to determine the exact chemical compound of this poison,” the lanky, bespectacled Dr. Muller added.

“How can it be? We had every piece of material in that box scanned, and Garrett was guarding him the whole time,” said a perplexed Beverley.

“We thoroughly questioned Garrett Porter, and he didn’t see or hear anything strange. We also confirmed what he told us, via the

Freedom Home image-vision system. We must also inform you that your father wasn't the only person murdered last evening. The police found the body of the young man who was supposed to be delivering the box from the school board. It appears he was killed upon entering his van. We believe the killer then seized his van, took his Freedom Home security pass, and made his way here. At some point, he slipped the poisonous envelope into the box," explained Gil.

"We have the most state-of-the-art security detection devices in this building; how did he get that bloody poison in here without it being detected?" Westgale growled.

"We're still in the process of putting all the facts together. Our preliminary examination has told us that the envelope holding the drawing was lined with a substance that would have blocked the scanner's detection chip from picking up the poison. Very sophisticated stuff, sir," replied Gil.

"Do any of you have an idea who may have done this?" asked Beverley.

"No," admitted Gil. "We'll need to determine whether this crime was personal or if it was targeting your father as America's defense director."

Westgale walked over to stare intently at the American flag behind his desk. "Your father woke up every morning to honor and protect our freedom," he said, his voice tight. He turned abruptly and pounded his fist on his desk. "How the hell did this happen?" he shouted.

"I wish I had the answer, sir. Whoever was behind this was not only highly sophisticated, but definitely highly motivated," Gil said.

"What about the drawing?" asked Westgale.

"It was a rather disturbing image. I'd rather not speak of the details out of respect for Miss Gibson," Gil said, not looking at her.

"Please... describe the drawing, Agent Robichaud," replied Beverley.

Gil looked at her. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. I need to know." She quickly brought up a tissue to dab new tears.

“It was some kind of demon warrior surrounded by raging flames,” Gil said quietly.

“What about the guy who actually delivered the box, did we not catch him on our image-vision system?” asked Westgale.

“Yes, we did, but he used one of those flash-chips to blur his image. At least we have a basic description, and we currently have investigators checking out the school warehouse,” replied Gil.

“I know this might sound crazy, but what about Devan Bedlam? Could he have been behind this?” asked Beverley.

“To Bedlam’s credit, the one positive thing he’s done since becoming leader of the MAA is to not promote the use of violence. So far he has stuck to his message against harming fellow Americans. Now, do I fully trust in his sincerity? Absolutely no. But unless we come across some proof, I’m not about to start making unfounded accusations,” said Westgale.

“Miss Gibson, I promise you, we will do everything in our power to find out who killed your father,” Gil assured her, his square jaw and powerful physique exuding strength. “Unfortunately, because of who your father was, it may be like finding a needle in a haystack. This murder was carefully planned, and the toxin used is rare and complex. I think it’s safe to say we’re dealing with a very serious and diabolical person or group here... one hell-bent on creating terror.”

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Over the next couple of weeks, Gil’s team of investigators worked day and night, searching for concrete information relating to General Gibson’s murder. Sadly, their efforts did not provide any tangible leads.

As promised, Westgale had his driver pick up Beverley and bring her to the Freedom Home for an update on the investigation. When she entered the building, intense sadness immediately overwhelmed her. However, she found comfort in the support she received from Westgale and his staff.

“So, how are things, Bev?” asked Westgale as an opening to their conversation.

Beverley nodded slowly. “Getting better each day. I want to really thank you and your staff for all you’ve done. My mother returned to France two days ago, but she asked me to pass this on to you.” She handed Westgale an envelope.

He opened it and read the letter inside. “Those are very kind words. Your father truly deserved that wonderful memorial. He was a spectacular human being, and will always be remembered.”

“Has the investigation uncovered *anything*?” Beverley asked, anxious to learn of any progress.

Westgale sighed and shook his head. “I wish I could tell you who committed this heinous act, but so far all we’ve had are some erroneous leads. Your father’s murder was a very well planned crime. However, Dr. Muller has consulted with our experts regarding the lethal chemical used in the murder, and he will be by shortly to provide us with an update. We’re hoping it will be helpful.”

“I’m just really afraid for everyone in the Administration. I hope, after what happened to my father, that you’re taking extra precautions.”

“Of course,” Westgale said. “But the most difficult thing to deal with in these situations is trying to move forward past the tragedy. Since your father’s death, many of us in the PBA have been distraught, including me. But really, Beverley, what choice do we have? We need to keep our heads up, be vigilant, and battle on.”

“And that’s exactly what the general would have wanted,” Beverley said, her voice thick. She blinked the tears from her eyes.

“As I know you’re well aware, part of that moving on includes naming a new defense director, which I’ll be doing tomorrow,” Westgale said carefully. “Besides having the pleasure of treating you to a late lunch this afternoon, that’s the primary reason I asked you here today. I felt it would be more appropriate to speak with you in advance of that announcement.”

“That’s very thoughtful of you, sir. I fully understand that life goes on. I just hope whoever replaces my father will be as devoted to this country as he was.”

“With regards to the devotion and excellence your father displayed... he’ll never be replaced.”

Moments later, Gil Robichaud appeared with Dr. Muller. “It’s lovely to see you again, Miss Gibson,” said Dr. Muller.

“Thank you, Doctor. The president informed me that your experts were able to determine the type of toxin that was used to kill my father.”

“Yes, it’s called helcin. As we suspected, within seconds of your father removing that piece of paper from the envelope, he would have died. If anybody had come within a few feet of that piece of paper without a protective mask on, they would have died as well.”

“Oh my goodness!” Beverley gasped. “I’m thankful, then, that Garrett prevented me from entering that room.”

Dr. Muller nodded somberly. “Whoever killed your father meant business. This chemical compound is extremely rare. There’s a high level of preparation involved in making it. We’re talking about a highly skilled scientist spending months in development.” He stressed the last sentence.

“Is there any history of helcin being used in the past, Gil?” asked Westgale.

“When Dr. Muller informed me it was helcin, I looked into it, sir. There are no cases in the domestic file, but there was one involving Cobra Pix and his Pinian militants. It happened a year ago. Apparently they stormed their government’s main building and killed a number of government officials with a similar form of helcin,” Gil replied.

“Considering Pix is highly in favor of seeing this country torn to pieces, I think it’s worth looking into,” said Westgale.

Gil nodded. “My team’s on it as we speak, sir.”

The following day, President Westgale announced General Clifford Sims as the new defense director. Sims was considered a true hero within the PBA, highly praised for his efforts in bringing down the AXE terror group. He brought with him a very charismatic and up-front demeanor, which was a far cry from the more laid back and cerebral approach of General Gibson. Sims was honored by the appointment, but he demonstrated his sadness for the loss of General

Gibson in his acceptance speech: “This is most definitely a bittersweet occasion. To be named defense director is an incredible honor, and I will do my best to serve this country with the utmost level of commitment and integrity. However, the loss of my predecessor, General Vance Gibson, will leave a void in this administration that will never be filled.”

As the next several days went by, concern grew that General Gibson’s murder case might never be solved. Despite the resources devoted toward solving the case, no progress had been made. After analyzing the Pinian government helcin attack, Robichaud’s team was unable to find any link to General Gibson’s murder. While Westgale was unwilling to close the investigation, he did decide to divert resources and manpower elsewhere until a solid lead was discovered.



## CHAPTER 4

On the morning of the announcement naming the country's new Secretary of Agriculture and Environmental Safety, Beverley awoke consumed with nervous excitement. She realized the other three candidates, with their greater experience, were more qualified for the position than she was, but she was convinced there was no way they could match her will and determination to make a difference.

When Beverley arrived at the Freedom Home, she visited the General Vance Gibson Nobility Shrine, constructed outside her father's old office. The scene moved her deeply. Nestled among gifts and mementos were flash-messages offering heartfelt condolences sent by many domestic and international political figures. As Beverley lay a rose among the other flowers in memory of her father, she heard footsteps approaching and turned to see her father's closest friend and associate, Colonel Mitchell Peters.

"Beverley, wonderful to see you, my dear. I'm so glad the president decided to create this shrine; it sure honors a great man. I must say I was totally moved by the speech you made at the memorial service."

"Thank you, sir. It was wonderful to celebrate my father's life with so many of his friends and associates. I know your friendship meant the world to my father."

"Your father was like a brother to me, a true inspiration. Believe me, if it wasn't for him, I wouldn't be where I am today. I'm sure

you'd like a few moments alone, but before I leave you, I'd like to present this in honor of the general." Colonel Peters placed a magnetic gold eagle medallion on the backdrop of the shrine.

"That's a splendid-looking medallion," said Beverley.

"It was bestowed upon me when I became a colonel," said Peters.

"Are you sure you don't want to hold on to that?"

"Please, accept it as a token of my appreciation for the finest man I've ever known. And if there's anything I can ever do for you or your mother, just let me know," the colonel said. Head bowed, he slowly walked away.

Beverley spent the next few moments reflecting on the memory of her father, then checked her time-pin and realized it was time to go to the council chamber. On the way there, she encountered her father's former lead administrative assistant, Fiona, struggling to carry a couple of large boxes.

"Hey Fiona, why don't you call one of the aides to help you with those?" Beverley suggested.

"It's actually good exercise for me," replied the diminutive Fiona.

"Are you moving to another office?"

"Oh, I guess you haven't heard... I've been let go."

For the first time, Beverley noticed Fiona's dejected expression. She'd been hiding it well. "Let go? You know more about how the military works than anybody in this entire administration," Beverley exclaimed.

"Ultimately, it was General Sims's decision to not keep me on staff. I guess he has his own group of people." She sighed and shifted the boxes. "This job meant so much to me. Not only did I love working for your father, but with my husband not being able to work... the job was a true blessing."

"I deeply feel for you." Beverley leaned forward. "I highly doubt I'm going to get the position today, but if I do, well, I'll definitely see if there's a way to bring you on board with me in some type of administrative capacity."

Fiona smiled. "I would really appreciate that. I wish you the best of luck."

Beverley continued to the council chamber, found a seat, and waited for the PBA Strategic Council to announce the results of its vote. Once again, nervous excitement pulsed through her.

Members of the council took their time, thanking the candidates for their contributions to the Administration. With each speech, Beverley's anxiety level increased. Finally, Nicole Kratz made her way to the front podium. "After several weeks of tireless analysis and deliberation, the fifty-three member Strategic Council for the Peace Bringers Association of America has finalized its vote. It is my pleasure to introduce, with a large majority of thirty-six votes, the new Secretary of Agriculture and Environmental Safety, Beverley Gibson."

Those words sent a rush of excitement soaring through Beverley. This was what she so strongly desired, the opportunity to make a difference. Though she was thrilled, she couldn't help but think of Fiona. Before joining some of her associates in celebration, she decided to pay a visit to General Sims and personally discuss Fiona's predicament.

Sims's office area took up almost an entire floor of the Freedom Home. The level of security was astonishing. Upon entering the reception area, she had to be cleared by a talk command robot called Eos, named after the Greek goddess of the dawn. When she entered the main reception area, Wanda Banks, Sims's lead administrative assistant, told her the general would be with her in a few minutes.

Beverley thanked her and sat down in the reception area to wait. She let her eyes run over some of the memorial plaques hanging on the wall across from her. *All those men and women who lost their lives to war*, she thought sadly.

"Makes you really think, doesn't it, Beverley?" Sims's deep voice said at her elbow.

She stood and turned to look at him. "It sure does, sir."

"Come on in," he said, and turned and returned to his office with Beverley on his heels. "Have a seat. Congratulations. I just received a flash-message giving me the good news of your appointment. That is just fantastic. Your father would be so proud."

Beverley smiled. "Thank you, sir. It's a dream come true."

Her father's office had resembled that of a family man and a hobbyist, but Sims's office was filled with all types of war memorabilia. Her father had put family first; she wondered if Sims's décor was a reflection of his personality.

"Here, have a chocolate," Sims said, holding a box of exotic-looking chocolates in front of her. "One of my navy commanders brought these to me today, right from Zurich. They're fantastic." As if to demonstrate, he selected one from the box and popped it into his mouth.

Beverley smiled and held up her hand. "They look delicious, but I'll have to pass."

Sims set the box on his desk and studied her a moment. "If you don't mind me saying, for someone who's just had a dream come to fruition, you seem somewhat down."

Seizing the opening, Beverley replied, "If I seem down, it has more to do with some disappointing news I received earlier today."

"Is it related to the fact that the investigation into your father's murder is at a standstill?"

"No, but it does relate to my father."

"How so?" Sims asked as he sat back down in his chair.

"Does the name Fiona Tanner ring a bell?"

"Sure; she worked for your father."

"For more than ten years," Beverley added. "And now she's out of a job. From what she told me, you're the one who decided to let her go."

Sims sighed and leaned back in his chair. "Yes, that's correct. Unfortunate, but let's just say there just isn't a place for her." He spoke matter-of-factly.

"How can you say that?" Beverley asked, hiding her annoyance at his attitude. "My father always spoke so highly of her and her job performance. In fact, everyone in my father's office did."

"I'm sure she is an outstanding person and a very capable employee." Sims stood and walked over to a machine in the corner of the spacious office. He rested his hand on top of it and turned back to look at Beverley. "Do you see this machine, Miss Gibson? We call

her Athena; she's our department's repository of knowledge. She's certainly the most important member of my staff, even more important than Wanda. Heck, when all is said and done, she's probably more important than I am." He chuckled. "It would take about seventy people to do the work she does." Sims pressed a few buttons and the flash-screen on his desk came to life. "What I just sent to my desk is a full, detailed description of every piece of artillery used by our military."

He returned to his desk and sat down, leaning forward to rest his elbows on the desk top. "In order to keep Athena operating properly, we do have to occasionally rely on robotics engineers. If Fiona had those skills I may have had a place for her, but I just don't have a need or the room in my budget for another administrative clerk."

Beverley's annoyance was turning to anger. "So, are you one of those people who believes human beings have become redundant unless they know how to make or fix machines?"

"Well... I'm still here, and so are you," Sims hedged. He sat back in his chair with another sigh. "Look, Secretary Gibson, I feel bad for anybody who loses their job, and I understand why Fiona holds a warm place in your heart, but when making important executive decisions, the mind needs to rule the heart. Now that you have become an important department head, you'll soon understand what I mean. I'm sure the healthy termination package Fiona receives will be very helpful to her until she's able to find another job. Now, if you don't mind, I have a meeting to attend in the next ten minutes."

"Thank you for your time, sir," Beverley said, rising abruptly. She turned and left without another word or a backward glance.

Watching her leave, Sims flashed back to his twelfth birthday, the memory conjured by Beverley Gibson's loss of a parent.

*LuLu's Diner. Uncle Slater had decided it was time he knew the truth about how his parents died.*

*"Couldn't anybody have saved them?" asked young Clifford, vigorously plunging his fork into his piece of dark chocolate cake.*

*“That was the first day the Hayes gun law came into effect. You see, Cliff, the store owner’s gun was taken away from him. If he still had it, he may have been able to protect your mom and dad during the robbery.”*

*When they returned home, Uncle Slater presented a neatly wrapped package to Cliff. The wrapping paper was decorated with military tanks and zap-grenades. “Here you go... I hope you like it.”*

*Cliff looked at the package with great excitement.*

*“Go ahead, open it up.”*

*Cliff complied, then looked up, elated. “Wow! Just what I asked for—a real laser-gun.”*

*“Now, what are the three things you need to remember?” asked Uncle Slater.*

*“Uh... it’s my right to have one, it’s only to be used against my enemies, and...oh yeah, they’re not weapons, they’re instruments of freedom.”*

During the next couple of weeks, as she was setting up her new office at the Freedom Home, Beverley was happy to have Fiona Tanner join her staff as Coordinator of Business Affairs.

## CHAPTER 5

With some quiet time available to us on a beautiful summer day, Sharon and I took time to relax in the backyard. She had just completed a very difficult trial that had left her feeling fatigued. Despite the sunshine's invitation and nothing on the day's agenda but relaxation, she hadn't yet put the case behind her.

"I hope I did the right thing, Heath," she said as she poured me a cold glass of orange juice. She wasn't frowning, but the line between her eyebrows was noticeable.

"There are rules to follow, and Dr. Langford was well aware of that," I said firmly.

"Yeah, but I could've at least requested the judge reduce the sentence." She set the pitcher of orange juice down on the patio table and settled back in the deck chair across from me, staring out into the yard without seeing it.

I leaned forward to get her attention. "The way I see it, as district attorney, you did what you had to do. Those medications are illegal for a reason, Sharon. Sure, they help the animals feel better quicker, but they're also potentially harmful to both the animals and the environment."

She sighed. "I guess you're right, but they were furious with me."

"Who?"

"It seemed like every farmer in town. They all rallied together requesting I go to Judge Webb, but I declined."

"I can understand how difficult that must have been for you." As director of Vexton Land Protection, I really could. I dealt with matters

relating to farms and land every day, as a liaison between them and our government.

“Sometimes, upholding the law can be a real challenge, but if people in my position don’t do that very thing, we end up living in a world of mayhem.”

Sharon looked exhausted. What she needed, I decided, was some downtime. I had an idea.

It had been difficult for us to find time to visit my mother, Grace, because of our busy schedules. For the last few years, she had been living at the Dennis Claremont Retirement Home, a home for the elderly named in honor of my late father. Fortunately, Mom was still in good health and able to help bring comfort to many of the residents who weren’t as fortunate as she was. Whether it was helping them remember to take their medications or organizing activities, Mom was the home’s true leader, and her caring demeanor was always on display.

“Honey, I’ve got an idea. While you’re busy closing off the Dr. Langford case, why don’t I take Riley to visit his grandmother? You’ve been juggling home and a heavy workload for a long time; you deserve a few days’ peace and quiet, just to recharge.”

It took some convincing, but finally Sharon agreed. I told her to take full advantage of our Home Servant—Vexton-Tech’s new line of consumer robots had quickly become a smashing success; nowadays it was a real challenge to find an American household that didn’t own a Vexton-Tech consumer robot—and the next morning I left with our eight-year-old son, Riley, to visit Mom.

\* \* \*

“Grandma, watch me, I can do really neat tricks with my soccer ball!” Riley called out as he lifted the ball from the ground with his foot. Mom encouraged him with applause, and he tossed the ball in the air and repeatedly bounced it off his head, then showed how he could throw the ball back to himself from behind his back. After he’d performed his tricks, his small but enthusiastic audience showed him their true appreciation with loving applause.



“That’s thirsty work,” Mom said, rising. “Let’s go inside and find you something to drink.” She took his hand and they walked into her suite deep in conversation.

I remained out on the patio with longtime family friend Zack Hampton, whose technology business was once a major success until, he claimed, Vexton-Tech’s “crooked ways” put him out of business. Whenever he talked like that I felt he was putting me on the spot. I’d been friends with Skip Levin, CEO of Vexton-Tech, since we were kids. I enjoyed the perks that afforded me—I found out about, and even got to use, all the latest innovations before everyone else did, as long as they’d received safety clearance from the American Technology Safety Standards Association (ATSS).

“It’s good to see the boy actually enjoys physical activity rather than sitting around playing with some machine all day long,” Zack commented, as he pulled at his orange suspenders. They were a glaring contrast against his blue t-shirt.

I hesitated, then decided warning him would be better than him finding out any other way. “Sorry to inform you, Uncle Zack, but that’s about to change soon. Skip has promised to send Riley one of those new Vexton-Tech Ro-Dogs.”

I’d run into Skip the week before, and when I mentioned that Riley was stoked about the new robots, Skip had told me he’d send one from the first shipment when it came in.

Zack’s expression soured, as I’d expected it would. “Yeah, I’ve heard about those. Knowing Gerald Levin, soon he’ll make a machine that will also replace the master. Good ol’ Gerald; in the world of business, he’s like a cunning predator awaiting his prey. When that man is finally summoned by Mephistopheles, his spirit will escape from the gates of hell and come back to haunt us all.”

I chuckled, but before I had to frame a reply, Mom shouted from inside the suite, her voice high with panic, “Heath—Heath!”

I jumped to my feet and ran inside. She stood in the doorway between the kitchenette and the sitting room, as if poised to run one way or the other. “What’s wrong, Mom? Are you okay?”

“It’s Riley!” She pointed into the room behind her. “He’s in the sitting room. There’s something wrong with him. He became angry for no apparent reason. He threw a laser-light across the room, and then he threw some chairs.”

“What’s he doing now?” I asked in alarm as I moved toward the doorway.

“That’s the crazy thing—after becoming enraged, he just fell to the floor.”

I’d reached the doorway by then. Mom moved aside and followed behind me as I entered the room. My son was sprawled facedown on the floor. “Someone call an ambulance!” I shouted as I ran toward him. I dropped to my knees beside him. “Riley, can you hear me, buddy? Riley, wake up—can you hear me?” He didn’t move.

The home’s staff nurse burst in and came running over to Riley. “There’s an ambulance on the way,” she said, as she rolled him onto his back and checked his vital signs. “He’s breathing!”

His eyes were open, but unseeing. It was as if he was lost in a motionless state. I looked up at the nurse, my body trembling. “Do you know what’s wrong with my son?”

“His vitals are okay, but we’d better get him to the hospital,” she replied.

I heard the ambulance’s piercing siren while I was calling Sharon to tell her what had happened. I took some comfort in knowing help was imminent. “I’ll call you back as soon as I know anything,” I told Sharon, and hung up as the medics arrived.

In my arms, Riley moaned, prompting a small surge of hope. He looked up at me, appearing extremely groggy, and mumbled, “Daddy, I feel so strange.” He rubbed his eyes with two small fists. I blinked back tears of relief.

“Do you feel any pain, Riley?” asked the lead medic.

“No, I just feel really strange.”

“Okay Riley, these nice men are going to take you and me for a ride so we can go see the doctor,” I said.

Mom leaned over and gave him a kiss on the cheek, and even though I assured her everything would be fine, I was shaking with

fear. Several frightening thoughts were running through my mind as I wondered what was happening to my son.

When we arrived at Vexton Memorial, the attending physician spoke with the medics, then turned to Riley and me. I was very pleased to see Dr. Holt tending my son. I always found him to be very caring and professional.

“Hello, Heath... and who do we have here?” he said, realizing Riley had come out of his catatonic state.

“This is my eight-year-old son, Riley,” I said.

Dr. Holt put Riley at ease by playing a word association game with him, made sure Riley was comfortable, then had a nurse take him for some basic tests while I explained the details of what had transpired.

Dr. Holt looked concerned. “Hmm... let’s get those tests done, and then I’ll perform my own examination.” He left me in a waiting area and moved on to another patient.

By that time Sharon had arrived. She, like me, was extremely anxious. “Heath, what on earth’s happened? Is he going to be all right?” she asked as she sat down beside me and leaned forward. I held her hands.

“He seems okay now. I don’t know what happened, honey, but it was very frightening.” We waited impatiently for the next hour as tests were being performed.

Dr. Holt reappeared. “Let’s speak in my office.” He led us down a hallway and into an office. “Please have a seat.”

We sat down. I held Sharon’s hand.

“All the testing has been performed, and Riley is still in a room being taken care of by a nurse. You have a very sweet and intelligent young boy, and does he ever adore the two of you.” He smiled at us. “I can see there’s a real mutual love. He also told me how excited he is by the fact that you’re going to be getting him one of those new robot dogs.”

“Yeah, that’s all he’s been talking about,” I replied.

“How is he, Doctor?” asked Sharon, whose hands were trembling.

“The test results and my examination indicate that your son has contracted LRS.”

“What on earth is LRS?” I asked.

“It stands for Lethargy Reaction Syndrome.”

“I’ve never heard of it. Is it rare?” asked Sharon.

“It’s an illness that has only come to light over the last few weeks. We’ve been seeing a rise in cases across the country,” Dr. Holt said. “As for the cause, the American Medical Organization is currently trying to figure that out.”

“The cause isn’t known?” asked Sharon. Panic edged her voice. I squeezed her hand.

“No, at this time, it isn’t,” Dr. Holt said gently.

“What else do you know about this illness, Doctor? Is there a cure? Is it life-threatening? Who’s prone to getting it?” I asked, my words racing out rapid-fire.

“At this early stage, very little is known about LRS. So far, the reported cases in the database show those afflicted have been both male and female, ranging from age six to twenty-one.”

“Are you telling us our son is going to have to live with this his entire life?” asked Sharon, tears spilling down her face.

“Like I said, it’s far too early to know what we’re really dealing with, Mrs. Claremont. We need to take things one day at a time.”

“Please be honest, Doctor. What are we to expect?” I asked, my heart pounding.

“You can expect more episodes exactly like what happened today. Our current research has shown there is no definitive pattern as to frequency. You will see Riley become agitated before entering into a motionless state. Fortunately, though, within about thirty minutes, the effects naturally subside.”

“And there’s no medication to help him?” asked Sharon, her voice quavering.

“Not at this time, but I know that, as we speak, it is being worked on,” Dr. Holt assured us. “This has now become a very urgent matter, and the medical community is fighting this thing full-on.”

“Is there anything *we* can do to help our son?” asked Sharon.

“Physically, at this point, I’m afraid there isn’t. Hopefully that will soon change. Mentally, there’s quite a bit you can both do, like

staying positive and continuing to show your son how much you love him. He'll most definitely need that."

Riley was kept in the hospital overnight for observation and released the following afternoon. On the way home, he was his usual self. I couldn't say the same for Sharon and me; we both looked and felt shell-shocked.

We spent the latter part of the evening trying our best to relax, under a starlit sky. We both realized we needed to heed Dr. Holt's advice and stay positive. As I held Sharon close to me, I did my best to ease the tension. "We'll be all right Sharon, as long as we face this with courage. I'm certain our son will be fine... I know he will... he has to be."

A few days later, to Riley's joyous delight, the Vexton-Tech Ro-Dog was delivered to our home. When we removed it from its box and brought it to life, Riley was ecstatic. "Dad, this is so neat. I can't wait to bring him outside!"

"Okay Riley, but only for a little while. You have to help me with some chores, like you promised," I said, as we watched the Ro-Dog run from our yard into the adjacent field.

"Wow! Look how high he can jump!" Riley bellowed.

I marveled at how lifelike the toy was in its construction. Skip had told me each Ro-Dog was unique. Everything from body and eye color to behavior patterns varied from one to the other. "You need to give him a name," I said.

"Ah... Jumper—I'll call him Jumper," Riley replied. Jumper was sandy brown with a white belly, and had light blue eyes.

Sharon and I were so glad to see Riley find such happiness in what we saw as a dreadful situation.

The next day he couldn't wait to bring Jumper back outside.

"Not today, Riles; there's a severe storm on the way," I told him, pointing to the sky.

"Daddy, are those dark clouds monsters? Does that mean God is sad and afraid? Our teacher told us that when it rains, it means God is crying. How come he's always so sad?"

“God is just like us, son. Most of the time he’s happy, but sometimes, yes, he does become sad and afraid.” Just as I finished my answer, lightning flashed several times, accompanied by roaring blasts of thunder. Moments later, a vicious downpour of rain and hailstones started.

Unfortunately, this weather held for the next several days. I had become used to witnessing storm after storm ravage many farms in the region. Frequently, I was called to the largest farm in Vexton County, Hollis Farms, to provide assistance. During one of these recent storms, I watched a wicked blast of wind obliterate a white wooden fence that had been containing a herd of calves. The calves ran wildly off in all directions, and a few of them ended up with minor injuries.

After the storm, while tending to his petrified animals, Neville Hollis said uneasily, “These weather extremes are really taking a massive toll on all of us. When you take into consideration the financial problems we’re facing, things are really looking dire, Heath. I know government assistance is on the way, but personally, I don’t know how long I can hang on.”

The empowered Peace-Bringer government had recently passed a bill that would provide \$60 billion worth of much-needed subsidized assistance to American farmers. As President Westgale expected, the MAA was outraged that these subsidies were coming at the expense of reducing military funding. I’d seen MAA leader Devan Bedlam rant on the World Connect, “If President Westgale and his idiotic associates believe our enemies view the world as some giant, friendly, peaceful playhouse, he’s gravely mistaken. As we weaken our defenses, the stronger *they* will become! These farms are no different than any other business; they need to be accountable for their own actions.”

That had made me angry. I was glad when Secretary Gibson countered with, “If we don’t aid our farming communities across the country, we will lose them. To blame our farmers for the severe weather issues they have had to deal with over the last several years is totally ludicrous. They desperately need our assistance, and I’m thrilled the Strategic Council voted in favor of doing just that.”

A few days later, the weather began to clear, and I was looking forward to a day of total relaxation. I had been at it every day for the last two weeks. I loved my job and took great pride in working with the farmers of Vexton, but sometimes it was extremely difficult, being blamed for the wrath of Mother Nature.

In the early afternoon, I received a call from Skip.

“Heath, I just wanted to make sure you received the Ro-Dog. I’d been meaning to follow up with you, but I’ve been so busy going over financials.”

“Oh, I guess you didn’t get my flash-message. I sent a thank you note a day after the toy arrived,” I said.

“Like I said, I’ve been so busy, I probably missed it. So, how does the little guy like his new friend?”

I chuckled. “I’ve never seen a happier eight-year-old in my life. I don’t know how you guys created that thing, but it’s so lifelike. The way it moves and responds to commands is truly amazing. He calls it Jumper.”

“Jumper, that seems to fit. I told my engineering guys to make sure it’s smart and mobile. The product looks like a real winner. We’ve already sold out of our first production run. In fact, we’re doing a World Connect feature on it next week.”

It was no surprise that Skip had made Vexton-Tech into a massively successful company. Everybody knew that Skip’s father, Gerald, was one of the wealthiest men in America, and sure, it helped Skip in the business world, but I always believed he deserved loads of credit for his own personal success. Maybe it was because he was like an older brother to me, or because of his high level of intelligence and leadership abilities, but I always had great admiration for him.

Vexton-Tech’s head office had eventually moved to New York City, but Skip always made certain the company’s original headquarters in Vexton continued to function as a Vexton-Tech sales office and warehouse. This was very important to the town; it provided many valuable jobs.

When we were growing up together, Skip lived on an enormous estate within walking distance of the quaint home I grew up in.

While most properties in Vexton were used for farming, this property contained a small golf course, three tennis courts, and two huge swimming pools, amongst other luxurious amenities. The extravagant estate always intimidated me.

There was one occasion, when I was twelve, that I'll never forget.

*"Here, catch," said Skip, tossing me my soccer ball on the way out of the house. As I moved to catch it, I tripped, knocking over and shattering one of his father's antique sculptures. Just as I came to my feet, Skip's father entered the house and saw shards of the broken sculpture scattered across the floor. He was obviously angry. I stood frozen in fear.*

*Skip looked at me shaking his head, as if to tell me to stay quiet. "Sorry Dad, I was showing off with the ball, and I guess I got a little carried away," said Skip.*

I had sincerely wanted to own up to the mishap, but Skip insisted I let him take the blame. That was just one of the many true examples of Skip's kindness.

Gerald Levin made his fortune as a real estate mogul, and was now owner and chairman of Vexton-Tech. He was also owner of the Washington Androids professional soccer club. Gerald was extremely tough on Skip when Skip grew up. It was as if he expected him to always be perfect. In Skip's second year of high school, he battled an illness and missed several weeks of classes. This resulted in Skip's usual A+ average dropping down to a B+. His father became so angry that he grounded Skip for the entire summer, making him spend his days with private tutors.

Divorced for the last twenty-three years, Gerald still lived with his assistants at the Vexton estate. Although he spent a lot of his time travelling around the world, he still took great enjoyment in his heavenly property. Skip and his family would often visit Gerald and spend a few days in Vexton.

During one of his recent visits, Skip invited my family over to the house. After dinner, while the ladies and children indulged in a friendly game of Laser Flash Frenzy, we men moved to the



enormous living room. This time I made sure I was oh-so very careful not to damage any of the precious pieces of art.

When I entered the room, two paintings immediately caught my eye. They were respectively titled *Sunrise* and *Nightfall*. Closest to the entrance of the room, the *Sunrise* painting captured the true essence of a beautiful summer morning. With its radiant sun glowing over towering mountains, the painting evoked a feeling of purity, a sense of new beginning.

The *Nightfall* painting at the opposite end of the room left me feeling extremely sentimental. I began thinking about the fact that every single day is finite, and how it seems like we are simply minions in the all-powerful hands of time. I also began thinking about my father Dennis, who was the original director of VLP, and how he and I used to spend many evenings just sitting in our backyard, talking about the day that had just passed. Even though I would go on and on about the most trivial stuff imaginable, Dad always listened attentively, and when I asked him a really silly question, he would do his best to try to answer me with respect and understanding. Like the time I asked him why Skip's house was so much bigger than ours. I can vividly recall his reply: "Well son, it's not important how big a house is, but what happens inside the house."

As I continued looking at the painting, my mind recalled a day I will never forget. I had woken to an ominous-looking autumn morning and went downstairs for breakfast to find Mom and Dad nervously looking out the window.

*"I don't know, Heath, maybe we should keep you home this morning," Dad said. "My weather flash-file is alerting me we could be in for a massive storm today. The system says we could be looking at a severe tornado."*

*"No, no, I have to go. The Washington Androids are visiting our school. Mrs. Levin and Skip are coming to get me at eight o'clock," I said, one eye on the window as I hoped the sky would miraculously clear. A few minutes later, it did. A hint of sunshine became visible through the black clouds.*

*“Okay, get yourself ready, it looks like it’s starting to clear out there,” Dad said after checking his weather flash-file again. “The storm alert has been downgraded.”*

*I whooped in excitement—I was going to get the chance to meet my favorite soccer team.*

*As the students began filing into the auditorium at noon, though, I looked out the window to see a pitch-black sky filled with churning storm clouds. Minutes later, all hell broke loose. Even through the thick walls of the auditorium, the thunder was deafening. Robo-scooters and large disposal bins were being thrown around the schoolyard like they were paper litter. The teachers tried their best to calm us down, but our fears heightened with every crash of thunder.*

*“Everybody just stay relaxed. We’re all safe here inside the school. Stay together and think positive. After all, we’ve got the Washington Androids here today, and they’re going to be signing autographs and answering all your questions,” said the school principal, who appeared just as nervous as we were.*

*I was glad to be with Skip; being with a good friend helped to ease my nerves. The Washington Androids did their best to bring some levity to the situation by showing us some soccer tricks, but fear distracted their audience. And then, miraculously, a silence fell. I looked out the window and saw through the last trickles of rain on the glass a brilliant rainbow shining in a clear blue sky.*

*Although the worst of the storm lasted only twenty minutes, it felt more like hours. For me, the darkest hour was still to come. As Skip and I were eating lunch, the principal tapped me on the shoulder.*

*“Heath, please come with me. And maybe it’s a good idea if you join us, Skip.” Even at that young age, I realized this couldn’t bode well.*

*When Skip and I reached the school foyer I saw Mom and Mrs. Levin gently weeping. I instantly knew something awful must have happened.*

*“Heath, come here, give me a hug.” I could feel Mom’s body shaking as she held me close. She struggled to find words. “Daddy’s robo-copter crashed... he died,” she said in a soft, gentle voice as tears flowed down her cheeks.*

*I was stunned for a moment. Then, “No, no, no... Daddy can’t die!” I wailed.*

*The principal let us use the nurse’s room for privacy and I settled down on the couch within Mom’s embrace. I asked if Skip could stay, and Mrs. Levin said that was fine. Mom was doing all she could to be brave. She and Skip tried their best to ease my pain, but I was devastated. Several minutes later, the nurse appeared with the shaggy-haired Brent Shale, captain of the Androids, and also my favorite soccer player.*

*“Hey buddy, I have a soccer ball for you. It’s been autographed by the entire team. And one day soon, some of my teammates and I will come back to Vexton and play soccer with you... if that’s okay?”*

*“I guess so, but can Skip play too?” I mumbled, sniffing.*

*“Of course—I’d better say yes, since his father owns the team,” Brent quipped, chuckling.*

*“I wish Daddy could be here to meet you. We always watched your games together.”*

*“You know, Heath, my father also died when I was a young boy, and I know it’s very difficult to understand, but the people we love are always with us—because they’re part of us. Even when I’m on the soccer field in a big game, I know my father’s with me, watching over me, cheering me on.”*

A few days later, Brent had kept his promise and returned to Vexton with five other Androids, allowing Skip and I the chance to play soccer with our heroes. We still looked back on that afternoon with great fondness.

And as I followed in my father’s footsteps at VLP, I did so with great pride. Whenever I entered the VLP robo-copter and ascended into the atmosphere, or whenever I caught a glimpse of one of those fleeting Vexton rainbows, I could feel Dad’s deep love. I knew he was watching over me.

“Heath, are you okay?” asked Skip, and I realized I’d been silent for a long time, while Skip waited patiently for me to come back to the present, back to his call.

I gave myself a shake. “Yes! Sorry—that *Nightfall* painting just got me thinking about my father,” I said, absently accepting a plate of banana-coconut soufflé from one of the Home Servant robots.

“Still pensive,” Skip observed.

“I’m fine,” I said, turning my attention to the soufflé and lifting my fork.

Gerald joined the conversation. “That painting usually brings out a feeling of sadness in most. Myself, when I look at it, I think of it as the joyous end to a prosperous day,” he said. He popped some caviar into his mouth and washed it down with champagne. “But I think it’s great that it got you thinking about your father. Dennis was a good, decent man, unlike so many of these delusional land-lovers walking around today.”

“Come on Dad, don’t start now,” said Skip, obviously concerned I would be offended.

Gerald looked from Skip to me. “Please forgive me, Heath. I didn’t mean to insult you, but I do find most of these environmental fanatics to be rather foolish. Sometimes it seems to me these people think we’d all be better off sitting in a cave by candlelight. So, how’s life at VLP?”

“It’s been rather chaotic of late, but I really do enjoy my work, sir.”

“I’m sure you do, but there are far more lucrative opportunities in the corporate world.” He set down his glass and leaned forward. “I’m sure we could find a suitable position for you at Vexton-Tech.”

“I appreciate it, but I’m very happy, and truly committed to VLP.”

Gerald picked up his glass and rose. “Well, let’s hope VLP is as committed to you as you are to it. I’m sure you’re overworked and underpaid. With us, there’d be all kinds of room for you to work your way up, and bring in some real money.” He walked toward a sculpture of two soldiers that Skip had told me he’d purchased that very morning.

“Not everybody walks around all day only thinking about money, Dad. Some people, like Heath, are more focused on making a real, tangible difference in the world,” said Skip.

“Ah, those are the very words President Westgale used when he came into office,” said Gerald as he turned away from the sculpture and stared directly into my eyes.

“And I’m glad he’s doing exactly what he set out to do,” I said in response.

“Well, let’s see. He’s taking away funding from our military, leaving us vulnerable to our enemies. He’s trying to take away our personal laser-rifles so we can no longer hunt or protect ourselves, and he’s over-taxing hardworking corporations so he can pay for his peace dream. If he set out on a course to ruin America, he’s doing a fine job.” Gerald was growing agitated. One of his multitasking robots poured him another glass of champagne. He turned and rested his hand atop the sculpture. “If these soldiers could come to life, they would tell us how they risk their lives to preserve the freedom of this land. Westgale can preach all he wants about world peace, but you know as well as I do that world peace is a figment of the imagination, and the reality of conflict will always supersede the delusional wishes of misguided dreamers.” Gerald took a final sip of his champagne, and left the room.

“You’ll have to excuse him,” Skip said with an apologetic chuckle. “Dad gets just a little uptight when it comes to Westgale.”

I was amazed that Gerald Levin was so bitter. Here was a man who appeared to have everything, but he never seemed to have anywhere near enough. As for the opinion he expressed about Westgale, I knew he was not alone.

\* \* \*

A few afternoons later, I paid a visit to Hollis Farms to perform some routine inspections for VLP. Neville was always very obliging and clearly understood I had his property’s best interests at heart when performing my duties.

As he came out of the main house, I immediately noticed he wasn’t his usual cheerful self. His years of farming were taking their toll, something you could see when a particular movement made him grimace, but he never seemed to let it get him down.

“Hey Nev, is everything okay?” I asked.

He stared down at an apple he carried in his hand, then, with an inarticulate growl, threw it across the yard. “Damn it!” he shouted, and plunked down on the porch steps and put his head in his hands.

I took a couple of hesitant steps toward him. “Do you want to talk about it, Nev?”

He raised his head. “I’m sorry, Heath. You’ve come here to do your job, and I’m acting like an idiot.” He pushed to his feet.

“I’m also here as a friend, Nev,” I said. “You’ve known me since I was a kid. I’ll never forget how Dad and I would come out here and fill up baskets with your delicious fruit and vegetables. I completely understand if you’d rather keep what’s bothering you to yourself, but if ever...”

“You’re right, Heath. It’s not good to keep these things bottled up inside. The reason I’m so upset is because Nathan has been diagnosed with that LRS illness.”

“Nate has LRS?”

“Yeah, my strong and vibrant nineteen-year-old son has contracted some illness I had never even heard of until a few weeks ago,” he said bitterly. “Who would’ve thought?”

“When was he diagnosed?”

“Just this morning. He was up real early doing his chores. I was still asleep when all of a sudden I heard these noises coming from the side farmyard. I looked out and saw Nate madly throwing hay bales across the yard, and then he just sat on the grass, totally out of it... like he was frozen. When Kurt and I ran over to help him, we knew right away we needed to get him to the hospital.”

“I know exactly how you’re feeling,” I told him. “We’re going through the same thing.”

He looked at me, stricken. “Oh no... Riley?”

When I arrived home from my meeting with Neville, Sharon was sitting on the living room sofa, holding Riley. He was in a deep sleep.

“It just happened again,” she whispered, teary-eyed.

My heart sank.

## CHAPTER 6

As the number of LRS cases increased across the country, so did the public's anger. People were demanding answers. Westgale planned a press conference to address the matter, but first he needed the report from Dr. Ahar, head of the study on LRS.

"Charles, children and young adults are becoming sick across the country and we have absolutely nothing to tell the public," Westgale said, pacing off his agitation.

Dr. Muller turned in place to visually track him around the room. "I understand your frustration, sir, but Dr. Ahar's report is still a few days away. On a positive note, he's told my office that he's convinced the illness is not contagious, nor does he believe it's life-threatening."

"Even though LRS is still a mystery, the situation needs to be publicly addressed, and soon," Westgale said. He stopped and looked at Muller. "The press conference is at 9:00 p.m. tonight; you're going to have to tell them something."

Dr. Muller nodded. At 9:00 p.m. he looked into the World Connect pickup and outlined the known facts pertaining to the illness. He finished by assuring the American public that answers would be forthcoming in the days ahead. There was nothing more he could do.

As usual, Devan Bedlam took the opportunity to further the MAA's cause with a verbal tirade. "Once again, the PBA's incompetence is undeniable. While members of the Administration are flying around the world in robo-planes searching for world peace, we're seeing young

Americans become ill right across the country—and the Administration has absolutely no idea why. This is totally inexcusable.”

A week later, as promised, Dr. Ahar presented his findings to the Westgale Administration.

“Jack, thank you for getting the study completed on such short notice,” said Westgale.

“Thankfully, it involved a lot of cross-referencing of prior studies and hypotheses, so I wasn’t starting from scratch. At least now we can tell the American public what is causing the illness,” replied Ahar. He went on to explain in detail the technical intricacies of the report.

Westgale was stunned. “Now, if I’m clear on this, you’re telling me this all goes back to the SD10 acid rain. Our expert reports told us there was no need for panic and that this stuff would only cause some mild form of hay fever.”

“That initially appeared to be the case. Unfortunately, my study has revealed this form of sulfur dioxide is strange—odorless and very difficult to detect, and far more potent and advanced than originally thought. For most people it poses no problem, but for some, for unknown reasons, their immune systems are being compromised, resulting in LRS,” said Ahar.

“So I take it this is why we’re only seeing a certain percentage of the population contracting the illness?” asked Nicole Kratz.

“That’s correct, Director. I’ve had fifteen LRS sufferers thoroughly examined over the last few weeks, and I wasn’t able to find any consistencies. The one thing that has remained constant is the age range, which is between six and twenty-one,” replied Ahar.

“If we’re unable to find a cure, then what are the long-term issues?” asked Dr. Muller.

“There is a very high likelihood that these individuals will face severe cognitive disorders within five years or so of contracting the illness. Needless to say, we desperately need to find a cure,” Ahar said.

“Is there not some kind of medication that will help, at least?” asked Nicole.

“There is, Director Kratz,” Ahar replied, looking almost relieved that he had some positive news. “It’s called IXM. Large amounts of



it were produced last year when we feared the FL8 virus would wreak havoc on the country.”

“Is the medication still available?” asked Nicole.

“Yes, it is. I spoke with the manufacturer, Step 1 Health, and fortunately they have enormous quantities of the medication in reserve,” replied Ahar.

“Will it work?” asked Nicole.

“After fully analyzing the medication in relation to LRS, I’ve concluded the pill will be suitable for helping combat the effects of the illness. It won’t cure the illness, but it will help to minimize the discomfort,” said Ahar.

“As much as I’m concerned about the current cases we’re dealing with, I’m also very concerned about future cases. Is there any way we can fix this, Doctor?” asked Westgale.

“Sadly, that sulfur dioxide will continue to flow. For how long, there’s no way to know. We may not be able to answer that question,” said Ahar with a deep sigh.

\* \* \*

With LRS now an overwhelming part of our lives, Sharon and I sat down to watch a press conference on the illness via UCIT on the World Connect. It was 9:00 p.m. Sharon’s niece Kayla and Riley were occupied in the recreation room, teaching Jumper math tricks. I had Max, our Home Servant robot, adjust our flash-screen as Sharon and I waited, already tense with trepidation.

As part of the New Order Treaty, the Outer Commission had established that major issues relating to federal politics and national crises would require a completely transparent and impartial method of presentation to the public. This prevented the biased political reporting formerly introduced by rampant mass media manipulation in prior decades, when corporate entities used their immense power and influence to further their position by catering to their chosen political interests, and vice versa. When one looked back at how news had been presented on television in the medium’s final years of existence, it was no wonder television news had become a thing of

the past. As broadcasters became more interested in attaining high ratings by using glitz and sensationalism, the truth ended up being lost in all the noise. UCIT, a fully impartial, fact-based communication network, eliminated all of that and filled the Outer Commission's requirements.

The broadcast began with its usual dissonant sound effects followed by the haunting yet relaxing monotone voice of Cryptic, the UCIT robot. Cryptic then introduced Nicole Kratz.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. It is with great consternation that I stand here today to inform you that within the last several weeks, our American medical database has recorded just over 200,000 diagnosed cases of an illness being referred to as Lethargy Reaction Syndrome, or LRS. Obviously, this is of enormous concern to the Administration. In order to understand this disease and find ways to alleviate its effects, we've called upon world renowned scientist Dr. Jack Ahar, who is present with me this evening."

Kratz yielded the podium to Ahar, who sincerely explained what was known of the illness. When he also disclosed information regarding IXM, a medication that would help combat the awful effects of the illness, Sharon and I hung on every word, hoping to hear that this was a cure, that there was something out there that would cure our son. Sadly, those words never came.

"Oh no, Heath," Sharon said, fighting tears, "by the time our son is thirteen, he may have a severe mental disorder. As if what he's suffering now isn't bad enough! How could this be happening?"

I did my best to maintain a strong demeanor, but inside I was crumbling. "They'll find a cure, honey. At least now we know there's a medication to help battle the illness."

After the press conference came to an end, Cryptic was quick to initiate an interview with Forever Green's Trent Kinsley.

"Not that long ago you wrote a controversial report suggesting the American government was being negligent by not eliminating the SD10 acid rain air pockets," Cryptic began, the robot gazing at the professor with its pseudo-humanoid eyes that shifted in shape from oriental to occidental and through irises of brown, blue, and green

every few minutes. “Do you feel a sense of vindication now that Dr. Jack Ahar has confirmed you were justified in your concern?”

Kinsley frowned. “Actually, even I was alarmed by Dr. Ahar’s findings. Our specialized agents of nature at Forever Green believed this new form of acid rain may cause a mild form of hay fever in certain individuals, but certainly not an illness as harmful as LRS.”

“Why do you suppose our American government still doesn’t seem to take environmental issues seriously enough?” Cryptic asked.

Kinsley leaned back in his chair and clasped his hands over his belly. “I believe commerce still remains the most severe impediment,” he replied. “Sadly, the almighty dollar still reigns supreme in this country. In order to stop or prevent many of these environmental issues, the government would have to order many of the same organizations that have provided it with loads of financial support to cease and desist. So I guess you could say the government would be biting the hands that feed it.”

Sharon and I looked at each other. “There are going to be a lot of angry people,” she said ominously. “*I’m* angry! You’re angry.”

All I could do was nod.

Sure enough, by the following day, anger had swept across the country like a raging inferno. Even some of the country’s most devoted PBA followers began questioning Westgale’s leadership. The World Connect showed large groups of protesters gathered outside the Freedom Home, calling for his immediate resignation. Our flash-screen displayed bobbing signs and placards bearing bold slogans: *GO AWAY WILLY—FAR AWAY* and *PBA—POISON BRINGERS OF AMERICA!* There was also a very haunting image of a mobile robot clown repeatedly calling out the names of LRS sufferers.

\* \* \*

Westgale stood at a window in his office, brows pinched in concern, looking out at the mob of protesters outside the Freedom Home. He had an overwhelming sense that his time as president could be near its end.

“I’ve faced quite a few obstacles over the years, April, but this one just might be undefeatable. Look at those people.” He gestured vaguely with one hand, still watching the bobbing signs and shaken fists. “They’re furious.” He turned away to look at his wife, seated on the couch in the middle of the room with Gil Robichaud. “And they have every right to be.”

April rose and came to rest her hands on Westgale’s shoulders. “You’re not a quitter, William; you never have been and never will be. You’re not responsible for these young people becoming ill. Sometimes things happen that our beyond your control. Why can’t you see that?”

Westgale shook his head firmly and stepped away to pace. “It wasn’t beyond my control. The warning was there, right before my eyes. I failed. I failed the people of this country!”

“You had three detailed reports done on the matter, and all three reports concluded there was no imminent danger,” April said, her tone commonsense. “What were you supposed to do?”

Westgale stopped and looked at her. “The right thing. Kinsley warned us all along, and I didn’t listen to him.”

“He warned you about *hay fever*,” April corrected him. “Not LRS.”

Westgale looked down and shook his head firmly again. “That’s irrelevant. I had a chance to do something, and now I sit here as leader of this nation, responsible for more than 200,000 ill young Americans—and that number is growing as we speak.”

Westgale returned to once again look out the window. Violence had erupted. Several mini fire-zaps arced through the air from the crowd to fall on the drive, where Freedom Home security officers extinguished them. The angry crowd surged forward, trying to push through the cordon of officers. Several direct confrontations ensued, with minor wounds on both sides by the look of it, until a riot squad trotted forward, double-time.

“General Sims’s order,” Robichaud said, stepping up beside the president. His face colored slightly, though he kept his eyes on the crowd below. “My officers need a little help to restore peace.”

It looked like they were successful, until a man in his thirties lunged from the crowd and grabbed a female bystander.

“Stay clear, or this young lady dies!” he shouted, his words audible even in Westgale’s office, thanks to the sound-blast device he wore around his neck. The crowd surged back from him like an ocean wave, those on its outer edges quickly scurrying for cover. He gave the cringing woman he held tightly by the arm a shake. “Get that son of a bitch Westgale out here right now, or she’s as good as dead!”

Robichaud immediately lifted a laser-view scope and zeroed in on the man. “Sir, the lady he’s holding... it’s Nicole,” he said.

Westgale’s heart skipped a beat. “Damn! I warned her to avoid the front gates. Does he have a weapon?”

“Yes, he does, sir. He has a laser-gun, and it’s on kill mode. If he presses that button, Nicole will be dead in seconds.”

Westgale turned to Robichaud. “I’m going out there, Gil.”

“You can’t, sir!” Robichaud protested. “We don’t know what we’re dealing with here.”

“Nicole’s life is in the hands of some madman. I’m not going to stand by and watch another one of my associates be killed,” Westgale said, pushing past Gil. He paused when General Sims strode into the room.

“How the hell did Nicole end up in that crowd?” Sims demanded immediately.

“I told her to come through the back entrance,” Westgale said.

Robichaud stepped up again. “Sir, I can’t stop you from going out there, but I think it would be a big mistake. We need to let one of our tactical negotiators handle this. If something were to happen to you... this country...” Gil let that hang.

“Mr. President, please leave this to the people who are trained to handle these types of situations,” Sims added.

Westgale shook his head firmly. “Sorry, gentlemen. Please make sure nobody does anything stupid. Maybe this guy just wants to talk.” He took a deep breath and left the office, on his way outside.

“Hey Willy, I’m giving you one minute to get your ass out here, or she’s dead—do you hear me, you bastard?” the man was shouting as Westgale stopped at the front entrance to the Freedom Home.

“There’s a chance he could be bluffing, sir,” said Sims, coming up beside him.

“That’s a chance I won’t take,” said Westgale.

“Wait,” said Sims, putting a hand on Westgale’s arm as he prepared to step outside. He held out an earpiece and tucked its small microphone into Westgale’s breast pocket. “So we can keep you up to date,” he added, stepping back as Westgale nodded and affixed the earpiece to his ear.

Westgale strode out of the building and down the drive toward the front gate, where the man was holding Nicole. “Tell your guard dogs to open this gate and back off,” the man demanded when Westgale was about ten feet away.

Westgale stopped and spread his hands. “Please, let her go,” he said in a calm, reasonable voice. “She hasn’t done anything to you. She’s a very kind and caring person, the mother of two beautiful teenaged children.”

“I know all about your little executive director, here,” the man sneered. “How she achieved a perfect grade score at Summit University—and of course how she’s the brains behind your World Harmony Program.”

“She’s more than just an intelligent person and politician,” Westgale replied. “She’s a daughter, a sister, a wife, and like I said, a mother. Please, let her go. Tell me what it is you want.”

“Like your little helper here, I also have a daughter. She’s thirteen years old and is supposed to attend high school this fall. She was visiting the school the other day with her friends, and all of a sudden she felt this uncontrollable feeling of anxiety come over her.” The man’s voice had started out angry, but as he spoke it softened, gradually growing tender and full of pain. “She ended up knocking over a table and shoving a teacher who’d come to her aid. Then she headed toward a stairwell, collapsed, and fell down two flights of stairs.” He paused and swallowed, gathering himself.

“The doctors told us she has LRS... when I left my house today, she was still lying unconscious in a hospital bed because of that fall.” His voice rose to an angry growl again. “You need to pay, you ignorant jackass!”

“I’m sorry this happened,” Westgale said sincerely. “My heart goes out to you.”

“You’re the son of a bitch who *caused* this! Tell me, Mr. President: how are you able to sleep at night, knowing you’ve made over 200,000 young Americans sick?” the man sneered.

Westgale dropped his hands and let his shoulders slump. “You’re correct. I’ve barely slept at all, sir. I’ve devoted my entire adult life to trying to better this country, and what has happened has—”

“Better this country? By allowing its people to be poisoned?” the man shouted.

“If I’m the person you’ve come to seek vengeance against, then let her go and take me.” Westgale took a step forward. The watching security detail shifted nervously.

“That’s very brave and commendable of you, Willy,” the man drawled, “but I think that would be far too easy for you. No, no, you need to think about your actions.”

*“We put the man’s image on the World Connect,”* Robichaud’s voice said in Westgale’s earpiece. *“Turns out his wife followed him to the protest, afraid he would act out violently. Freedom Home Security brought her in and she’s been searched. She said he’s not a violent man, but his daughter’s diagnosis has left him depressed.”*

Westgale ducked his head and lifted his hand as if to scratch his ear, depressing his earpiece in the process. “Understandable. What’s her name? Her husband’s name?”

*“Melody Peel, the husband is Zane Peel,”* Robichaud replied.

*“She doesn’t know if he has any other weapons on him, or a bomb,”* Sims added ominously.

*“She wants to come out there and speak with him,”* Robichaud said.

“That’s a good idea,” Westgale murmured, head still down. “Send her out.”

He turned his head at a rising murmur from the crowd standing well back from the action, and saw two of Robichaud's agents escorting a petite woman with short brown hair to the front gate area.

As she slowly approached, she called out to her husband, "Zane, I've got good news. Just after you left the house this morning, the doctor informed me that Andrea had regained consciousness and is going to be fine. Now, come on—put that weapon down and let the lady go free," she said. She stopped beside Westgale, then slowly began edging closer toward her husband. "Zane, come on... please, put the weapon down."

"You shouldn't have come here, Mel," Zane called out, his voice half anger, half sob. "This is between me and him, and unfortunately for Miss Kratz here, she got caught in the middle." Anger clouded his face again, and he flung his free arm toward Westgale. "Look at him, standing there so smug. Those people in that building see us as a bunch of fools." Zane jerked his chin toward the Freedom Home.

"President Westgale and the rest of the people in that building didn't want this to happen," Melody said, her tone soothing. "Things happen in life—you know that, Zane. There's a medication Andrea can start taking to help her feel better, and there are doctors working day in and day out to find a cure. So for the sake of our daughter and the both of us, put that weapon down and set Director Kratz free." Zane's grip on Nicole relaxed. She continued. "Our daughter's waiting to hear from us. She so badly needs our support." She pulled her flash-pad out of her pocket and held it up. "Here's Andrea, in her hospital room. She wants to speak with you, Zane." Melody moved even closer.

"Hi, Dad," a girl in the video said, "I know you're angry because I became sick, but I'm feeling better, and it makes me really upset to see you acting like this. I'm going to get better. The doctor has informed me that all the best doctors in the country are trying to find a cure—and I know they will. Please stop this... please." Westgale heard the tears in Andrea's voice. He kept his eyes on Zane Peel.



Zane hesitated only a moment, then he abruptly released Nicole, tossing the laser-gun aside. Kratz immediately dashed toward a pair of security personnel, while Zane Peel, head lowered, held up his hands and waited for half a dozen tactical team members to close in and take him into custody.

\* \* \*

Later that afternoon, Westgale was dismayed to see an announcement on the World Connect that prominent civil attorney Gloria Lee had begun preparing a class-action lawsuit against the American government on behalf of LRS sufferers.

“The Westgale Administration displayed a high level of negligence in how it handled the SD10 acid rain problem. The threat posed by those air pockets was made public. Westgale and his staff ignored a comprehensive report on the subject, completed by a leading environmental expert, Professor Trent Kinsley. As a result of that, more than 200,000 Americans now suffer the consequences,” Lee claimed in the broadcast.

The following day, Westgale held an emergency meeting of his executive staff and the PBA Strategic Council. The atmosphere in the meeting room Westgale walked into was thick with tension.

He moved to the head of the table. “You’ve no doubt all heard that one of this country’s foremost civil attorneys, Gloria Lee, is initiating a class action lawsuit against our government.”

Evan Ryder snorted. “She’s basing it on our supposed ‘negligence with regards to the dangers emanating from SD10 acid rain, leading to the illness of American citizens.’”

Westgale glared a warning at Ryder. “I am very concerned for the Administration’s future,” he said with emphasis, “considering the Outer Commission has let it be known that it is now keenly observing our every move.” He looked around the room. “I am even more concerned for those who have become afflicted with LRS. The health and safety of American citizens is paramount to the Administration; therefore, I have begun working with Economic Assistance to initiate a detailed compensation program

for those who have become ill. I will be presenting this motion along with its relevant details within the next few weeks. I have also directed Dr. Muller to spare no cost in developing a plan devoted to finding a cure for LRS. He will be reporting to Finance for the requested funding.”

Westgale shifted his address in a more positive direction. “We must remain on the path we set for this administration. Even though it’s only in its infancy, the World Harmony Program has already set unprecedented standards for world peace. We have already seen many political regimes across the world make enormous changes in their approaches to governance. I am also thrilled to learn that through the program we have put a severe dent in the world’s massive illegal arms trade. And lastly, we will continue to provide sufficient support to our farming industry, as needed.”

When the meeting ended, Beverley invited Westgale to join her in the Freedom Home’s Executive Lounge.

“I don’t know, Bev,” Westgale said as he settled into an armchair. “This could be devastating. I’ve been going over the numbers with Finance, and the LRS Compensation Program is going to hit us hard—really hard. It has to be done, but when we combine that with the cost of seeking a cure for LRS and the massive debt still owed to the Outer Commission... It really concerns me that there may be no alternative but to claw back funding from the farming subsidies.” Westgale set down the lemon tea he’d been stirring continuously and rubbed a hand over fatigued eyes.

Beverley leaned forward. “All the information I’ve analyzed, sir, has told me every cent of those proposed subsidies is essential—essential to at least give our farming communities a chance to survive.”

Westgale dropped his hand and met her eyes. “Believe me, Beverley, I don’t want to go back on my word, but I may have no choice. Let’s just hope it doesn’t come to that.”

He changed the subject. “So, Nicole has informed me that you intend to perform a case study on the town of Vexton.”

“That’s correct. I’m leaving with my team in a couple of days. Vexton has been devastated by the volatile weather system, and I

thought it would be productive to actually go there and see firsthand how the town has dealt with such wretched conditions.”

“I think that’s a fabulous idea. Face to face with those we serve is always best. I look forward to discussing your findings.” Westgale shifted in his chair, leaning forward. “As to your father’s case,” he said, his tone compassionate, “General Sims has ordered a full review of all of our military department’s communications over the last year, looking for valid threats made directly against your father, or this country.”

Beverley smiled. “Maybe by the time I return from Vexton, we’ll have some answers,” she said hopefully.

“I can’t promise you when, but we will find out who killed your father,” Westgale said sincerely.

## CHAPTER 7

There was a real sense of excitement and nervousness at Vexton Land Protection upon the arrival of Beverley Gibson. Those who worked at VLP held her in very high esteem. Long before she was appointed Secretary of Agriculture and Environmental Safety, it was well known how diligently she worked on behalf of American farmers.

Because it had touched on the people I worked most closely with, the farmers, her work two and a half years ago convincing the PBA Strategic Council to allow an all-natural Canadian pesticide called Sun Mist to be sold in America remained in my memory. She'd spent hours in front of the council pleading her case, and even though the odds were stacked against her, she'd succeeded. Sun Mist went on to be the most popular pesticide in the country.

The seemingly relentless storms had subsided by the time she arrived, which was good news—I was looking forward to giving her a tour of the Vexton farmlands. After exchanging pleasantries, she explained why she had come to Vexton. “I know you’re well aware of the severe challenges our American farming communities are facing,” she said. “I think it’s important to study the surrounding issues practically and directly.”

“We’re extremely honored to have you here,” I replied as I offered her a seat in one of the chairs before my desk and sat down myself.

“The pleasure’s all mine. That must be your father in that picture,” she said, nodding toward the picture on the wall behind my desk.

I glanced back at Dad. “Yes, it is. Dennis Claremont.”

“I hope you don’t mind, but I did my homework before coming here, and I understand your father died a hero.”

I smiled. “Dad would never have seen it that way. He would have viewed it as just performing his job.”

“Rescuing two young boys in the midst of one of the worst storms your town has ever seen... I would say your father’s a hero, Mr. Claremont.”

“Speaking of heroes, I sure didn’t have to do any homework on *your* father’s outstanding accomplishments.”

Beverley Gibson nodded. “My father sure loved his country, and he always told me that being defense director was a true privilege. His death was so tragic, but his spirit continues to bring me true inspiration.”

“I don’t think there was a single soul in the country that wasn’t shocked and saddened by your father’s death, especially by the manner in which it happened.”

“It was heartbreaking to see such an honorable man killed in such a cowardly manner, and I just hope we’re able to find the perpetrator,” Beverley replied. “Now, let me tell you why I chose to visit Vexton specifically. The homework I did turned up quite a few impressive things about you. The main thing being that you’ve done an incredible job here, under such dreadful conditions. The revitalization projects you’ve completed within the last several years are obviously a testament to your environmental and farming knowledge, along with your management skills.”

“I take great pride in helping look after this special place. It hasn’t been easy for me, especially over the last few weeks...” Heath hesitated, then plunged on. “Since my son Riley contracted LRS. But I know I owe it to myself and my community to be strong and continue on. I also owe it to my father, to carry on his legacy.”

Miss Gibson frowned her concern. “I knew you have an eight-year-old son, but I was unaware he was suffering from LRS. It’s such a terrible illness, so unfair. I know it probably doesn’t serve as much consolation, but I can assure you that President

Westgale has a highly acclaimed team of medical scientists trying to find a cure.”

After discussing farming-related issues, we headed off in the VLP robo-copter, making visits to several of the farms within the region. Beverley was taken by the beauty of the land and enjoyed meeting the people of Vexton. Her technical team was very impressed with how efficiently the farmers had nurtured the land in such an environmentally friendly manner.

The final farm we visited that afternoon was Hollis Farms. When we arrived, I was surprised to see Neville in full work mode, guiding his farmhands through their chores. In recent years, partly due to his physical ailments, Neville had resigned himself solely to managing the operation behind the scenes, with his son Kurt leading the actual field operation.

“Hey Nev, I’m surprised to see you out here working just like you did years ago,” I said by way of greeting when Beverley and I approached him.

Neville put his hands on his hips. He looked very satisfied. “Kurt left for Central Valley, California, yesterday. So while he’s away, I’ve been getting my hands dirty, like the good old days.”

“Just don’t over exert yourself.” I turned to include Beverley in our conversation. “Neville Hollis, this is Beverley Gibson. I know you’re well aware of who she is.” I smiled.

“Pleased to meet you, Mr. Hollis. Your farm is beautiful, very picturesque,” said Beverley.

“Thank you, ma’am, and thank you for coming to visit us. I know everyone’s really honored that you chose to come to Vexton,” said Neville.

“When I look at these lands, I think of how blessed we are that Mother Nature has provided us with such a wonderful gift. And the fact that a tech company like Vexton-Tech has its roots here is fascinating,” said Beverley.

“Yeah, I guess that kind of put us on the map,” said Neville.

“So, how long is Kurt on vacation?” I asked.

“Oh, he’s not on vacation,” replied Neville.

“What sent him all the way to California, then?” I asked.

Neville shrugged. “I really don’t know. He said he needed to go there and speak with somebody in person. He claimed it was urgent—couldn’t wait.”

That evening, I invited Beverley and members of her team over to the house for a visit. As usual, Riley and Jumper were front and center, entertaining the guests.

“That’s quite a fantastic dog you have there, Riley,” said Beverley as Jumper finished bouncing a soccer ball off its nose.

“Okay, Riley, I think it’s time you brought Jumper inside and got yourself ready for bed,” said Sharon.

“He’s absolutely adorable,” said Beverley as Riley headed inside.

Sharon approached Beverley while I spoke with her associates. “I’m going to ask you a question that has been really preying on my mind,” she said. “I would really appreciate your complete honesty.”

That caught my attention. I turned so I could hear their conversation.

“Of course I’ll be honest with you,” replied Beverley.

“Do you believe the president’s negligence caused my son and all these other young Americans to become ill?” asked Sharon, looking intently at Beverley.

“No, I don’t believe he was negligent at all,” Miss Gibson replied. “He had three expert reports performed on those SD10 air pockets, and none of them suggested that he should have spent the billions of dollars it would have cost to eliminate them. In the end, it’s easy to say he erred in his decision, but as I’m sure you’re well aware, hindsight is always perfect. That being said, I can’t even imagine the pain you and your husband are dealing with.”

“Did he not accept Professor Kinsley’s advice because he’s considered some kind of new age scientist?”

I excused myself from those I’d been speaking with and stepped quietly over to Sharon’s side. My arrival seemed to defuse any anger Sharon was building because she flashed me a reassuring smile.

“Unfortunately, Kinsley and Forever Green do not operate within the formal standards required by our government. And just as

disappointing is the fact that our government has not been as progressive as it should be. This is something I plan to change. I've even had some recent discussions with President Westgale regarding Forever Green," Beverley answered.

Beverley and her team spent the next few days studying the lands of Vexton. Her team performed extensive analysis on the different types of soil found across the region and carefully studied our current VLP environmental enhancement projects. Before leaving, Beverley thanked the VLP staff for their hospitality. She also invited Sharon and me to Washington as her guests at an upcoming government conference, asking me to speak at it. I was honored by the invitation.

\* \* \*

Bowing to public demand, President Westgale decided to participate in an objective interview with the robot Cryptic.

Eyes shifting through their shapes and colors, Cryptic started off with, "Since the LRS story emerged, you've been facing immense pressure to resign. Are you concerned that you have lost the confidence of the American people?"

Watching the robot's constantly shifting eyes, Westgale indeed felt that he was addressing every concerned citizen in this varied nation as he answered. "Not at all. I can't deny the LRS story is a tragedy, but I'm confident we will find a solution in the form of a medical cure. When I look at our accomplishments overall, I'm tremendously proud of our success."

"A lot of the criticism you have received deals with the fact that you have greatly reduced the national security budget," Cryptic said. "What do you say to Americans who feel you have made this country vulnerable to our enemies?"

Pleased with the opportunity the question afforded him, Westgale replied confidently, "I would say the country is safer than it has been in many years. Through the World Harmony Program and other initiatives, we've brought the international community together in a way that has never been seen before. We've also crushed the



aspirations of many involved in the illegal criminal underground, especially arms dealers.”

“How do you feel about lawyer Gloria Lee initiating a lawsuit regarding LRS?” Cryptic asked.

“She and the American people are within their rights,” Westgale said. “I realize no amount of money matches the importance of one’s good health, but I do think our LRS Compensation Program will provide an adequate form of assistance to those who are suffering. However, I do stress that we are focusing on finding a cure for this illness.”

“Where will the money for the LRS Compensation Program come from?”

*Ah, and there’s the bone of contention,* Westgale thought wryly, but replied, “We are still working out the details. It’s a highly complex situation.”

“Could national security funding be further reduced?” Cryptic asked.

Westgale sighed inwardly. “That’s very possible.”

\* \* \*

“Director Kratz, thank you for seeing me this morning,” Gloria Lee said as she entered Nicole Kratz’s office the next day. She smiled and held out her hand for a handshake. “I realize I’m probably the last person anyone in President Westgale’s office wants to see at this difficult time.”

“Well, as the president said in his interview, you have every right to launch this lawsuit. In the meantime, our administration will be working on assisting those suffering from LRS,” Nicole replied as they both sat down.

“Are you a mother, Director Kratz?” Lee began.

Nicole smiled, though it held a hard edge. “Yes, I have two teenage children.”

“Me—I’m not,” Gloria said. “But my sister has a beautiful little ten-year-old girl named Laureen. A week ago, my sister took Laureen to their local amusement park. As usual, Laureen was

having a great time playing all kinds of games. She even found the courage to finally enter the ever-so-scary Phantom House.” She and Nicole chuckled. “Later in the afternoon, my sister decided to buy Laureen a soft, cherry bubble gum ice cream cone. Things started to get a tad messy so my sister turned around to get some napkins. All of a sudden Laureen stood up, threw the ice cream cone to the ground, and began pouncing on it for no apparent reason. Seconds later, she tumbled into her mother’s arms and fell into a stupor for more than twenty minutes. Later that evening, Laureen was diagnosed with LRS.”

“That’s very heartbreaking,” Nicole said.

Gloria turned on her flash-pad and displayed a view-file filled with similar stories, one after another. “You say you need time,” she said as the images and text flashed through on the screen. “Try telling that to these people. They need answers, not time. And now your medical expert is talking about cognitive disorders five years down the road—they have no time! The day this government decided not to eliminate those SD10 air pockets was a day that will haunt this country for years and years to come.”

“Do you think we intended for this to happen? Is that what you think, Miss Lee?” Nicole said sharply, struggling to control her anger.

“No, I don’t think anyone intended for this to happen,” Gloria Lee said quietly, her tone muffling the tension in the room a bit. “But the fact is, it did. And it damn-well shouldn’t have.”

“All we’re asking for is a few weeks,” Nicole protested. “Believe me, our staff is totally dedicated to finding a cure for this virus, but as I’m sure you can understand, this is a huge undertaking and we need time.”

“We’re talking about human lives here, and unfortunately I’ve been adding names to my list on a daily basis.” Gloria paused to regain her composure. “As I originally said, I will wait for your compensation proposal to be presented and then act accordingly. Please understand, if the proposal isn’t presented within a few weeks, I will automatically be commencing with the lawsuit.”

## CHAPTER 8

Like most of the people in Vexton, Sharon and I were looking forward to attending the big Vexton-Tech gala at the Levin manor, though our excitement was dampened by our concern over leaving Riley at home. Our apprehension was ungrounded, we both reluctantly admitted; we were leaving him in the capable and compassionate care of Kayla, Riley's caregiver since he had become ill. Kayla aided him through the roughest periods with loving care, and the two of them shared a very special bond.

"Oh, look at that," Sharon murmured as we approached the estate down the long front drive, which was lit up with luminous red, white, and blue laser flashes displaying the VT logo.

As Sharon and I entered the Levin home, I immediately noticed several past and current members of the Washington Androids, including the long-retired Brent Shale. Skip was pouring him a drink and called me over.

"Heath, look at our old hero here—he looks like he could still go out there and get the job done," said Skip with a big smile.

"The only correct part of what you just said was the word *old*," said Brent, and the three of us shared a laugh.

When Skip introduced me, Brent vividly remembered that dreadful day at our school. "When that storm hit I think my teammates and I were even more afraid than the students. We tried to put on a brave face for the sake of you kids, but inside we were filled with fear."

“The kindness you showed to me that day is something I’ll never forget,” I said. “When your hero comes through like that for you... it’s very special.”

Brent shrugged, then frowned in mild consternation. “I guess the fact I’ve been considered some kind of hero is baffling to me in the first place. I always tell the young players in the league that they should be grateful they’re held in such high regard, considering they play a *game* for a living. But hey, if they can brighten up someone’s day, then it’s all good.”

I excused myself and Sharon and I wandered around. Fortunately the estate was expansive enough to accommodate the large crowd. I spotted many dignitaries, including politicians, business executives, and celebrities from the entertainment world. Fine food and beverages were everywhere.

When I entered the main living room and I once again saw the *Sunrise* painting, I instantly began thinking about Riley. The horrid reality was that my beautiful young boy had become a prisoner to some dreadful ailment, and there was not a thing I or anyone else could do.

Most of the guests were now settled inside the house. Sharon had left me to talk with Skip’s wife, Dora, and was in the midst of meeting several of the guests. With Riley on my mind, I decided to go outside and find a quiet space on the back patio where I could call Kayla to see how Riley was doing.

“We’re having a fun evening together, Uncle Heath,” Kayla said, laughing. “Riley is taking good care of me.”

I chuckled. Even at such a young age, Riley always wanted to make sure those he was with were safe and never sad. One day, when he was six, we were taking a walk through the South Vexton forest when we came across a butterfly with orange and violet wings.

*“Wow! Look Daddy, he’s still following us. I think he wants to be our friend.” Riley was overcome with joy. He even named the butterfly—Sunny.*

*As we continued on our way, Sunny eventually went off in another direction. Riley became upset. “Where did Sunny go?” he asked, frowning.*

*I tried to ease his disappointment by telling him that Sunny needed to go home, and that we would see him another day.*

*That evening, Riley had appeared very dejected.*

*“Hey Riles, why so sad?”*

*“I was just thinking... what if Sunny doesn’t have any friends or doesn’t have a home? That means he’ll be all alone tonight, in the dark,” replied Riley.*

*“Don’t worry, Riles, Sunny’s not alone—he has all kinds of friends, like all the other butterflies, the birds, and the squirrels. And for his home, he lives in the trees, and in the flowers—Mother Nature gives him his home. He’ll be just fine tonight.”*

A tap on my shoulder brought me back to the party.

“Hey, Heath,” Skip said. “It’s nice to come out here and get away from all that madness, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, I must say, I do prefer peace and quiet.”

Skip nodded and looked out over the lawns. “Dad loves these galas. Personally, I don’t care for them very much. It’s amazing; when people attend these things they seem to transform into pretentious, attention-seeking creatures, all with their own agendas.”

I smiled. “I guess that’s why the world of big business has never been of interest to me. I just couldn’t tolerate the phoniness.”

“Oh, I know what you mean, I live it on a daily basis,” Skip said.

“That’s what’s always amazed me about you, Skip. Here you are running the largest technology company in this country, and you’re the same guy you’ve always been.”

Skip gave me a grateful smile. “I guess when you come from a wealthy family like I did, you realize that having all the money in the world doesn’t equate to happiness. Just look at what happened to my mom and dad. My dad may tell you money means everything, but that sure isn’t how I feel.”

“Our health and well-being really tend to get taken for granted,” I said, thinking of Riley.

“On that note, I heard of Riley’s illness just this morning, when Neville told me about Nathan. I hope you know you can always confide in me,” Skip said.

“I realize that, Skipper. Although Sharon and I really don’t want to burden everyone with our misery.”

“That’s what friends are for. I can only imagine the hurt you’re both feeling. If there’s ever anything you and Sharon need, Dora and I are here for you.”

“Thanks; your support is truly important to the both of us.”

“I know this won’t ease your pain, but here are four tickets to the next Androids game.” Skip dipped his hand into his shirt pocket and pulled out the tickets. “You’ll be my guests on the company jet. And I’ll make sure you get a full tour of the stadium, along with an opportunity to meet all the players.”

“Wow! Riley will be thrilled,” I said, accepting the tickets. Then I sobered. “It really saddens me to realize so many young people around this country have to cope with this senseless illness. I just pray the doctors can find a cure.”

“Neville told me they’re releasing a medication that helps lessen the effects; at least that’s a good start. Speaking of Neville, have you seen him? He told me he would be attending.”

“No, I haven’t seen him. All I know is that he’s been really busy tending to the farm, since Kurt went out of town.”

A distinguished-looking man in a navy blue suit joined us. “Sorry to interrupt, but your father’s been looking for you. He’s going to be delivering his speech soon, from the garden,” the man said, with a cultivated British accent.

“Goran Rackert, this is Heath Claremont,” said Skip, introducing us.

“Glad to meet you, Mr. Claremont,” said Goran as we shook hands.

“Goran’s the key man behind our consumer robots. Heath and his wife love their Home Servant, and his son absolutely adores his Ro-Dog,” said Skip.

“That’s why I enjoy coming to these gatherings; I finally get some feedback, and hopefully, appreciation for all my hard work. I’m glad your family is enjoying the robots. Has Skip told you about our latest creation, the Robo-Chef? We’re hoping to have it up and cooking in the very near future.” Goran turned toward a commotion.

“I think we’d better take it over to the garden. The big boss was very antsy when he sent me out here.” He flashed a wide smile.

Like the front drive, the massive garden was also illuminated by large red, white, and blue laser flashes. Watching those lights blend into the starlight made for a breathtaking sight. Several Home Servant robots marched robustly through the gathered crowd, offering trays of drinks and finger foods to the guests. At the front of the stage, three silver Ro-Dogs with glowing neon embellishments performed spectacular tricks as a form of ambient jazz music played in the background.

Gerald Levin stepped up to the podium and began speaking passionately about Vexton-Tech. “We have truly blossomed into the most ground-breaking tech company this country has ever known. We have set out on a course of innovation that others can only dream about,” he said, and his guests cheered with great enthusiasm. He waited for the crowd to fall silent before continuing. “Many so-called business experts doubted Vexton-Tech would be able to bring our consumer robots to the masses. Well, wait till they see the Robo-Chef, coming to your kitchens soon!

“I’m especially proud of our accomplishments. We were able to overcome the obstacles created by this current inept government. Little by little, William Westgale is doing his best to slowly crush the vitality of this country. What kind of government acts in such a negligent manner that its lack of due diligence sickens its youth? What kind of government tries to deter its most successful businesses from continuing to grow by taxing them into oblivion? And finally, I ask you, what kind of government depletes its war machine, leaving its country vulnerable to a foreign invasion? I’ll tell you the kind of government that is—it’s William Westgale’s government. This is the kind of government America doesn’t want, and surely doesn’t need!” Since this crowd leaned primarily Militant, it responded favorably to Gerald’s rant.

The next segment of the speech served as the crescendo. The neon lights began flashing furiously, and a loud roar could be heard coming from the front drive. Moments later, a robo-cycle burst into

the garden area. Becoming even more zealous, Gerald continued his rant. “An election will soon be upon us, my friends, bringing an end to this sham of a government.”

The driver of the cycle dismounted and walked toward Gerald. He was wearing a long trench coat with a hood throwing most of his face into shadow. Behind him were two very intimidating guards.

“It’s time this country brings in a true leader, and that man is—Mr. Devan Bedlam!” Levin shouted, and the crowd cheered enthusiastically. I found it a rather bizarre scene. Bedlam approached the podium, shook hands with Gerald, gave a casual wave to the crowd, and was escorted back to his robo-cycle, at which point he and his guards left the premises.

Gerald’s speech grew more relaxed. “I would like to call upon my son, Skip, to say a few words.”

Unlike Gerald’s bombastic approach, Skip spoke in a very reserved manner. He spent some time speaking eloquently about Vexton-Tech’s recent achievements and future aspirations. When he concluded, Gerald returned for some final words.

“I’m sure you are all well aware that, as well as being chairman of Vexton-Tech, I’m also the proud owner of the Washington Androids. Fortunately, we have had outstanding success over the last couple of seasons, winning two championships in a row. I’m so glad to see many of our players and their families here tonight. When people ask me how we did it, I tell them it’s all about great teamwork, whether it’s in business or sports. Teamwork is the key. With Vexton-Tech that great teamwork spans the globe.

“Tonight, we’re very pleased to have with us our chief financial officer, Mr. Bruce Kingston, and our vice president of marketing, the lovely Miss Brandy Noble. Without these very talented and dedicated people, Vexton-Tech would not be the company it is.”

The crowd clapped.

“Enjoy the evening, everyone!” Gerald Levin concluded, and stepped off the stage.

The celebration continued with a presentation of Gerald Levin’s immense art collection, which captivated the crowd. Several pieces



from the collection were then auctioned off to help raise money for an LRS Charity Fund established by Vexton-Tech. While I was admiring a stunning sculpture of a lion, Sharon came running over to me, her expression alarmed.

“Heath! Kurt’s dead!” she gasped. “Kurt Hollis is dead!”

“What on earth are you talking about?” I asked, shocked.

“I just received a message from my office telling me he was found dead in his California hotel room.”

“Oh my God... Neville... Is that why he didn’t show up tonight?”

Skip must have seen our distressed expressions because he rushed over to us. “Is everything okay? I hope nothing’s wrong with Riley.”

“No, Riley’s fine, but Sharon just received some awful news—Kurt Hollis was found dead in California,” I replied.

“Oh no! Poor Neville,” said Skip.

“I have to get to my office and find out what happened,” said Sharon. “Skip, thanks for having us here tonight and please thank your father as well. It was a spectacular gala.”

We left the Levin estate and drove to the Vexton Justice Center, where we found Neville slumped in a chair in the lobby. His hands covered his face, and his shoulders shook as he silently sobbed.

“Hey Nev,” I said gently.

He slowly lifted his head. “Who would kill my son, Heath? Kurt was a saint—a physically powerful man, and yet such a gentle soul. He would always assist anyone in need.”

“Has anybody told you anything?” Sharon asked as she returned from the beverage machine across the lobby and offered him a coffee.

“No, all I know is my son is dead. I’ve been waiting here for over an hour. They told me a Detective Eagan is supposed to see me,” Neville replied.

“Joel Eagan; he’s the lead investigator for Vexton Justice. I’ll see what’s holding things up,” said Sharon.

As she went to inquire, I remained with Neville.

“What is happening, Heath? First Nathan becomes ill with this bloody LRS, and now Kurt is dead. Tragedy for two of my three sons in a matter of weeks.”

“Have you had a chance to tell Ryan and Nathan?” I asked.

“They weren’t home when I got the news, and I couldn’t reach them on their flash-pads. Everything’s happened so fast. I’ll tell them when I get home. Right now I need to find out what happened to my son.”

“What about Kurt’s ex?”

“I don’t have a clue where she is. Since her and Kurt broke up, he hasn’t been in contact with her.”

“Did you ever find out why he went to California?” I asked.

“No, he left in such a rush, I didn’t even have a chance to say goodbye, and now... I’ll never have a chance to say goodbye.”

“Ah, here we go,” I said as I saw Joel Eagan emerge from the back.

Eagan was a big man who wore his suit jacket as if it were a comfortable sweater. He held his hand out as he approached. “Mr. Hollis, I’m Detective Joel Eagan, lead investigator for Vexton Justice.” They shook hands. “I’m sorry for the long wait. DA Claremont is waiting for us in her office.” He stepped back and held his arm toward the door he’d emerged from.

“Go on, Nev. I’ll be right here when you finish,” I said.

“Please have a seat, Neville. Detective Eagan will fill you in on what we know so far,” Sharon said as Neville and Joel entered her office.

The two men settled into the chairs before her desk, and Eagan turned to address Neville. “As you were informed earlier tonight, your son Kurt was found dead in a hotel room in Clear Valley, California. At this preliminary stage of the investigation, Clear Valley Justice believes your son was murdered,” he said gently.

“Why in the world would someone want to kill Kurt?” Neville almost wailed.

“We don’t know, Nev,” Sharon answered. “The only information we have is that he was murdered a couple of hours ago by a lethal styngor and that his flash-pad was stolen. All his other possessions, including his money and his wallet, were left behind.”

“Why? Who? Do the authorities not have any idea? Didn’t the hotel have its security vision system on?” asked Neville, looking from Sharon to Eagan.

“Evidently, whoever did this was sophisticated enough to know how to shut it off,” said Joel. He suddenly dropped his gaze to his flash-pad. “Hold on... we may have something important here.” He studied his flash-pad, then looked up. “I just received a message telling me that someone working at the front desk of the hotel recalled Kurt calling down earlier in the day. He asked if anyone going by the name of Brainy had tried to contact his room while he was out.”

“Brainy? That’s what they call Rusty Talbot’s son, Hunter,” said a surprised Neville.

“As in Vexton’s Talbot Farms?” asked Joel.

“That’s him. Weren’t Kurt and Hunter close at one time?” Sharon asked Neville.

“Yeah, and I know they still kept in touch, even though Hunter left Vexton a couple of years ago,” replied Neville.

“Why was he referred to as Brainy?” asked Joel.

“They say the young man is a genius. You see, that’s the thing— Hunter was not at all like his father. Don’t get me wrong, Rusty is a smart man, but more of an old-fashioned farmer with a traditional outlook. Hunter had his PhD in environmental engineering by the time he was twenty,” replied Neville.

“Do you know if Hunter stayed in touch with his father?” asked Joel.

“They had a rather rough falling out, so I don’t think they kept in touch,” Neville said.

Joel contacted one of his assistants and told him to check the World Connect and the police database for information regarding Hunter Talbot.

“I’m going to have the Clear Valley authorities classify Hunter Talbot as a person of interest,” said Sharon.

“Do you know if or where he was working?” asked Joel.

“The kid lived for bettering the environment; that’s all he ever spoke about. I think he went on to become part of some new age environmental group,” said Neville.

Joel paused, then said solemnly, “I ask you this with the utmost respect toward the memory of your son. Can you think of anything

in Kurt's past that could possibly have led to someone to wanting to kill him?"

"Detective Eagan, my son... he was the kindest soul you could ever meet," Neville replied, his voice tight with suppressed tears. "A few months ago, when the Hisleps were away, part of their farm was severely damaged by some unruly characters. I'll never forget how Kurt spent hours fixing the place up for when they returned."

A knock on the office door preceded the arrival of Joel's assistant, Jacob. "I found out something you might like to know, sir."

"What is it, Jacob?"

"It appears there's a Hunter Talbot who is part of the Forever Green environmental organization in Central Valley, California."

"That's Professor Trent Kinsley's organization. It doesn't surprise me that he's working there. Before he left Vexton, Hunter used to work under Heath at VLP," said Sharon. "Heath found him to be brilliant and thought he would go on to do some great things."

"Hopefully we can track him down and get to the bottom of this. Wasn't Kinsley originally involved with Vexton-Tech?" Joel asked her.

"Yes, it was actually he and Gerald Levin who started the business," Sharon said.

"I think I'll pay a visit to Professor Kinsley in California, before I meet with Clear Valley Justice. Hopefully he can shed some light on the situation," said Joel.

"And I think I'll pay a visit to Rusty Talbot at the same time," Sharon added.

They rose, and Sharon and Neville returned to the lobby, where I waited.

"Neville," Sharon asked, "would you like some support when you tell Ryan and Nathan about their brother's death?"

"Thank you both, but this is something I have to do on my own. In honor of Kurt, we have to continue on and be strong—Kurt wouldn't want us to mourn him." His voice grew fond. "Oh no, he would want us to continue living with a zeal for life. I take comfort in knowing that our giant angel is up there in heaven with his dear mother, watching over us."

\* \* \*

The following morning, Sharon hit a dead end trying to track down Hunter “Brainy” Talbot. She tried contacting Rusty Talbot about Hunter’s whereabouts, but Rusty was out of town on business.

Meanwhile, Joel Eagan travelled to California to speak with Professor Trent Kinsley.

Forever Green had attracted some of the most brilliant young minds in the country, and this youthful and atypical organization had made some positive inroads. There were no formalized employee titles, or a corporate hierarchy; in fact, Kinsley didn’t refer to the group as employees, but rather “agents of nature.” Because of that, Detective Eagan had gone straight to the top and arranged an appointment with Trent Kinsley.

Joel arrived at the unusual and sprawling Forever Green headquarters, composed of all natural materials and set on a scenic stretch of land. The head of the organization met him right away.

“Detective Eagan, it’s been such a long time. The last time I saw you, I believe you were working your way up to becoming lead investigator for Vexton Justice. I’m glad to see you’ve reached your goal. Come on—let’s take a walk and bask in Mother Nature’s beauty. It’ll give me a chance to show you our operation,” said Kinsley, absently sweeping a hand through his trademark shoulder-length hair. It was dirty blond and stringy, making him appear much younger than his actual years. He reminded Joel of a surfer.

They set off down a gravel path that meandered away from the building and into that scenic stretch of land.

“Now, the last time I saw *you*,” Joel said, “if my memory serves me correctly, you had just left what has gone on to be the biggest tech company in the country.”

“I can tell you that wouldn’t have happened with me as part of the business,” Kinsley said.

“I don’t mean to belabor the point, but like many of us in Vexton, I still can’t help but wonder why you left such a prosperous company, especially one that you helped create,” Eagan said.

“Well, you see Joel, since I started Forever Green and gained some public attention, I’ve been referred to as being very... how would you say?... eccentric, flippant—but what I like to think I am is honest. Gerald Levin, on the other hand, places business before ethics. Don’t get me wrong, he’s an outstanding businessman; if he so wished, he could sell bark to this very tree.” Kinsley placed his hand on the trunk of a giant oak. “But Gerald would get down and dirty, doing things like planting moles in other companies to steal trade secrets. Just ask Zack Hampton about that. Personally, I became tired of it all, especially when he insisted on making those damn consumer robots. So I had him buy me out, and I used the funds to create Forever Green.”

“With no regrets?”

“Of course not.” Trent turned his attention to the tree. “Do you know what fascinates me the most about this tree and the other earthly creations surrounding us?” he asked.

Joel smiled. “Please, do tell me, Professor.”

“Grandeur is their natural state—just *being* graces us with their magnificence. This tree was here long before you and I were born, and it will be here long after we’re both just a distant memory,” said Kinsley. Then he shook his head and offered a sheepish smile. “Listen to me rambling on. My apologies, Joel.”

They resumed walking. “Anyhow, I’m certain you didn’t come all the way here to reminisce, and the fact that you’re a lawman leads me to believe you’ve come here to inquire about Hunter Talbot,” Kinsley said.

“That’s correct.”

“I do follow the news, you know. I thought I would’ve been contacted by Clear Valley Justice by now. It’s a true shame that young man was killed. I really don’t know the Hollis family very well, but Hunter always speaks very highly of them.”

“I doubt you would find anybody who didn’t share that sentiment. Have you had recent contact with Mr. Talbot?”

“Well, I’m sorry to inform you that I haven’t had any contact with Hunter for more than two weeks,” Kinsley said. “I wish I had some answers for you regarding Hunter. When I heard the authorities

were looking for him, I tried reaching him and his girlfriend, but I had no luck.”

“What about his job here with Forever Green?”

“With all due respect, we don’t use the term ‘job’ around here, nor do we use the term ‘employees,’” Kinsley said. “Those terms make life seem so regimented, and I’ve always believed that stifles creativity. Instead, we refer to our members as agents of nature, whose purpose rests in nurturing our sacred Mother Earth. I don’t keep tabs on the whereabouts of my agents, but I do keep tabs on their productivity.”

“And Hunter’s productivity, how’s he been doing of late?”

“Hunter is one of the most brilliant young men I have ever met,” Kinsley replied. “He’s been very instrumental in Forever Green’s development of some highly innovative methods for creating natural energy. In the past year, we’ve provided consultation to six major corporations, and Hunter spearheaded three of those projects. He’s currently working on a project over in Finland.”

“Finland? What’s he up to over there?”

“Like I said, I don’t keep tabs on our agents. In time, Hunter will fill me in on what he’s working on,” Kinsley replied.

“Do you think he could have headed over there before we put out the APB?” Joel asked.

“All I can tell you is the last time I saw him he said he needed to discuss something important, but then he never came back to see me. As to where he is, your guess is as good as mine.”

“I trust in your honesty, Professor, so if you hear from Hunter or learn of his whereabouts, I’d appreciate you contacting me,” Joel said.

“I will. It seems strange, the timing of all of this.”

“Why’s that?” Joel asked.

“Well, I almost came back to Vexton the other day. Gerald invited me to one of his glitzy galas, but since I’m not into revisiting old ghosts, I decided not to attend.”

“I wasn’t there myself, but I heard it was quite an event.”

“That’s the extravagant Gerald for you. I’m sure the place was crawling with his robots. I’ll never forget how he tried to get me on board with making those bloody things.” Kinsley said.

“Tell me,” Joel coaxed.

Kinsley sat down on a bamboo bench, and Joel joined him. “One morning I was working in my office when Gerald pounded on my door, bellowing, ‘Professor, tear yourself away from whatever it is you’re doing and meet me down in the company lounge in fifteen minutes.’ When I entered the lounge, he was sitting at his usual table, grinning from ear to ear.

“‘Have a seat, Professor,’ he said, then he called out, ‘Henri, please bring the champagne.’ He turned to me and said, ‘You’re going to love this stuff; I had it imported from France.’

“I knew the four or five servers who worked in the lounge, and none of them were named Henri. And then I saw this robot coming out with a bottle of champagne. That was Henri!”

The professor smiled and shook his head. Joel chuckled.

“The thing began filling our glasses,” Kinsley continued. “‘What on earth is this thing?’ I asked.

“‘This is the reason we’re celebrating. It’s our first prototype of a consumer robot called the Home Servant. Our market research has told us there’s a big demand for such a machine,’ Gerald said. He was really enthusiastic. I was angry. I’d already told him how I felt about the damn idea, and he went and did it behind my back. He told me to relax, that Henri was a prototype, that it was nowhere near ready for market. He wanted me to give it a chance—but more, he said it needed my fine tuning and expertise.

“My inspiration for starting Vexton-Tech was about making a positive contribution to society,” Kinsley said, “not to help create some kind of cold, robotic world. Most of our inventions up until then had aided the physically and mentally challenged. I told Gerald that was what inspired me, not robots.

“‘If we’re not careful, that moral compass of yours is going to lead us right into corporate obscurity,’ he told me. He went on about our need to progress, that this was a great opportunity, that if we didn’t make the things, another company would.

“And I told him, ‘You can make them until the cows come home for all I care, but I won’t have anything to do with it!’” Kinsley returned to



his feet. “And that’s the story behind why I left Vexton-Tech. In a way, it was a very positive and cathartic thing. I was able to use the payout I received to create Forever Green, and from a personal standpoint it got me really thinking about why we’re here on this planet.”

“How come I’ve never heard this story before?” Joel asked as he rose too.

“Like I said, I usually don’t like to revisit old ghosts or the stories they leave behind.”

\* \* \*

Back in Vexton the following day, Joel and Sharon visited Hunter Talbot’s father, Rusty. They exchanged surprised looks when they drove down the long lane to the Talbot farm; at this time of year there should have been green fields of strawberries, but the farm appeared the worse for wear.

Most of the farmers in Vexton tended to be jovial, but Rusty always seemed bitter. Many believed this bitterness stemmed from the fact that Hunter, his only son, had deserted him.

“DA Claremont, nice to see you,” he said when he opened the door to them. “What brings you to my humble abode?”

Totally unaware of why they were visiting, Rusty became indifferent when they explained.

“Hunter chose to leave this farm, that was clearly his choice. To help save the planet, he claimed.” Rusty snorted. “This farm has been in the Talbot family for several generations, and now because my son decided to go in search of magical rainbows, it’ll all be coming to an end soon.”

“So, I take it you haven’t had any contact with him in quite a while?” asked Joel.

“I would say it’s been about... two years since I’ve seen or spoken to him,” Rusty replied, puffing on his pipe. “It’s a shame the Hollis boy was murdered. He was a fine young lad, a true farmer. But if you think my son had anything to do with the young man’s death, you’re definitely on the wrong path—that’s not Hunter. He doesn’t have a violent bone in his body.”

Back at his office, Joel had his staff contact Clear Valley Justice to inquire if they had any leads in the case. A thorough investigation of the entire hotel had turned up nothing, until a maid claimed to have seen a mysterious-looking man on the day in question. She'd entered the elevator on the seventh floor to ride up to the twenty-eighth floor to finish her shift, and there'd been a large man, over six feet tall and dressed all in black, already in the elevator car.

"The witness reported he wore a gray fedora with a black hatband and a pair of expensive-looking sunglasses," Joel's assistant reported, referring to the transcript. "They had like, red-tinted lenses. The witness said hello to him, but he seemed nervous and just nodded, didn't speak. He was still inside when the maid left the elevator on the twenty-eighth floor."

The investigators designated the man a person of interest; the hotel was thirty-floors high, and Kurt's room was on the twenty-ninth. The description of the man did not match that of Hunter Talbot, for Hunter was around five feet eight inches tall. Now the police had two persons of interest in the murder of Kurt Hollis.

## CHAPTER 9

“What have you been up to, Riley?” Dr. Holt asked during Riley’s next checkup.

“We went to an Androids game, and I got to meet all the players!” Riley exclaimed, still thrilled by the experience.

“Great! That must have been exciting,” said Dr. Holt as he examined Riley. “And how’s your robot dog?”

“His name’s Jumper. I taught him some new tricks yesterday.”

“What kind of tricks?”

“Math tricks.”

The doctor examined Riley’s eyes. “I’m sure Jumper is a very smart dog. I would love to meet him one day,” said Dr. Holt as he finished the examination. “Why don’t you go with Rhonda now, and she’ll take you to see Rocky the Clown while I talk to your parents.”

The smiling nurse stepped forward and held out her hand; Riley hopped off the examination table, took her hand, and skipped out the door with her.

“How is he, Doctor?” asked Sharon when they were gone.

“There is no change from when I initially diagnosed him with the illness,” the doctor replied. “We’re finding that once a person contracts LRS, their condition remains constant. Now, have either of you noticed any changes in Riley’s condition?”

“None. The episodes still occur once every few days, and it’s always the same: he suddenly becomes agitated and starts knocking over or throwing things, then he goes into a catatonic state for about

half an hour, then he's fine. We just never know when it's going to occur, and we're really concerned about what will happen when he returns to school in the fall," I replied.

"I'm going to put him on IXM. Have you heard about it?" Dr. Holt asked as he moved to a large cabinet behind his desk.

"Yes, we have," Sharon said. "You think it will help him?"

"I do." He returned with a jar of pills labeled *IXM*, removing one of the bright red pills from the jar and holding it up. "Taking two of these each day will drastically lessen his anger and agitation. Instead of aggressively knocking over or throwing things, you'll now see him become only a tad fidgety and disoriented before being rendered catatonic. And that lifeless state should now only last half as long."

Sharon and I looked at each other. "It's something," I said. Though I knew there was still no cure, it was disappointing that there was so little that could be done to lessen the symptoms of the disease.

VLP headquarters had notified me that there were several acres of trees in need of inspection, so after we got home from Riley's appointment with Dr. Holt, I headed out to the large forested area surrounding Moon Shade Bluff. This was the area where Dad's robo-copter crashed the day he was killed. The legend of Moon Shade Bluff went that an ancient civilization called the ZeZ settled in what later would be called Vexton, and the ZeZ viewed the massive cliff as a sanctuary from malice. It was said that when the spirits of doom were unleashing their wickedness on the ZeZ people, its core group of leaders would make their way to the top of the bluff and absorb the cosmic energy from the Vexton sky, which had been blessed by a multitude of cosmic gods. In recent times, the rare phenomenon was known as the Vexton Gleam. For the majority of people in Vexton, this myth remained a lighthearted, even humorous tale, passed from one generation to the next. Nonetheless, Moon Shade Bluff remained a sight to behold.

Dad had promised he would take Skip and me up to the top of Moon Shade Bluff as a gift for my tenth birthday. I remembered

waking up that morning and running to the window, hoping the weather was clear, and my excitement when the shutter on my bedroom window opened on a sunny day.

*I ran out of my room shouting, "When can we go, Dad? Can I call Skip?"*

*"Well, it looks like the weather's fine," Dad said, "but are you sure you're not afraid?"*

*"Not as long as you and Skip are with me," I replied, even though I was actually feeling fairly jittery.*

*"You just make sure you stay with Dad when you're up there," said Mom.*

*"All right! I'm going to be king of the mountain!" I crowed. Although in my imagination I had already travelled thousands of miles in it, this would actually be my first time in Dad's robo-copter. Skip had been in his father's private jet on several occasions, so soaring above the clouds was nothing new to him.*

*As the flight began, a rush of adrenaline helped suppress my nervousness as I looked out at a vast blue sky and down on a landscape that looked like a patchwork quilt. I felt like I had entered a different galaxy. But when we landed on top of Moon Shade Bluff, my nerves returned, and I was afraid to exit the copter.*

*"Come on, Heath—here, take my hand," Dad urged.*

*I took a couple of steps out of the copter, my eyes tightly closed, my grip on Dad's hand like a vise. Finally, I gave in and opened my eyes. Wow! There I was, towering above the world. I really did feel as though I were king of the mountain.*

*When I looked over at Skip, he had his arms outstretched toward the sky. "Do like me, Heath!" he shouted, laughing. "I'm reaching out to the cosmic gods. My teacher told us about it last week."*

*I had no idea what he was talking about, but it looked like a fun thing to do, so Dad and I joined him.*

I still have the photo Dad took with his flash-cam of the three of us with our arms reaching for the sky. It sits on our living room mantel. Smiling at the memory, I began inspecting the damaged trees within the area, at first discounting a rustling noise in the near

distance as a natural sound from the forest. But when I heard it again a few seconds later, the sound was much closer, and I grew wary. When a voice called out, “Heath—over here,” I jumped, spooked.

I whirled toward the voice and saw a man dressed in light-colored clothing hidden in the underbrush. “Who’s there?” I said loudly and sharply.

“It’s me, Hunter—Hunter Talbot.” His answer came as a harsh whisper.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I said, approaching him.

“Please, Heath... I followed you here from your home. I need to speak with you.”

Now we were face to face. “Speak with me? Do you realize you’re a person of interest in the murder of Kurt Hollis?”

“I know! I know—that’s why I need to speak with you. It’s about Kurt,” he said, eyes darting around nervously.

“You’d better start talking, Hunter. I’m of the mind to call the Justice Center right this second.”

“Please, just give me a chance to explain,” he said, his voice trembling.

“All right, go ahead—explain yourself.”

“I came to you because I trust you. You always treated me so well when I worked at VLP, and I know you’re a good, decent man.”

“I appreciate that, Hunter. Now, tell me what happened to Kurt.”

“It’s all a lie, Heath—one big, giant lie.”

“What is? What in the world are you talking about?” I said impatiently.

“He lied, Heath—that son of a bitch lied.” Hunter looked at me with blue eyes wide with fear.

“Who? Kurt, who lied?”

“Dr. Jack Ahar. And now one of my best friends is dead.” Hunter slumped to the ground, weeping—out of sorrow, or the hopelessness of the situation, or both, I didn’t know.

I moved in closer, hovering over him. “Dr. Ahar lied? You’re talking about a man who’s considered the number one scientist in this country, and probably the world. What exactly did he lie about?”

“Just hear me out. SD10 acid rain—it’s not causing LRS, Heath.”

“What?” I almost shouted. “Don’t you dare play games with me,” I growled. “My son is suffering from that illness.”

“I know he is. And I know Nathan Hollis is as well. I also know why Kurt was killed.”

I took out my flash-pad and started to contact Sharon. “You can’t call your wife, Heath,” Hunter said quickly. “If the authorities become involved in this, I could end up a dead man.”

I hesitated, then put away my flash-pad. “Okay... I’ll hold off for the time being. But you’d better start telling me every damn detail.”

Hunter nodded. “Forever Green began studying those SD10 acid rain air pockets well before the government did. I’ve taken it upon myself to continue analyzing the matter ever since. Because the government has publicly branded Professor Kinsley as some kind of lunatic, they’ve never given any credence to our work.”

“So, what is it that you know about this acid rain that no one else does?”

“After Kurt informed me that Nathan had become ill, and I heard Ahar’s press conference, I went back and carefully studied our original report, and then I did a follow-up. I discovered that there are certain regions in the country that are in no way exposed to that acid rain. Vexton is one of those regions.”

I lifted a skeptical brow. “How do you know you’re not mistaken?”

“The Forever Green report was by far the most comprehensive report ever done on SD10, and my follow-up analysis is backed by indisputable data.”

“What about Kinsley? Is he in agreement with you?”

“He’s unaware of my follow-up report. I never had a chance to address the matter with him, but I have all the proof I need. Look.” Hunter turned on his flash-pad and showed me the portion of the report he was speaking of. “I then went on the AMO database and learned that there were around 16,000 confirmed LRS cases within these regions. It led me to believe something was not right.”

“Did you not think of contacting the authorities?”

“The government? We’re talking about Forever Green. They wouldn’t have given me the time of day. So I took it upon myself to address the matter with Dr. Ahar directly. I attended a lecture he gave just outside of Clear Valley. After the lecture ended, it sure wasn’t easy, but I made my way to the back of the lecture hall and spoke with him.” He dropped his voice, though, as we were now at the top of Moon Shade Bluff, there was no one around to hear. “I taped our conversation.” He activated the recorder on his flash-pad:

*“Dr. Ahar, may I please have a few minutes of your time?”*

*“And who are you with?”*

*“Forever Green.”*

*“Forever Green... ah, Kinsley’s group of dream-chasers.”*

*“I beg your pardon, Doctor?”*

Ahar chuckled. *“I must say, your boss is a very intriguing individual. His body may be on this planet, but it’s always seemed to me his mind resides in a totally different stratosphere. So, are you looking for an autograph, perhaps a photo?”*

*“Actually sir, I was hoping to speak with you about the SD10 air pockets and your conclusion about LRS. My detailed analysis has told me there are several regions throughout the country that in no way could be affected by that particular form of acid rain, but you’ve failed to disclose that information to the public.”*

*“Look son, long before you were even in your mother’s womb, I’d been helping countries around the world overcome numerous scientific and medical dilemmas far beyond any other scientist’s capabilities. So, if you think I’m going to concern myself with the musings of some young, misguided neophyte tree-hugger, then you are just as spaced-out as Kinsley.”*

Hunter’s response sounded as if he was losing his grip on his anger. *“Just answer one question. If you believe SD10 acid rain is causing LRS, how are those outside of the affected regions becoming ill? How, Doctor?”*

Ahar raised his voice. *“Security—remove this young man from the building.”*

*“Are you afraid of being challenged, Doctor?”*



The recording ended.

“He had a security guard usher me out of the building,” Hunter said, tucking his flash-pad back into his pocket. “And I know my every move was being watched until I came back here to Vexton. When I noticed some guy following me, I was afraid for my life. That’s when I contacted Kurt. I knew I could trust him with the information, and I felt it was important to relay it to him in person. I was hoping he would bring the information back to you and your wife. I had a plan to give the guy the slip and meet Kurt in his hotel room, but obviously my plan didn’t work.”

“This guy who was following you, what did he look like?”

“I never got a totally clear look at him. He was a big guy... and he always wore sunglasses and some old-fashioned gray hat.”

A bell went off in my mind. “Do you remember what color the glasses were?”

“They were kind of weird looking. They had some kind of red tint.”

“That has to be the same guy,” I said to myself.

“What guy?”

“The day Kurt was murdered; a maid claims to have seen a man in the hotel elevator who fits that very description. Along with you, he became a person of interest.”

“That has to be the same guy!” Hunter said. “They knew I was going to divulge the information to Kurt. They knew we were planning to meet in his room, but I was late. When I finally arrived at the hotel, I caught a glimpse of that guy leaving the building. Then I saw there was a commotion, so I got out of there like a bat out of hell and caught a flight to Vexton.”

“Did you not try reaching Kurt?”

“Yes, I tried reaching him on his flash-pad, but there was no signal. On the way home, that’s when I heard he’d been murdered. I figured even though they failed to get *me*, they were sending me a strong message by killing Kurt.”

“What makes you think Ahar is the person behind all of this?” I asked.

“It’s all about that horrific LRS lie I caught him telling the American public. He and whoever is involved with him are going to do whatever it takes to keep the truth hidden.”

“If what you’re telling me is accurate, then that includes murder,” I said. “But why would Ahar have done this? What good could it possibly do him to make the country think acid rain is causing LRS? I can’t see him being paid to lie. The man has more money than he knows what to do with.”

“I wish I had the answer... and I wish I never got Kurt involved in all of this.” Hunter dropped his gaze to his hands resting in his lap. “I still can’t believe this has happened.”

“We have to expose this, Hunter. More than 200,000 young Americans are already living with LRS, and that number is rising as we speak. If it’s not this bloody acid rain that’s making everyone sick, then we need to find out what the hell is!”

“You’re forgetting one thing, Heath. When Ahar told his lie, he was representing the American government. That’s why I feared my flash-pad was being tapped.”

I stared at him. “You think the Westgale Administration has something to do with this? Have you lost your mind?”

Hunter slowly shook his head. “I don’t know what to think. I’ve been on the run, fearing for my life, and one of my best friends was killed with a styngor by some madman who appeared to have been following me around California.”

Hunter and I shared a bleak look. He looked as if he felt trapped in a void of confusion. Personally, I didn’t know what to believe. Was Hunter telling me the truth? The one thing I did know was that his story had to be brought to light. If he was correct, and this was some dastardly lie being told by Ahar, either by himself, in conjunction with the government, or anyone else, it most definitely needed to be exposed.

“Let’s go see Sharon. I promise to make sure you’re not placed in any danger,” I said. When he looked like he might protest, I added, “Now, put some trust in me, like I have in you, and let’s get to the bottom of this madness.”

“Okay... but there’s one thing I need to do first.”

“What’s that?”

“Visit my father. I promise I’ll return within twenty minutes and then we’ll go see your wife.”

“I can’t let you out of my sight,” I said. “I’ll wait for you at your father’s farm.”

## CHAPTER 10

Nicole Kratz wasn't surprised that Dr. Ahar's attorney, Arthur Fine, had requested a meeting; she was surprised, however, that he deemed it "an emergency."

"Hello, Arthur," she said as he entered her office and moved to the proffered seat. "How have you been keeping?" She took a closer look at him. "I hope you don't mind me saying, but you look rather stressed."

"Let's say I've had better days," Arthur said as he loosened his tie and sank down in his seat. He sighed. "Where does time go? It doesn't seem that long ago, you were sitting in one of my law classes at Summit. It's fantastic to see you've accomplished so much—the number two person in the US government... impressive." His words sounded forced; he was clearly too preoccupied to focus on pleasantries.

"It's been a long road, but I'm very fortunate to have found myself in this position. Are you sure you're okay?" Arthur didn't answer. "Is Dr. Ahar going to be joining us?"

"That's why I'm here, Nicole. Dr. Ahar... he's... dead."

"Dead?"

"He took his own life, early this morning," mumbled Arthur, sinking deeper into his chair.

"What in the world happened?" she exclaimed. "He was the most revered scientist on this planet—we all held him in such high regard."

Arthur nodded. "The man had everything. Like you said, he was an incredibly brilliant scientist, but very humble. Even though he'd

become a celebrity on the World Connect, he never viewed himself as being above anyone else.”

“Did he leave any message behind?”

“He left this, along with a short note.” Arthur pulled a data-chip audio file from his satchel. “I have no idea who or where it’s from. Listen.”

He scanned the chip and played the message. The voice had obviously been altered: *“Congratulations, Dr. Ahar; they sure couldn’t have chosen anybody better qualified to undertake this ever-so-important LRS study. After all, there is no other scientist in America who has reached anywhere near the superstar status that you have, and that’s who the American people wish to hear from, a true superstar.*

*“It is my understanding that your lovely daughter, Anya, is quite a rising star in the world of medicine and science as well. It would be tragic if something prevented her from becoming a superstar scientist just like her father. That would be just awful. By the way, I’ll save you many laborious hours by informing you that this recent LRS crisis has been caused by streams of acid rain flowing from those insidious SD10 air pockets that have formed across the country. I strongly trust you’ll agree. Have a wonderful day, Doctor, and may God bless both you and Anya.”*

When the recording finished Arthur propped himself up in the chair. “The note he left accompanying the audio file read: *I can no longer lie. Please protect my daughter.*”

“And you have no idea who sent this?”

Arthur shook his head in frustration. “This is the fifth time I’ve listened to it, and damn it, I still can’t make any sense of it. Who the hell would have sent Jack such a disturbing message?”

“It sounds like whoever it was was targeting his daughter as well. What do you know about Anya?”

“Well, like the message said, she is definitely following in her father’s footsteps. I’ve met her on a few occasions, and from all accounts she is a brilliant, all-round scientist. Even Jack told me she probably has the most brilliant mind he’s ever come across. In

fact, he recently put her in charge of his highly acclaimed New York lab.”

“Have you contacted anyone else about this?” Nicole asked.

“Certainly not. The only people who know about this, besides me, are Anya and now you. When I heard that recording, I thought it would be best to bring it to your attention.”

Nicole nodded. “I think that was very wise. I’m going to contact Gil Robichaud and have him begin a full investigation. If Dr. Ahar was lying about what is causing LRS, we need to address this immediately. As far as Anya is concerned, I’ll arrange for her to be protected here in Washington until we get some answers.”

“There’s a major problem with that plan,” Arthur said. “She won’t divulge her current whereabouts. She claims she’s fine, but says she needs time to herself.”

\* \* \*

It had been a little over two years since Hunter and his father had spoken to one another. Noticing the neglect when he arrived at the farm, he looked around the property before approaching the house. What used to be field after field of strawberry plants, with large baskets overflowing with glistening red berries, was now a shadow of its former glory. Full of angst, Hunter approached the front walk, realizing how deeply he’d hurt his father by heading off to California. But it was *his* life, he reminded himself, and he had to follow his calling. Already exhausted from this recent ordeal, he knew he’d have to dig deep down and somehow find the energy to face his father, whose gruff demeanor usually made for tense conversations that ended in confrontations. Hunter knew that under Rusty’s cold and harsh exterior there was a warm and caring heart, but Rusty was a man who avoided showing any sign of vulnerability.

Hunter knocked on the door and waited, but there was no answer. He knocked again, louder this time.

“Hold your horses... I’m coming,” bellowed Rusty.

Hunter could hear his father’s heavy footsteps approaching the door. The door swung briskly open.

Rusty looked at Hunter and grunted. “Well now, if it isn’t the return of the prodigal son. There are people out there looking for you, my boy. Did you come back to old dad to seek refuge?”

“Can I at least come into the house before the battle begins?”

“Of course you can.” He stepped back from the doorway, and Hunter entered the living room. “You look like you haven’t slept for a week,” Rusty noted as Hunter passed him. “Sit down, son. Let me go to the kitchen and fix you a sandwich and some lemonade.”

As Rusty headed to the kitchen, Hunter surveyed the living room. The house seemed a little messier than it used to be, but otherwise very little had changed. Although, when Hunter looked toward the fireplace, he noticed something different. The farming awards that used to sit on top of the mantel had been replaced by several of Hunter’s academic honors. This touched Hunter deeply.

Rusty returned with the sandwich and lemonade. “So tell me, Hunter: how is it that chasing the sun and climbing trees can get you into so much trouble that the law is looking for you?” he asked as he handed Hunter the glass and plate.

Hunter set the drink and sandwich on the side table beside his chair. “It’s a long story, Dad, but I’m working on getting everything cleared up.”

“They told me Kurt Hollis was murdered. I just hope to God you had nothing to do with that.”

Hunter suppressed his surge of anger. “If you’re asking me if I murdered Kurt, of course I didn’t. Now, I didn’t come here to worry you about all of that. How are you doing, Pops?”

“How does it look like I’m doing? I’m on the verge of having to sell this place.”

“I’m sorry to hear things have taken such a turn for the worse.”

“You should be,” Rusty snapped. “You’re the one who turned your back on this place, and for over two years you’ve ignored this farm.” He flicked open a lighter and methodically began to light his pipe.

“That’s unfair, and you very well know it,” Hunter retorted. “I’ve tried contacting you many times, and not once did you get back to me. How do you think that made me feel?”

“Those calls were out of some kind of forced obligation. If you really cared about me, you would have stayed here and worked this farm.” Rusty’s voice was rising. “Instead, I was forced to hire some punks who nearly ruined the entire operation. And to make matters worse, they were stealing from me.” Rusty puffed slowly on his pipe as if hoping to inhale calmness.

“First of all, Dad, get it through that thick skull of yours that I care for you with all my heart. That being said, I also have to live my life—the life that *I* wish to live. I’ve done extremely well for myself at Forever Green, and I want to give this to you; it’s my way of giving back to both you and the farm.” Hunter turned on his flash-pad and displayed a money transfer, made out to Rusty, in the amount of \$200,000.

Rusty shook his head once, sharply. “No way. I’m not taking some kind of pity payment from you.”

“I’m not giving you this out of pity. I’m giving it to you because I love you, and the foundation you provided for me enabled me to get an education and work for an incredible man like Professor Kinsley. Now, this farm... don’t think for a second this place isn’t special to me. If you’ll let me, I would love to come here every so often and use my crazy, new age ideas to help fix this place up.”

Hunter could see tears beginning to form in his father’s eyes even though Rusty was trying his best to maintain his tough exterior. When he spoke, his voice had softened. “Thanks, son; this means more than you could imagine to me.”

“It’s only money, Pops.”

“It’s not the money I’m referring to,” Rusty said as those tears he was trying so hard to conceal spilled over onto his ruddy cheeks.

“How did things go?” I asked Hunter.

“Well, I’ll be staying with Dad until I leave Vexton.”

“That’s great. I’m thrilled to see you worked things out.”

“People who don’t know my father very well,” Hunter said, “see him as a grumpy and coldhearted character, which he can be, but the true Rusty Talbot is actually a very caring and understanding human being. He’s also incredibly industrious.”



“Like father, like son,” I said. “Joel Eagan informed Sharon and me that Professor Kinsley holds you in high regard. He also said the professor mentioned something about a secret project over in Finland you’ve been working on.”

Hunter nodded. “Yes, that’s true, and I would love to get this mess all sorted out so I can get back there.” He paused. “I’ve been wondering, how’s Mr. Hollis doing?”

I sighed. “Nev has had it rough lately, between Nathan being diagnosed with LRS and now Kurt’s murder.”

“I feel so responsible. I should have known I would be placing Kurt in harm’s way. I still can’t believe he’s gone. At some point, I’ll have to find a way to reach out to his family and tell them just how sorry I am.”

“Now, now, you can’t go on blaming yourself for what happened. First things first—we need to bring this information to the authorities,” I said briskly. “We should get moving. Sharon’s going to meet us back at the house.”

When we arrived at the house, Sharon saw me with Hunter and nearly fainted. “What is he doing here?”

Hunter explained what had happened.

“And why are we to believe you?” asked a skeptical Sharon.

“I’m telling you the truth, ma’am,” Hunter replied. “This is exactly what happened. I’m in fear for my life. Dr. Ahar’s an incredibly powerful man. When Kurt was killed, I was supposed to be in that room as well.”

“You don’t need to worry anymore. The doctor won’t personally be having anybody else killed,” said Sharon.

“Honey, I agree with Hunter. If Ahar had Kurt murdered, obviously Hunter is in serious danger,” I said.

“Ahar’s dead,” said Sharon.

“What?” I blurted in disbelief.

“He took his own life. The news was just released a short while ago,” said Sharon.

“Did they say why?” I asked.

“He left a short note saying he could “no longer lie.” There was also an audio file in which he and his daughter were being threatened,” Sharon answered.

“How so?” asked Hunter.

“It sounded as if he was being forced into telling the public that the acid rain was responsible for causing LRS. Here; the audio file was released on the World Connect. I copied it to my flash-pad—listen.” Sharon played the audio file.

“No wonder he was so defiant in the lecture hall when I spoke with him,” Hunter said. “He must have been in fear for his *own* life.”

“If what you’re telling us is true, then it’s safe to say that whoever threatened Ahar in that audio file must have killed Kurt and was the person who was following you. You’ll need to tell the authorities in Washington exactly what you’ve told Heath and me,” said Sharon.

“And what if they don’t believe me? After all, they despise the organization I represent,” said Hunter, shifting nervously.

“You’ve been caught in the eye of this storm, Hunter. If you just tell the truth, you’ll be fine,” Sharon assured him.

# CHAPTER 11

The death of Dr. Ahar had thrown the Westgale Administration into panic mode. As it began fervently searching for answers, the catalyst for Ahar's suicide and the murder of Kurt Hollis were now considered top priorities. Hunter Talbot was somebody they hoped would help provide answers. He spent an entire afternoon, of his own volition and without an attorney, speaking with US Attorney General Dave Perry, relating to him the entire course of events in California.

"Thank you for sharing this information, Mr. Talbot. Would you say your organization eagerly encouraged a proactive response from the government in eliminating those air pockets?"

Hunter started to feel uneasy, but he remembered what Sharon had told him: just tell the truth. "Yes, that's correct."

"In fact, isn't it true that your boss, Professor Trent Kinsley, is on record publicly condemning President Westgale for not taking action and eliminating those air pockets?"

"Our report strongly supported the fact that the matter needed to be addressed, and months later we were proven correct," Hunter responded.

"Let me get this straight. First your organization accuses our government of being negligent by not spending billions of dollars to eliminate those acid rain air pockets, and now you're claiming there isn't a concern. What is it, Mr. Talbot?"

Hunter felt that he was on the verge of being considered some sort of guilty party. "Yes, I do stand by our original report, but I

don't believe for a second that SD10 is causing LRS—hay fever, but not LRS. That's why I went to Dr. Ahar. My follow-up study concluded that there is no way the SD10 has permeated through those regions—it simply isn't possible. Here are my reports to prove that.” He produced his data.

After the interview, Hunter was allowed to leave, but he was ordered to remain within the country for the time being.

Dave Perry and Nicole Kratz addressed the matter in her office.

“So, how did things go with this Hunter Talbot fellow?” she asked.

“I think he's telling the truth, Nicole. He even brought me a copy of his own extensive SD10 report. If you look at phase four of the report, you'll see exactly what he's referring to.”

Nicole took a few minutes to read the information, then pulled up the AMO database on her flash-pad. “From what I see here, if we consider the report's unaffected regions, the database shows 16,372 current confirmed cases of LRS. I guess this is what Dr. Ahar meant when he said he could no longer lie. This seems to confirm the idea that he was being forced into blaming the acid rain for LRS. That being said, I'm going to have this report sent out for further analysis.”

“I still can't get my head around why someone would threaten Ahar into telling such a horrific lie,” Perry said. “It just doesn't add up.”

“What do we really know about our friend Professor Kinsley?” Nicole asked.

“Other than the fact that he's extremely wealthy, exceedingly eccentric, and nonpolitical, not a whole lot. Are you thinking he would do something so contemptible to further his cause?”

Nicole raised the flash-screen at the front of her office. “Last evening, I had my staff do some research on the professor, and they discovered some very interesting view-files. The man's contempt for our government is very apparent, and on several occasions he has also taken issue with Dr. Ahar.” She played a clip from one of the view-files.

The view-file had been made at a seminar where Kinsley was presenting, around the time when Forever Green's SD10 report had

been made public. The seminar was titled “Will Today Have a Tomorrow?” During the seminar, Kinsley described the Westgale Administration as “clowns starring in a poorly organized circus.” He also warned of the dangers of government complacency. “It’s so sad that the people we trust to run this amazing country continue to operate in such a reactionary mode. As our treasured Mother Earth continues to be destroyed by the greed of mankind, the keepers of the Freedom Home contribute to her destruction through total ineptness and complacency. You can bet, when disaster does arise, they’ll be sure to call on someone like their ever-so-trusted superstar scientist, Jack Ahar, to come and save the day,” Kinsley sneered. “The main problem with that scenario is that the time will soon come when there will be nothing left to save!”

“‘Superstar scientist,’ that’s exactly how the voice in the audio file refers to Ahar,” Dave Perry observed.

“That caught my attention as well,” said Nicole. “Even though the voice on the audio file was heavily altered, I’m going to have our people perform a comparison analysis.”

“I’ll dig a little deeper into the professor’s past,” Dave said, “see if he’s ever been in trouble with the law. We’ll also need to look into Ahar’s recent activities for anything suspicious.”

A knock on the door interrupted them. It opened to reveal Westgale.

“Come on in, Mr. President,” said Nicole.

“Nicole, David; has anybody come up with anything regarding Dr. Ahar’s suicide?” asked Westgale.

Nicole described the matters relating to Hunter Talbot and Professor Kinsley. Westgale shook his head in frustration. “Just when I thought things couldn’t get any worse, we’ll now have to backtrack and tell the American people LRS isn’t being caused by acid rain... and that we have absolutely no idea what actually is causing this horrific illness.”

“I fully understand your frustration, sir, but I believe we have to continue to be transparent. I’ll work with Beth on drawing up a speech, outlining the facts as we know them,” said Nicole.

“First General Gibson is murdered in the Freedom Home, and now Ahar commits suicide because of this whole LRS mess,” Westgale mused. “What on earth is going on around here? We need to get to the bottom of this. If we don’t, I’m fearful we’ll be done.”

“I’m glad to have the both of you here,” Perry said, gently steering the conversation elsewhere. “There’s a matter relating to the general’s murder that I’m planning to look into.”

“Have you found a lead, David?” asked Westgale.

“Not a direct lead, but I’m hoping Dwight ‘Dagger’ Wagner might be able to shed some light on the general’s murder,” replied Dave.

“Oh yeah, the punk who was behind that AXE domestic terror group,” interjected Nicole.

Dave nodded. “That’s correct. There’s a strong possibility the general’s murder was in retaliation to the World Harmony Program. We’re still trying to determine how many AXE members are at large. And if the murder was an attempt to cause harm to our administration, that would certainly give AXE a motive. I think it would be wise to see what we can get out of Dagger. He may know something valuable to the investigation.”

“I’ll leave it in your capable hands, David. Please keep us informed,” said Westgale, concluding the meeting.

\* \* \*

After the Administration confirmed to the public that SD10 acid rain had been ruled out as the cause of LRS, anger filled the country once again. Outraged by how they were constantly being misled by the Westgale Administration, people were demanding answers. The resulting chaos within the American government prompted the Outer Commission to call a formal meeting at an undisclosed location, where it was decided that the situation should be closely monitored, with the possibility of implementing Section 31.4 of the New Order Treaty.

The AMO’s LRS database rose to 276, 319 individuals diagnosed with the illness, with the age range increasing from six to twenty-six, up from twenty-one. Those working on finding a cure were frustrated by the inconsistencies among those suffering from the illness.

Dr. Ahar's death left an enormous void within the scientific community. Many found it hard to believe that a man of such prominence could have crossed a line of morality, leading him to take his own life. There'd been no suggestion of corruption or turmoil in his professional or personal life. The question that continued to linger was, why hadn't he disclosed the threat made against him to the authorities?

"I owe you an apology," Gloria Lee said to Nicole Kratz when they met in Nicole's Washington office. "I guess I rushed to judgment."

"I actually think what you did was very commendable," said Nicole.

Lee chuckled weakly. "Coming into your office and ranting like a lunatic?"

"Actually, I want to thank you for that. I think it helped put things in perspective. Most of the time the people of America don't have a voice; you gave them that," Kratz replied.

"Since it's not the acid rain causing this illness, does the Administration have any other theories?"

Nicole slowly shook her head. "Sadly, we're back to square one. But on a positive note, we remain very committed to providing monetary assistance to those with the illness, and of course finding that ever so mysterious cure."

"That's fantastic to hear. If I can ever be of any assistance, please don't hesitate to call."

\* \* \*

Westgale called his executive staff to a meeting on the third floor of the Freedom Home for an update on the development of the LRS Compensation Program. Nicole Kratz presided.

After continuous meetings with the Economic Assistance and Finance Departments, Nicole reported, the planned \$60 billion in subsidies promised to the farmers of America would remain in place. General Sims and his fellow military officials did not hide their dismay when Nicole also announced that the two departments had recommended that the funding for LRS assistance come out of the

national defense budget. Once they had the final numbers, she reported, this motion would be presented before the fifty-three-member Strategic Council in the coming days.

While Nicole invited the directors of both departments to fill in details and participate in a lengthy question and answer period, Westgale sat quietly with one of his aides in the corner of the cavernous room, as he had for the entire meeting. Fatigued and tense, he was fearful of not only the public reaction to this news, but also the reaction within his own Administration, especially his Department of Defense—who, after hearing the news of another defense funding claw-back, called its own emergency meeting.

General Sims presided over the meeting, which was contentious right from the beginning.

“We’re all concerned, Cliff. What in God’s name is the president doing to the military? What is he doing to this country?” Colonel Mitchell Peters growled, giving his anger free rein. “These recommendations are preposterous!” He waved a contemptuous hand at the list of recommended adjustments displayed on the large flash-screen at the front of the room. “We need to upgrade those robo-fighters for a reason. And look at the bottom of the screen, where he wants to eliminate forty percent of our overseas contingency funding. This is a complete disgrace, General!”

“I understand your concerns, Colonel, but nothing has been passed at this stage, and I’m certain there are many members on that Strategic Council who will be as strongly opposed to these changes as we are. I just hope it’s the majority. And if that’s not the case, then we’ll deal with the matter accordingly,” said Sims, keeping his voice calm. It had no effect on Colonel Peters’s temper; he demanded a one-on-one meeting with Sims to further discuss the situation.

They met at Griffin’s Gourmet restaurant the next day.

“There’s no doubt Westgale is losing his grip on this country,” Sims began. “I wanted to address this with you personally, Colonel. Your claim was correct when you said these cutbacks are turning us into a sitting duck for those who want to bring us down.



Unfortunately, he's also being very evasive with regards to many important matters."

"Such as?"

"General Gibson's murder."

Peters lifted his eyebrows. "How so?"

"He knows who orchestrated the murder, and for his own political reasons, he's keeping it hidden."

Peters stared at him. "Are you serious?"

"I wouldn't joke about the murder of a man we all so dearly cared for," Sims replied.

Peters slammed his fist against the tabletop. "That damn fool! Who was responsible?"

"Cobra Pix and his wicked Pinian militia, the Iron Lotus."

"And William's just letting this go?"

"It appears so. And sadly, that's not all. The Iron Lotus has been aggressively recruiting members within this country, and William's been ignoring it. I assume our supposedly trustworthy president doesn't want to risk putting a damper on his foolish peace dream."

"I'll go speak with him as soon as we're done," Peters decided. "He can't be carrying on like this, General."

"It's no use, Colonel; he'll just continue to lie and deny. Trust me when I tell you he's lost all regard for us. Just consider how he continues to deplete this military. The man has become delusional, and this entire country will be left to face the consequences of his insanity. The time has come. Before he runs this country into the ground, we need to stop him!"

A few days later, the Strategic Council voted to once again reduce the national defense budget, creating further rage within the Department of Defense.

\* \* \*

Westgale was up with the dawn, again driven from his bed by the pressure he had been facing. Over the last several weeks, sleep had not come easily.

“Why don’t you try to catch a couple more hours of sleep, honey?” April urged, her eyebrows pinched by concern. “I’m really concerned for your well-being, William,” she said as Westgale sat at the foot of the bed, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

“I’ll be fine, sweetheart. The sun is shining. I can hear the birds singing.” He offered a smile. “It’s a brand new day.”

April sighed. “You’re not fooling me. I know you far too well.”

Westgale rose and moved to the window. “You know how long it’s been since we’ve walked through that wondrous field?” he said, referring to the Freedom Home’s Field of Honor, which paid tribute to America’s illustrious history.

“Way too long,” April agreed. Then she suggested, “If you’re up to it, so am I.”

After breakfast, they were on their way. Westgale paused just inside the entrance to take in the splendor around him. He inhaled deeply and smiled. “It’s so uplifting to be out here.”

“I guess so, considering you’ve been continuously confined to dreary conference rooms for the last several months,” said April as they continued on, occasionally stopping to view the many flash-screens telling America’s story.

“I still think of him every day... every day,” said Westgale as they stood in front of a flash-screen paying tribute to General Gibson.

April nodded. “I miss his calming presence. He had an innate way of putting things into proper perspective.”

“Right now we could all use his guidance,” Westgale said wryly, eyes on the flash-screen as it displayed aspects of the general’s life and achievements, including his efforts in helping to raise financial support and coordinate the reconstruction of several poor neighborhoods in Arkansas.

“Ah, the Arkansas Recovery Projects. He really took Major Buckner’s death to heart,” said April, referring to the soldier whose death prompted General Gibson to travel to his home town to pay his respects to the man’s family. He’d been so appalled by the destitute town’s living conditions that he was determined to provide aid.

“He firmly believed that the young men and women who give up their lives for this country should be honored, that they don’t live and die in vain,” Westgale added, fighting tears.

April put a comforting hand on his arm. “Everybody’s well aware of your high regard for the military. Those who say otherwise are foolish, and they don’t know the real William T. Westgale.”

“Those dedicated men and women. I despise the fact that they may think I’m turning my back on them.” Westgale turned to look earnestly at April. “I had no choice, my love. I wish I could just wave some magic wand and satisfy everybody’s wishes.”

“With the World Harmony Program, you’re doing something no other world leader has ever done,” she reminded him. “And when you take into account the program’s only in its infancy, you should be extremely proud.” April pulled him over to a bench in front of a flash-screen that paid homage to the former White House, and they sat down.

“Yeah... the program is gaining traction daily, but I’m also not too naive to realize how challenging it is to stem the tide of chaos and hatred.” He thought about a night some twenty-five years ago, when he’d heard his grandfather warn his father that the political divide was becoming an unbridled beast tearing at the country’s heart... and sure enough, a few months later the War Within erupted.

Westgale turned to a flash-screen telling the story of that very war, the one that divided the country into Peace-Bringers and Militants. “To think that war cost us our complete independence, to the point where an international governing body is able to remove our existing government if it sees fit...” Westgale firmed his shoulders. “Well, we must never let that type of conflict arise again, April—never.” He passed a weary hand over his eyes, and April embraced him.

## CHAPTER 12

Since the day he was arrested, the authorities believed Dwight Wagner had been holding back valuable information relating to the extremist criminal underground in America. Dave Perry, who had briefly met Dwight during a couple of prior court hearings, was looking forward to his first opportunity to interview him.

During the last several days, Dave had researched Dwight's background and criminal history. Knowing that Dwight was facing the death penalty, Dave realized it would be difficult, as proven by Dwight's prior interviews with authorities, to obtain information. However, Dave had a plan that he was confident would work.

The guards brought Dwight into the interrogation room, and he dropped into a chair across the long, narrow table from Dave. Dwight's shackles rattled as he settled. He'd been incarcerated long enough that his military-style brush cut had grown out. He stared directly into Dave's eyes. "What the hell am I doing here? Don't you guys understand I have nothing to say? You've had shrink after shrink try to analyze who I am, and it's all a waste of time."

Dave opened Dwight's file and shook his head. "Let me see... wow, that's quite a load of artillery for a lowlife street gang." He looked up at Dwight. "And judging from these prior interviews, I guess you have no plans on telling us where it all came from." He looked back down at the file. "What else do we have here? A plan to bomb six government buildings all in one shot—rather ambitious, I must say." Dave looked up again. "Tell me, Mr. Wagner—why so angry?"

Dwight looked at him and snickered in response. "It's people like you who fuel my fire, Mr. Perry—Peace-Bringer cowards who are

running this country into the ground. You and your kind sicken me. How can people like you run a country when you don't know what it's like to suffer? How can you know what it's like, growing up on the streets, not knowing if you'll live to see tomorrow?"

Dave stared right back at him. "Oh, so you think you know all about me?" He took out his flash-pad. "We have far more in common than you think, my friend. Let me enlighten you. This is Newark, New Jersey. Do you see these streets? This is where I grew up as an orphan. This alleyway, right here—this is where I spent many nights, not knowing if I would be alive in the morning."

"Why the hell are you telling me all this?" Dwight snarled.

"Do you see this building? One night I went right to the top. Just as I was ready to plunge to my death, two security guards grabbed me. I was able to break free and run away. The next morning one of the street kids I hung out with got me a laser-gun—again, I was ready to end it all."

Dwight slammed his hands against the table and leaned back. "Why do I have to listen to this crap?"

"I lay on a park bench, unconscious, my entire body trembling, until a man named Mr. Posey came to my aid. He and his wife devoted their lives to helping troubled youth in the area. He sat down beside me, casually, and said a few kind words of encouragement—and amazingly, I just handed him that gun. That's all it took. I realized I just needed someone to show me they cared. For the next six months I stayed at the shelter they ran, which helped to at least give me some sort of direction."

"And then, let me guess—you turned your life around and miraculously, you went on to become the number one scumbag lawyer in America," Dwight sneered.

"Oh no, it wasn't that easy. I spent the next few years still trying to get my life together, but I kept relapsing. Finally I began seeing a counselor for my addictions. During our first session he really got to me. I knew he was speaking the truth about my life, and it ripped at my soul. I told him I needed a break and went into the bathroom. I began splashing cold water onto my face, and when I raised my

head and looked in the mirror, I noticed a bright flashing sign above me that read *BELIEVE*—one simple, yet powerful word. That moment changed my life.”

“I know you are well aware that in a few months, my time on this earth will come to an end,” Dwight said with elaborate patience. “So if you’re hoping I can dig down and find something to *believe* in, well, it’s just a little too late for that, Mr. Attorney General.”

“You’re correct, there is nothing anyone can do to save you now,” Perry said. “But your younger brother Lucas... he’s a whole other story.”

“The last time I checked, he was also on death row with me, and the fifteen others.”

“Yeah... that leaves another six members of your little group roaming around the country, planning to do who knows what.”

“I get it,” Dwight drawled. “This is where you tell me you’ll spare Lucas if I rat out the others. Don’t waste your breath; I’m not a snitch.”

“It’s entirely up to you whether or not you cooperate. I read the file on your brother, and I’ve spoken with the agents who’ve interviewed him. It’s pretty obvious you’re the one who introduced him to your world, and now you’re going to allow him to be executed. Do you ever look in the mirror, Dwight? Your brother trusted in you to guide him through life, and you taught him to hate the world.”

“Shut up, man!”

“It’s true, isn’t it? Your brother never wanted to get caught up in your madness, but he didn’t have a choice. He needed you, and you led him straight to death row. I’m giving you a chance, Dwight. You tell me what I need to know, and I guarantee you your brother will not be executed. I’ll also make sure he gets the help he needs.”

Dwight began trembling. “I know I failed him. You... you don’t have to tell me that. Our mother was a two-bit alcoholic; they took us away from her when I was eleven and Luke was five. She didn’t even know who our fathers were. I promised Luke I would always be there for him.”

“And I’m giving you that opportunity to be there for him,” Dave pressed. “This is your final chance for at least some form of redemption. What’s it going to be, Dwight?”

Dwight lowered his head into his hands and sighed. “What do you want to know?”

“Tell me where your pile of goodies came from, and give me those names. That will help your brother’s cause.”

Dwight hesitated a long time, still holding forth some vestige of resistance. Then he sighed heavily and leaned forward to rest his forearms on the table. “My connection informed me that the weapons and bombs came from some out-of-country arms dealer referred to as The Network, but if you want to know who they are and where they’re from, I have no clue.”

“And the six AXE members still on the lam?”

“I guess your Intelligence people aren’t so intelligent after all. The list of all those involved, including their real names, was encrypted in my flash-pad, the very one your goons took from me when I was arrested. I encrypted the info with a code, which obviously even your experts weren’t able to break.” Dwight paused a long time. Then, clearly reluctant, he began explaining how the information could be retrieved. “Now, before you go all crazy on me, there is one individual on that list who never gave me their real name,” Dwight warned him. “I know nothing about them. They went by the name of Jupiter, and desperately wanted to be part of the movement, but at the same time demanded to remain completely anonymous.”

“And so how did this Jupiter contribute to your so-called movement?”

“By sending us much-needed funding, along with a dozen large vials of a deadly toxin called helcin. At first I planned on just storing the stuff away, but then I was contacted by someone who really wanted it badly—they wanted it so desperately, they ended up paying me \$25 million, which of course your goons confiscated from the warehouse.”

Dave tried his best to remain in control, but he was vibrating with anger. “You rotten bastard—that’s the same bloody poison that killed one of the finest men who has ever served this country! Do you know

how deadly that stuff is?” he shouted, pounding the table with his fist. “Who the hell did you sell it to? Tell me who it was—tell me *now!*”

Dwight leaned back and waved a casual hand. “Do you think for a second they were going to reveal their identity to me? They paid me the money, and that’s all I cared about.”

Dave paused to regain his composure. “Did you get any contact info, or see anything? You had to have made an exchange at some point.”

“Whoever it was really trusted us, because they left the bag of money at the warehouse gate and drove away. Once we counted it and saw it was all there, we brought the vials of helcin to the gate, and they came back and picked them up.”

“Was all the money in order?”

Dwight grinned. “\$25 million.”

“Wow, they trusted *you* with \$25 million—but then again, I guess it’s not difficult to trust a lowlife scoundrel after you’ve just given them counterfeit money.”

Dwight’s grin vanished as if his face had been wiped clear. “What are you talking about?”

“They conned you, Dwight. The money wasn’t real. Now, do you recall what kind of vehicle they were in when they made the pick up?”

“That money was fake?”

“As fake as can be,” Dave said smugly. “Now, what about the vehicle?”

“It was some old black van... Look, I’ve had enough of this. Take me back to my cell.”

“Okay Dwight, but let me tell you, I not only have the influence to have your brother’s execution stayed, I can also make it happen a lot sooner. Heck, I can even get you a front row seat. So, like I said, it’s up to you.”

“I’m being honest,” Dwight protested. “It was just some old black van with a rusty license you couldn’t read.”

“How many people were in the van?”

“Two for sure. The guy on the passenger side came out of the van. He was a big guy wearing a long black coat and a gray hat and a pair of fancy sunglasses.”



\* \* \*

After his interview with Dwight Wagner, Dave Perry met with Nicole Kratz and Gil Robichaud.

“What were you able to get out of him?” asked Gil.

When Dave related what Dwight had told him, Nicole exclaimed in horror, “You mean to tell me there are twelve vials of that stuff out there? If a few specks of the stuff instantly killed General Gibson... oh my Lord!”

“In some bizarre way this all seems linked,” Dave mused. “We’ve got this guy wearing sunglasses paying for the helcin with counterfeit money, leading us to believe he’s involved with killing the school board employee and the general. And then we have what appears to be the same guy suspected of killing Kurt Hollis because Kurt supposedly knew the truth about LRS.”

“Not to mention the country’s foremost scientist lying to us about the cause of LRS, and then taking his own life in the midst of all this. And what about the investigation into Professor Kinsley?” asked Nicole.

“All the information we’ve compiled on him shows that as much as he cares for the environment, he cares for his fellow man that much more. The man’s like a saint,” replied Gil.

“I recently spoke with some of my associates who’ve been involved with several hospitals, and they praised the work he did with Vexton-Tech, creating machines to aid those with everything from mobility issues to serious respiratory conditions. He also spearheaded the creation of several devices helping to aid the mentally challenged,” said Nicole.

“And apparently he donated many of those machines out of his own pocket. That sure doesn’t sound like a person who would coerce a doctor into lying about an illness affecting young Americans,” added Dave.

“Yeah, but then there’s the anger directed at Ahar, and the president, for that matter. We can’t forget the fact that he used the term ‘superstar scientist’ to describe Ahar, the same term that appeared in the threat,” said Gil.

“There is no doubt the man is fanatical when it comes to the environment, but I don’t believe he had anything to do with any of this,” said Dave.

“I think we may have been purposely misled,” said Nicole.

“What makes you think that?” asked Gil.

“The voice expert we had analyze the audio file told us there was definitely no match. And even though that alone doesn’t rule out Kinsley, I believe whoever is behind the threat used the ‘superstar scientist’ term to purposely make us look in the professor’s direction,” she replied.

“I agree with Nicole. I think we’re wasting our time looking at Kinsley. It’s my belief this is a whole lot bigger than some dispute between new age environmentalism and traditional science. Unless something else comes up, I think it would be wise to eliminate the professor as a suspect,” said Dave.

A member of Dave’s staff sent him an urgent flash-message, and he excused himself and stepped out of the room to open the file.

“I think we may have something here,” he said when he returned a few minutes later. “I’ve had a member of my staff reviewing all of Dr. Ahar’s World Connect broadcasts, including those that weren’t actually aired. This is one of those.” He scanned the view-file and sent it to the flash-screen at the front of the room.

The episode was titled “A Kentucky Morning.” *Dr. Ahar’s Chronicles* had been recorded in several settings. Most often the setting was in one of his labs, but others were set outdoors. “This one was recorded three years ago on his Kentucky farm,” Dave said as the view-file started.

*“It’s been a while since we’ve recorded a show out here,” Ahar began in his usual relaxed tone. “Thankfully, it’s one of those splendid Kentucky mornings. Today I’m going to be providing some important information regarding safe and healthy farming. Before I do so, I want to send out congratulations to my darling daughter, Anya, who was awarded Student of the Year in both Advanced Biology and Environmental Science today at New York City’s prestigious Summit University.*

*“As I move over here to the barn... let me just open the stall... there we go. Speaking of Anya, this is her horse, her pride and joy. This guy’s a feisty fellow. Anya named him Jupiter. For some reason unknown to me, Anya has been fascinated by astronomy since she was a child, and Jupiter is her favorite planet. Now, let’s move on to take a look at...”*

When the clip ended, Nicole, Dave, and Gil looked at each other in dawning comprehension. “Anya Ahar... Jupiter... the person who supplied Dwight Wagner with the helcin,” Nicole murmured.

Gil nodded. “I think we have something.”

“There’s no doubt, Gil. In a way it all adds up, considering that whoever made the helcin had to have really known what they were doing,” Dave said.

“If it is her, then the question now becomes, why?” Gil said.

“Dwight Wagner claimed he didn’t know who Jupiter was, but now that we have reason to believe it could be Anya Ahar, I think it’s paramount we bring her in. I also think we should speak with the other members of the group to see what, if anything, they know about her,” Dave suggested.

“I’ll brief the president,” said Nicole. “Do whatever it takes, gentlemen. If Anya Ahar produced that helcin, we need to get her off the street.”

\* \* \*

As Dave Perry and his associates had discovered in prior attempts to elicit information from the imprisoned members of AXE, they were extremely guarded and did not wish to be seen as snitches. Dave realized that even if they were aware of Anya’s involvement, they would most likely remain silent. Fortunately, he caught the break he was hoping for when former Wagner associate Morris Johns admitted to introducing Anya to the movement, and he was more than willing to speak openly about the matter.

“So, Mr. Johns, Agent Long has informed me that you’re the person who introduced Anya Ahar to AXE. Why are you opening up about this now?”

Johns shrugged. “Since we’re now exposed, our truthfulness will benefit those who choose to follow our path. AXE is bigger than us. It will become a way of life. I also know for a fact Anya will eventually turn herself in.”

“And how the hell do you know that?” asked Perry, perplexed.

“The youth of America need her.”

“What on earth are you talking about?”

“You’ll have to wait and see,” Johns replied, his tone flippant.

“Do you know Anya’s current whereabouts?”

“Not physically. But spiritually, she is present within this very room,” Johns answered, grinning.

“How did you first meet Anya?”

“Her father did some consulting work for my father’s international engineering firm, and I met her then. But it was at Summit where we bonded as friends. She was considered an academic genius. Even her professors were in awe of her. Me, I quit after my first year. Anya and I used to talk for hours on end.”

“What kind of things did you speak about?”

“Life in general. Although Anya had so much going for her, she was angered by the current state of America, just like I was. We both believed the War Within had left the country directionless.”

“Why AXE, Mr. Johns?”

“I first met Dagger at an extremist rally.” Johns gave a brief, ironic chuckle. “We came from two different worlds. He was a street punk and I was some privileged rich kid, but we both viewed life in the same way. I was impressed with his street smarts. He told me how he used to dream of starting a new political movement.”

“AXE?”

“Yeah. But he needed funding to get the movement started.”

“I take it he came to you looking for that funding.”

Johns nodded. “Yeah, I gave him some cash, but we also started working on a doctrine for the movement.”

“And Anya,” Dave probed.

“She shared the same vision, and helped out with the funding, as well as the creation of our doctrine—to help set out our agenda.”

“Agenda?”

Johns sat up straight. “We believe it’s time for the youth of America to be heard and take charge of this country. We believe if America’s youth take control, hypocrisy would be eliminated and we will never face the prospect of another War Within. Dagger was so right when he said ‘An old mind is a stubborn and jaded mind, while a young mind is open and positive.’”

“And your youthful open-mindedness decided it would be wise to blow up six government buildings, killing loads of innocent people?” Dave said sarcastically.

“We had to make a harsh statement; casualties were unavoidable.”

Dave slowly shook his head. “Unavoidable.”

Johns’s face flushed and he leaned forward. “Soon—very soon, you and the rest of your delusional PBA followers will be old news. Little by little the extremist underground across America will continue to unite, and yes, Mr. Perry, we will emerge victorious, bringing about this country’s rebirth.”

“With helcin as your shield?”

Johns sat back. “Ah, helcin... that was Anya’s special contribution to the group. Boy, did she ever work hard on making that stuff. Originally it was all going to be stored away for our movement, but somebody came and made Dagger an offer he couldn’t refuse, so we decided to sell it, and direct the funds toward AXE.”

\* \* \*

After all the relevant data relating to Anya had been compiled, Nicole arranged to meet with Arthur Fine in the Field of Honor. While she waited for him to arrive, she gazed at the framed photos of her loved ones on her desk and thought about the fragility of life. The last few months had taken a real toll on her. As hard as she tried to always look on the bright side, she was finding it difficult to maintain her positive outlook. After the War Within ended, the country believed America would rebound stronger than ever. She, like many others, believed in the adage that sometimes

the only way to appreciate goodness was to face evil. After such a wicked civil war, one would have thought a lesson on the value of life had been learned, but as Nicole and others quickly learned, this wasn't the case.

Moments later, Nicole was contacted by a guard at gate A3. "Director Kratz, your guest has arrived."

With her security team in place, she made her way to the gate where Arthur Fine waited in a white grand-electro. The navy blue tinted window on the driver's side slowly began to lower. Nicole leaned toward the open window. "Hello, Arthur... I see you brought company?"

A young lady in the passenger seat turned her head toward Nicole. "I'm Anya Ahar. I've come to turn myself in."

Nicole instantly called upon the Freedom Home agents, who took Ahar into custody, escorting her and her attorney into the Freedom Home interrogation room. Anya readily admitted to manufacturing the helcin, providing funds to AXE, and partaking in the creation of the AXE doctrine. Nicole sat in the back of the room as Dave Perry was called in.

"So, Miss Ahar," Perry demanded, "where is that damn helcin?"

"I don't know. Dwight Wagner sold it."

Dave stood in front of her, arms crossed. "Why are you here, Miss Ahar? Why did you turn yourself in?"

"So I can save the youth of America."

"And how do you propose to do that?"

"After my father took his life, I began studying his LRS report, and although he was threatened into lying about the cause of the illness, my father was definitely trying his best to find a cure—"

"Enough of this crap," Dave cut in. "Tell me where that damn helcin is!"

"I don't know," Anya snapped.

"Hold on, David. Let's hear her out," said Nicole, moving toward the front of the room.

Dave whirled toward her. "Damn it, Nicole, this woman is a terrorist! I have no interest whatsoever in what she has to say about

how she plans to *save* the youth of America. The only thing I care about—and you should care about—is where that poison is!”

“My client has told you she doesn’t know,” said Arthur. “I will not allow her to be unfairly badgered.”

“Oh, don’t start with me, Arthur,” Dave retorted. “How can you sit there and defend this pathetic excuse for a human being?”

“I don’t want to pull rank on you, David, but you’re getting out of line,” Nicole said firmly. She turned to Anya. “Please, Miss Ahar, continue where you left off.”

Anya gave Perry one last glare and turned to Nicole. “As I was saying, even though he was forced to lie, I know my father was actually trying to find both the cause and the cure. But he chose the incorrect methods of analysis.”

“Are you saying your father didn’t know what he was doing?” asked Nicole.

“Oh no, my father was a brilliant scientist, but as time went by, I think he became more interested in being a celebrity. I think he lost his edge.”

“And this is where you’re going to tell us *you* have the solution,” Dave interjected.

“I’ve been working on finding the cause and the cure, and I’m certain I’m close—very close,” Anya said.

“Why should we believe you? What proof do you have?” asked Nicole.

Arthur removed a data-chip from his coat pocket. “Here, Nicole, show this to your experts, see what they think.”

“Is this some attempt to ease your conscience?” Nicole asked Anya as she accepted the chip

“The only thing I regret is the fact that Dagger sold the helcin. I manufactured that poison for the cause. I didn’t produce it to be treated like some kind of commodity. If Dagger Wagner had half a brain, AXE would have easily been able to bring down your pathetic administration,” Anya sneered.

“You delusional little ingrate,” snarled Dave.

“How dare you speak to my client that way!” shouted Arthur.

“Your client made the poison that killed this country’s former defense director. Not to mention putting her brains and money behind an underground domestic terrorist movement. What the hell is wrong with you, Arthur?” Dave shouted back. He didn’t wait for an answer, but stormed from the room, slamming the door on the way out.

“You’d be best advised to calm that boy down, Nicole. I think Anya may end up being of extreme value to your quickly sinking administration,” said Arthur.

“In case you’re unaware, Arthur, we already have a large team of highly acclaimed medical scientists working on LRS,” said Nicole.

“And how’s that going so far?” Arthur sighed and pointed at the chip in Nicole’s hand. “Take my client’s reports to Dr. Muller. Let’s see what he thinks.”

“What is really going on here, Arthur?” Nicole said slowly. “If you think I’m going to make a deal to release her, you’re kidding yourself.”

“If there’s one I thing I know, it’s that you aren’t stupid, Nicole. Here’s the deal I’m proposing: under complete supervision, you give Anya four months to find both the cause and cure for LRS, which she will fund herself.”

“And if she’s successful?”

“I ask that you grant a permanent stay of execution, and she serves a six-year prison sentence.”

“And if she’s not successful?”

“You can do as you please.”

Nicole thought for a moment. “These are extremely serious crimes, Arthur. Now, if she’s successful at finding the cause and the cure, my counter offer will include a permanent stay of execution, along with a twelve-year prison sentence.”

“I believe that to be fair.”

Nicole held up her hand. “That’s not all, Arthur. During her time in prison she will also undergo extensive counseling, and the second she is released from prison she will be facing lifetime parole. So, there it is: take it or leave it.”



“You have a deal,” Arthur replied. “I’m glad to see I taught you well, Nicole.”

“Of course, my bringing this to President Westgale is contingent upon Dr. Muller providing a positive review of Anya’s LRS report,” Nicole said as she called in the security detail to take Anya and Arthur to the Federal Justice Center in Washington, where Anya would be officially arraigned.

Nicole left the interrogation room to return to her office and found Dave waiting in the foyer. “If you’re going to start screaming at me, I don’t want to hear it,” she said, walking past him.

Dave fell in beside her. “I know what you have in mind, Nicole, and I think it would be a gigantic mistake.”

“I’ve looked into her background, and she’s considered even more brilliant than her father. Dr. Ahar said himself on many occasions that his daughter was born with a gift he had never seen before. We need to discover a cure for this damn illness, and if she believes she can find it, we need to give her the opportunity.”

“I know we’ve all been stressed lately, but are you listening to yourself, Nicole? You’re talking about our government asking for assistance from, and making a deal with, a domestic terrorist. The woman is corrupt. Besides, we have a plethora of doctors and scientists in this country who are more than capable of getting to the bottom of this.”

“Those same doctors and scientists you’re speaking of are coming up completely empty, David,” she reminded him. “And we now have close to 300,000 young Americans suffering from LRS. Even Dr. Muller is beginning to lose hope that a cure will be found, so if Anya Ahar is the solution, so be it.”

“Right now, I think we need to be more concerned about the fact she’d been managing one of her father’s labs. Who knows what kind of other poisonous concoctions she’s put together? And even if we were to let her do this, how do we know she’ll actually be successful?”

“At this point, what do we have to lose?”

“Respect, credibility, everything the Peace Bringers Association of America stands for. Think of the optics. It’s already bad enough

that we trusted her father, and he lied to the country. And the reason he lied was to protect the very person you now want to have leading the way in search of a cure. This is a young woman who believes in radical extremism! We *cannot* trust her or give her any credence,” Dave insisted.

“I don’t care about optics. I don’t care about politics, and frankly, right now, I don’t care what you think, David. If it all checks out with Dr. Muller, I will be presenting this request to President Westgale for his consideration, and I will do everything within my power to convince him to put this before the Strategic Council.”

Dave shook his head. “Somehow Arthur always gets the best of you. It looks like you’ll always be his student. Tell me, Nicole: did he get you to let her eventually fly off like a bird into the sunset?”

“Yes, and for the sake of this country, that’s exactly what I hope happens.”

## CHAPTER 13

While I was working in my office, Hunter made a surprise visit. “Hey Hunter, I’m so glad to hear you and Kinsley have been fully cleared,” I said.

“It’s funny, isn’t it, Heath? How sometimes good can actually come out of something so awful. Don’t get me wrong, there isn’t a day that goes by where I don’t lament over what happened to Kurt, but being able to patch things up with Dad... that at least has taken some of the sting out of my grief.”

“So, what’s next for you, Hunter?”

“I’m returning to Finland tomorrow to finish my latest project. I hope the folks back in Washington are able to find out who’s behind all this craziness.”

As I was bidding farewell to Hunter, my flash-pad buzzed.

“Hi, Heath, this is Secretary Gibson. How is everything in Vexton?”

“Probably a lot calmer than it is over in Washington.”

“Yeah, it’s rather chaotic here at the Freedom Home. However, I’m calling you with some good news.”

“Great. We sure could use some around here.”

“I wanted to personally inform you that within the next week or so, the first run of farming subsidy payments is going to be sent out across the country,” Beverley said.

“That is great news. I didn’t think it would happen so quickly.”

“It’s urgent to get that funding out,” Beverley replied. “Now, the second reason I contacted you was to invite you to speak at the

farming conference I was telling you about, here in Washington. I can have one of my assistants, Fiona, send you the details.”

“I really appreciate the offer, it sure is an honor,” I said, “but I can’t leave Riley, with his illness and all.”

“Actually, the invite is to you and Sharon, as well as Riley and Kayla. We’ll take care of all your travel and lodging, and include a full tour of the Freedom Home.”

“Thank you, Beverley. That is very gracious of you, but I couldn’t expect you to do that.”

“In appreciation of the incredible and innovative work you’ve performed at VLP, this is the least my department could do,” she insisted.

“Well, thank you. I’ll talk to Sharon,” I said.

\* \* \*

Skip was back in Vexton for business and invited Sharon and I over to the Levin estate for a dinner with him and his wife, Dora. Before dinner, we sat in the main living room, as usual being pampered by Home Servant robots offering appetizers and cocktails.

“I was so glad to see Riley had such an enjoyable time at the Androids game,” said Skip.

“Oh, that was such an amazing day; Riley still hasn’t stopped talking about the fun he had,” replied Sharon.

“How is that lovable little guy doing?” asked Dora.

“It’s difficult, Dora. To see him have those episodes really is heartbreaking, but somehow he still maintains a positive outlook,” I replied.

“It’s so hard to believe what happened with Dr. Ahar,” said Skip. “How a man of his standing, even if he was being threatened, could lie like he did—it’s just so difficult to comprehend. Then to learn he took his own life...” Skip shook his head. “It’s really unimaginable.”

“It is. How’s your father keeping, Skip?” asked Sharon.

“Dad’s been out of the country on business in the HKM for the last few weeks. He’s looking forward to coming home in a couple of days,” Skip replied.

As expected, dinner was sensational. Sharon and I ended up eating enough to keep us full for days. “That salmon was to die for, and those vegetables dipped in that wine sauce—you must pass on my compliments to Chef Paolo,” Sharon said.

“Oh, but Paolo had nothing to do with tonight’s dinner,” Dora replied, grinning.

“Well then, my compliments go out to you, Dora,” said Sharon.

“Thank you, but I didn’t have anything to do with the dinner either.” Dora’s grin widened.

“Well, someone had to have cooked up these superb dishes,” I said.

“Come on.” Skip rose and led us into the kitchen. “That’s who deserves full credit for tonight’s meal,” he said, pointing to a gleaming robot standing stoically in the corner. “This is the Robo-Chef!” he exclaimed.

“You mean to tell me this machine made that meal?” I asked.

“Yes, and to perfection, I must say,” replied a joyous Skip.

“I wasn’t aware these things were already out,” I said, studying the robot.

“Actually, they’re not,” Skip said. “This is the very first. In the coming days they’ll be made available to the public. This is the reason Dad’s in the HKM. The development of this robot has been really challenging.”

“Between the Home Servant robots and the Robo-Chef, soon good ol’ Gerald will end up devoid of actual human contact on this palatial estate,” Sharon said.

“That would probably be a good thing—for other humans,” Skip joked. “All kidding aside, I understand where you’re coming from, Sharon, and believe me, at times even I have questioned the merits of such a technologically advanced world. However, I have come to realize it’s part of our evolution, and there’s no turning back.”

“Sometimes I think it’s so difficult for people to accept change. I can remember Skip and his father both questioning whether the Farmhand robot would be accepted by the farming industry,” interjected Dora.

I nodded. “Now farmers across the country can’t live without it.”

\* \* \*

The news of Anya Ahar's involvement with AXE and the manufacturing of helcin came as a tremendous shock to the public. That she was the daughter of the man the Westgale Administration had called upon for assistance during the LRS tragedy made many Americans uneasy.

Even though Westgale was being praised for his efforts to aid American farmers and for the ongoing success of the World Harmony Program, the turmoil surrounding the LRS story began stealing the headlines.

Nicole contacted Dr. Muller about sending Anya's LRS research file to him.

"Are you serious, Nicole?"

"I wouldn't be wasting your time if I wasn't, Doctor."

"You know I usually don't get involved in the politics of things, but isn't this the same person who made the helcin? Is there something I'm missing?"

"Sometimes politics need to be pushed aside," Nicole said. "I believe Anya Ahar is the person who can lead us to a cure."

"Well... I guess there can't be any harm in reviewing her work. Send me the file."

A few days later, Nicole visited Dr. Muller's office.

"I must admit," he said, "I don't know very much about Anya Ahar, but I have many colleagues who are quite astounded by her abilities. Her father always told me he believed she was destined for great things."

"I've heard that same sentiment expressed by so many people; that's why I'm so determined to go through with this," Nicole replied. "What did you make of the file?"

"Impressive... very impressive. She's approached the illness from a very unorthodox angle, which has led to a far more advanced analysis than the conventional approach our team has taken."

"What about her conclusion that this illness will eventually lead to death?"

“Yes, I saw that, and based on the data she has provided to back up her claim, it would be very difficult to dispute that hypothesis, regardless of how unconventional her methods are.”

“When I interviewed the professors who taught her at Summit, they described her ability to analyze and interpret data as beyond comprehension,” Nicole said.

Convinced even further by her meeting with Dr. Muller, Nicole knew she had to immediately bring this matter to Westgale’s attention. At a one-on-one meeting with the president, she pleaded her case. “We need this young lady, sir. She’s confident she’s on the path to finding that cure. We owe this to the American public.”

Westgale scowled, but his voice was thoughtful. “This would totally disregard our justice system. Even the mere mention of this will cause outrage. I realize your intentions are sincere, Nicole, but I personally think doing this would not be in our best interest.”

“Not in our best interest... I guess you mean politically.”

“I know I don’t have to tell you this, but every decision this office makes is political. We can’t preach one thing and do another,” Westgale said.

“I thought the foundation of the PBA is based on honesty.”

“Yeah, that’s correct, but our mission is also to stem the tide of evil, and Anya Ahar’s infamy sure won’t do anything to help calm the rapids of iniquity.”

“I remember the first day I was sworn in as your executive director, and we sat in this very office talking about the course ahead,” Nicole said. “You stressed to me how important integrity and transparency are within the Administration.”

“Nothing’s changed, Nicole; without those qualities you’d have a less than respectable form of governance.”

“You also told me how important it is for our team to be honest with each other as individuals.”

“Is there something you’re trying to tell me, Nicole?”

“I guess I’ll just come right out with it.”

“Say what it is you need to say,” Westgale said impatiently.

“I realize you’ve been under a great amount of stress lately, and I think you’ve started to succumb and be influenced by the pressures around you. That’s just so unlike you, sir.”

Westgale sat back in his chair, then laced his hands together behind his head. He sighed. “I don’t know what’s happening. Things are slowly crumbling around here. There’s dissent within this government, and it’s ripping me apart. I’ve never been one to quit anything, but if things don’t turn around, I may have no choice.”

“Everybody always focuses on the negative things—that’s human nature—but think of all the outstanding things this administration has accomplished,” Nicole said.

“And you’ve sure been an enormous part of those achievements.”

“All I’m asking is that you at least put this request before the Strategic Council—after all, this is why we have a council. And if they allow it to go before the Judicial Triangle, it will be my responsibility to fight for it.” Nicole presented him with Dr. Muller’s review of Anya Ahar’s LRS file.

Westgale looked through it. “Charles appears very impressed by the young lady’s work. Hmm... very interesting...” He looked up. “Give me some time to think about this. Come and see me this time tomorrow, and I’ll give you my answer.”

After leaving the president’s office, Nicole headed for a meeting with Beverley Gibson. She believed it was important to directly address the Anya Ahar matter with Beverley.

“It’s wonderful to see you, Fiona,” she said to Beverley’s coordinator as Fiona led her down the hall to Beverley’s office. “I hope Bev’s not working you too hard.”

“It has been rather busy around here lately, but the fact we’ve been able to provide aid to the American farming community makes it a good kind of busy, Director Kratz,” Fiona answered with a smile. “Please go in; Secretary Gibson’s waiting for you.”

“I’ll be with you in a second,” Beverley said as Nicole entered. She had several boxes open on her desk. “I’ve been going through these boxes of photos, trying to find one of Dad in uniform, so I can send it to my Uncle Mark.”



“That shouldn’t be difficult; your father wore his uniform with such pride.”

“Actually, Dad didn’t like having his picture taken while in uniform. He believed it was somewhat pretentious. Anyway, I guess you’re here to speak about Anya Ahar,” Beverley said, coming around her desk and indicating to one of the chairs facing it. Nicole sat down, and Beverley took the other chair.

“Yes, I am. It’s very important to me that I know where you stand on the matter.”

“Just recently, I visited Vexton County and met an eight-year-old boy named Riley Claremont, who has LRS. When I looked from that vibrant young boy into the eyes of his parents, I saw despair. That really crushed my heart.”

“I’m going to tell you something that hasn’t been made public yet: Anya’s research indicates that those with LRS, like that young boy in Vexton, will eventually succumb to the illness. Dr. Muller fully concurs,” Nicole added solemnly.

“Oh my Lord, that is terrible news.” Beverley paused in thought, then said, “As long as I know she is still going to face the punishment you’re proposing, then I’m okay with allowing her to display her human side and use her brilliant mind in a positive way.”

“Great, I’m so glad to hear that,” Nicole said in relief. “I don’t know if I could’ve gone through with this if I didn’t have your blessing.”

“I really do hope she has the answers,” said Beverley, returning to the boxes of photos. She lifted a photo resting on the desk behind one of them. “I kept this one aside. I would like you to have it,” she said, holding up a photograph of Nicole and her husband accompanied by General Gibson.

“Thank you, Bev. I remember that day—he took us on a fishing trip. We had such a great time,” Nicole said, accepting the photo. “Wow, this conjures up memories of a remarkable man.”

“Ah... finally. Here’s one where he’s actually in uniform,” said Beverley, lifting a photo from a box.

Nicole glanced at the picture and felt an instant jolt of shock. The picture was of General Gibson and his two personal security guards.

On General Gibson's right stood Major Garrett Porter, wearing a pair of red-tinted sunglasses. Nicole hid her alarm. "Oh, is that Garrett to the right of your father?" she asked calmly.

"Yes, it is. And the other gentleman is Major Miles Harris. Dad always felt uncomfortable about having his own personal security guards, but he came to really appreciate them. Garrett actually saved my life."

"How so?"

"On the night Dad was murdered I tried to run to him, but Garrett stopped me from entering the room. If he hadn't, I wouldn't be here right now."

"Was he aware your father had been poisoned?"

"Oh no, he was just following security protocol."

Nicole thought about the descriptions given by Hunter, the maid from the hotel where Kurt Hollis was killed, and Dwight Wagner. Both the sunglasses and Garrett's physical appearance matched those descriptions. Could Garrett Porter be the man they were looking for? Nicole didn't want to jump to conclusions, but she knew this had to be addressed as soon as possible. She needed a copy of that picture, but she wasn't prepared to present her concerns to Beverley, not yet.

When Fiona called Beverley out of her office for a few minutes, Nicole seized the opportunity to scan the photo with her flash-pad. When Beverley returned, Nicole ended their meeting.

"Well Bev, I just received an important message and I'll have to be on my way. I'm glad I have your consent to go forward, and I promise to keep you updated."

Back in her office, Nicole contacted Gil Robichaud and ordered him to come immediately to her office. While waiting for Gil to arrive, Nicole stared at the photo. She had briefly met Garrett several times in the past, but she didn't know anything about his background.

"What's going on?" asked Gil as he entered her office.

Nicole immediately showed him the photograph and expressed her concerns. Gil called in his team and began giving orders.

“First of all, we need to find out where he is. We also need to get this picture to Hunter Talbot and the maid in California to confirm that this is the man they saw. And we must find out everything we can about this particular model of sunglasses. Lastly, we need to determine if there is any record of Mr. Porter travelling to Clear Valley, California, on or prior to July 15, the day Kurt Hollis was found dead.”

As Gil was directing his staff, Nicole was busy searching Garrett Porter’s background. “What do you know about this guy, Gil?”

“I remember him being kind of like General Gibson’s shadow, and since the general’s death, he’s been working as part of Justice Malone’s security team.”

“It says here in his profile that he served in the army for three years, but he was discharged for behavioral issues. It also states General Gibson came to his aid and helped him seek counseling. Four months later, he was deemed clear of any psychological issues and brought in by General Gibson as part of his security team.”

“That’s right. I recall some people within the Administration being concerned about the general bringing him on board.”

“That being said, this report has nothing but praise for him while serving on the general’s staff.”

“We can’t take any chances, Nicole. I think it’s essential to get some eyes on him, now. If he’s the person who committed those murders and has possession of the helcin... who knows what else he could be planning.”

“I think we should speak to Beverley about this. If anyone around here might have insight into Garrett Porter, it would be her,” Nicole said. She contacted Beverley and asked her to meet with her and Gil.

After they informed her of their concerns, Beverley shook her head in disbelief. “There’s no way—not Garrett. He treasured my father—why would he want to kill him? Dad’s the one who helped him when he was down and out.”

“You may be correct, but at this point, we have to perform due diligence. Garrett was the last person to see your father before he

died, and now we learn that he owned a pair of very uncommon sunglasses matching the description of those worn by the person who is presumed to have killed Kurt Hollis in California. On top of that, the person who was following around Hunter Talbot was also wearing those sunglasses—and so was the person who purchased the helcin from the AXE terrorist group,” said Gil.

Seconds later, Selma, one of Gil’s assistants, burst into the room. “We’re still trying to reach Hunter Talbot, but we were able to contact the hotel in Clear Valley. The maid claims the sunglasses in the photo are exactly the same as the ones she saw on the man in the elevator. She also said his physical makeup matches.”

“What about his hair?” asked Gil.

“Because he was wearing a fedora, she wasn’t able to determine the color or style. Shamir’s working on finding out whatever he can about this particular model of sunglasses,” Selma added.

“Wait a minute—a fedora? What color was the fedora?” asked Beverley.

“It was gray with a black band,” replied Gil.

“That’s it,” said Beverley. “I don’t ever remember seeing Garrett wearing those sunglasses, but I do remember him wearing a gray fedora with a black band. Once I joked with him that he looked like an old-style gangster.”

Nicole turned from Beverley to Robichaud. “Gil, please contact Justice Malone’s office and make sure he’s kept away from Porter. I’m going to contact the president and Dave Perry. We need to get surveillance on him now!”

Minutes later, Selma returned. “We flashed over the photo to Hunter Talbot in Finland, and we’re waiting on his response.”

“This is something you might like to see, Agent Robichaud,” said another member of Gil’s staff. “I was going through our military discharge records and it appears General Sims is the person who ordered Garrett Porter’s termination from the army.”

Nicole read the report, then contacted Sims’s assistant, Wanda. “Hello, Wanda, this is Director Kratz. I’ve called for an emergency meeting in the main conference room. Is the general in?”

“Yes, he is, Director Kratz. He just came back from an inspection of one of our military yards. I’ll inform him of the meeting immediately,” replied Wanda.

“Hunter Talbot responded, Nicole. He claims the sunglasses are definitely a match,” said Gil.

“What has Shamir been able to find out about that particular model?” Nicole quickly asked.

“He’s still waiting on a return call from the company’s national sales manager,” replied Gil.

Nicole spent the next several minutes briefing Westgale as the conference room was being prepared for the emergency meeting. Just prior to the commencement of the meeting, Shamir received information pertaining to the sunglasses, and called Nicole.

“Okay, the sunglasses are made by I-Care Inc. The company’s sales manager informed me that they’re considered a high-end designer model. This is due to the fact the lenses are made from an extremely lightweight yet durable material known as PLS-34. The glasses were part of a test market, and there were only twenty produced. The I-Care store up the street from this building had three pairs in stock. One pair was purchased via a flash-transfer. I traced that transaction, and it leads to a Major Garrett Porter.”

“Good,” Nicole said. “This information helps solidify Garrett Porter as our lead suspect, but there’s still the lingering question of a motive.”

Westgale took to the front of the room and began the meeting. “As we meet here this evening, the foundation of this very administration lies in a complete state of turmoil,” he said somberly. “Of greater concern is the effect this will have on the future of the Peace Bringers Association of America. The Outer Commission is monitoring our every move, and it could be voting on our future at any time. I require your full support and dedication in making sure we remain unwavering in the preservation of our existence. It’s only in solidarity that we will be able to remain on course.” He paused and shifted topic.

“Nicole has called this meeting to address two very significant and urgent matters. First, as my executive director, she has requested

that I bring a motion to the Strategic Council calling for a hearing before the Judicial Triangle. Please refer to flash-file number 00172 for the details pertaining to this request. I thought long and hard about the moral dilemma at play here, and I've decided it is in the best interest of the people of this great country to allow this request to be presented to the Strategic Council. I will be bringing forth the motion tomorrow.

“Secondly, there is great concern that Major Garrett Porter, who is currently part of Justice Malone’s security team, is the individual who acquired the helcin toxin used in the murder of General Vance Gibson. Although the investigation is in its preliminary stage, it is also believed that he’s the person behind the threat made against Dr. Jack Ahar and the murder of a young man from Vexton named Kurt Hollis, who was killed in Clear Valley, California. We are still gathering evidence, and while we do, Major Porter is under constant surveillance. I will be glad to entertain any comments or questions you may have.”

General Sims pressed the laser-pin on his chair’s armrest, signaling he wished to speak. “With regards to Major Porter, sadly, it comes as no surprise to me that he is a person of interest in these crimes. He served under me in the military for five months before I deemed it necessary to have him discharged because of his erratic behavior. He blamed the government for the destruction of his family’s farm in Oklahoma during a brutal tornado. He would constantly lash out against what he claimed was decades of our government’s negligence toward the environment. To his credit, with the assistance of General Gibson, he received the counseling he needed and appeared to be on the road to recovery. General Gibson viewed Major Porter as a reclamation project. When he brought him on board to join his security staff, we all trusted General Gibson had made the right decision.”

Westgale took a seat at the back of the room as Nicole took over the meeting and began fielding questions from the executive staff regarding Anya Ahar. Most of the staff were angry.

“How the hell could you suggest allowing a terrorist to work on a cure for LRS?” asked one member.

As Nicole tried to present her answer, another member added, “Nothing good can come from that woman.”

Nicole defended her position. “Since Anya Ahar informed me that she believed she was on the path to finding a cure, I’ve had my staff reach out to hundreds of people who are currently being affected by LRS. The response from every one of these people has been unequivocally in favor of allowing Dr. Ahar to continue with her LRS research. Also, Dr. Muller is astonished by the inroads she has made with her research. And yes, after reviewing the details of her work, he agrees with her hypothesis that this illness will eventually lead to death.”

That evening, Dr. Muller held a formal press conference with his LRS team backing him up, during which he revealed that there was solid medical evidence that the illness was considered a death sentence.

By the wee hours of the morning, the case against Garrett Porter was stronger. Although there was no record of him travelling to Clear Valley at or around the time Kurt Hollis was murdered, it was established that Garrett had been on vacation during the week of July 15th. The most condemning evidence against him was his fingerprints; they of course were in the Freedom Home database, and they matched those found on the counterfeit money that was exchanged for the helcin. After Dave Perry reviewed the evidence Gil Robichaud presented to him, he ordered the surveillance unit to move in and arrest Garrett Porter.

A little after 8:00 a.m., as Garrett exited his house and was about to get on his robo-cycle and head to the Freedom Home, three federal agents closed in and ordered, “Put your hands behind your head and move away from the cycle!” One of the agents moved in as Porter complied, saying, “Garrett Porter, you’re under arrest.”

Garrett sputtered in disbelief. “What’s going on? Why am I under arrest?”

As another agent fastened the restraints around his wrists, the agent read the list of charges.

“Murdered General Gibson? That man was like a father to me! Helcin? Where in the world would I get helcin?” exclaimed Garrett.

His flash-pad was confiscated. Another team of agents moved his wife and two children from the house and began a thorough search of the entire property, seizing two more flash-pads, several data-chip files, and a pair of sunglasses. Although there was no sign of helcin on the property, one of the agents was sifting through several jackets and shirts in a basement closet when something fell from the shelf above the rod. It was a gray fedora with a black band.

Garrett was transported to the Federal Justice Center, where he was permitted to contact his lawyer, Sheila Lau. When Sheila arrived, Dave Perry took her aside and explained the case against her client. “This is not an ordinary case, Miss Lau. We believe your client has access to the lethal chemical helcin.”

“Isn’t that the poison used to kill General Gibson?” asked Sheila.

Dave nodded, then took her through every detail of the case.

“So, you have a pair of sunglasses, a hat, the fact that my client is over six feet tall, and fingerprints on some counterfeit money. But, most importantly, you don’t have a motive for these crimes? It seems to me that you may just be rushing to judgment. And by the way, Mr. Perry, in case you’re unaware, Mr. Porter cared very deeply for the general. He viewed him as a mentor,” said Sheila.

“It’s also a known fact that in the past your client has displayed such anger against this government that he was discharged from the army because of it.”

“And he received the help he required.”

“Are you putting this all down to coincidence?” Dave asked.

“If my client is in possession of helcin, or had anything to do with these three murders, then believe it or not, Mr. Perry, I want justice to be served as badly as you do. But I’m certain you’re barking up the wrong tree.”

With Garrett’s lawyer present, Dave questioned Garrett for several hours. Throughout the interview, Garrett insisted on his innocence, and in particular he claimed he had never even heard of helcin prior to the general’s murder.



After the questioning, Dave took Sheila Lau aside. “Let me be fair with you, and allow you the opportunity to sit down and speak with your client in private. I’m hoping he’ll open up to you. Miss Lau, for everyone’s sake, we need to know where that helcin is.”

\* \* \*

Nicole took it upon herself to pay a visit to Garrett’s former psychologist, Dr. Evan Durant, after having her assistant send a special order requesting that the doctor–patient confidentiality code be waived. Durant agreed, with the stipulation that he would not betray specifics of their exchanges.

“It is my understanding that General Vance Gibson often sent military personnel to see you,” she began when they met.

“Yes, both current and former military personnel, for various reasons. In some cases it was a very minimal form of counseling, but other cases were more extreme,” Durant said. “General Gibson was very compassionate; he really went the extra mile for those who served under him.”

“And how was Major Garrett Porter directed to you?”

“In Major Porter’s case he was discharged from the army by General Clifford Sims. General Sims then went to General Gibson, and he in turn directed Mr. Porter to see me.”

Nicole lifted an eyebrow. “Please, continue.”

“General Sims’s report stated that Mr. Porter would often go into anger-filled rants condemning the very government he was serving. Mr. Porter was an environmental enthusiast and thought the American government was being extremely negligent in that area. The fact that his family farm was obliterated by a tornado was at the core of his anger. I would say, like so many others I’ve seen over the years, he was also still feeling the lingering effects from the War Within.”

“PTSD?” Nicole guessed.

“No, more a fear for the future, and for that of his young children. The fact that America had become so divided upset him,” Dr. Durant replied.

“How long did you see him for?”

“Just a little over four months. I performed a thorough review on his progress, and in my professional opinion, concluded that he had overcome his issues.”

“Did you ever view him as someone who could be violent?” Nicole asked.

“No, I did not,” Durant replied. “Though no one ever really knows what another is capable of.”

\* \* \*

“When you piece all the available evidence together, it has to be one of three scenarios, Dave,” Gil said. “We either have our man, this is all some bizarre coincidence, or he’s being meticulously set up.”

“It’s not just the physical evidence.” Dave replied. “We have a guy here who was discharged from the military for constantly unleashing anti-government diatribes about what he perceived as our neglect for the environment. And then when you consider that Dr. Ahar was coerced into telling the American people LRS was being caused by an environmental issue—well, it seems to add up.”

“Could he explain his whereabouts on July 15th?” asked Gil.

“He claims to have spent the week doing some work on his house, and he asserts that’s where he was on that day,” replied Dave.

“Were his wife and children able to vouch for him?” asked Gil.

“His wife had taken the children out of town that week to visit her family. He claims to have had no actual interaction with anyone that entire week. I’ve had my staff look into airline and railway passenger records for flights and trains going into Central Valley on and before July 15<sup>th</sup>, as well as car rentals, but they’ve come up empty.”

“What did you make of your interview with him and his lawyer?” Gil asked.

“He came across as believable. His lawyer, Sheila Lau, is highly regarded and straight up. I believe she realizes the severity of this matter, yet she seems to have no doubt whatsoever that he’s innocent.”

Moments later, Nicole joined them. “If this guy is some crazed madman, he sure has a lot of people fooled,” she said, then sighed in

frustration. “His psychologist didn’t detect any violent tendencies, and I know General Gibson certainly wouldn’t have allowed him to step into this building if he suspected there was a problem.”

“Yeah, that might be so, but he wouldn’t be the first person to wear a veneer of civility over a disturbed core. As I mentioned to Gil before you arrived, all the pieces seem to link together,” said Dave.

“Do we know anything more about the counterfeit money?” asked Nicole.

“I have people on it,” Gil answered. “Hopefully we can trace its origin.”

“For the time being, Major Porter will need to remain behind bars,” said Dave.

“Keep me posted on the situation. Meanwhile, I must begin preparing for the Anya Ahar matter,” said Nicole.

“Come on, Nicole!” Dave suddenly snapped. “I didn’t want to battle you on this, but if I have to, I will. If this bloody request of yours ends up being granted, everything this association stands for will be tarnished. God help us!” His face red with fury, he stormed out of the room.

The tension regarding Anya Ahar continued to grow. Although President Westgale had agreed to allow the motion to be put before the PBA Strategic Council, like many others, both on the street and in his administration, he remained torn. He was desperate to bring an end to the LRS crisis, but he shared the same fears that Dave Perry had expressed. Most PBA supporters felt that the Administration should continue seeking a cure without Anya’s assistance. However, the more he consulted with Dr. Muller, the more Westgale feared the LRS medical team might not be able to find that cure without Anya’s assistance. Dr. Muller had recently added five highly acclaimed international medical scientists to the team, but they were just becoming familiar with the intricacies of the illness.

Before the meeting to consider Anya Ahar, Nicole accepted General Sims’s request for a lunch meeting.

“Thanks for meeting me, Nicole,” Sims said as she sat down across from him. He sighed and looked at her with a concerned expression on his face. “Why, oh why, are you putting yourself through all this stress?”

His concern almost got the better of her. She waved a hand and struggled to answer in a normal voice. “I just don’t understand it, General; just when it looks like we might finally get some answers...” She shook her head. “It’s so frustrating.”

“People don’t see it that way, Nicole. The fact that Anya Ahar’s the person who made that poison, and that she aided a domestic terrorist group—well, I can understand the anger. I feel it as well.”

“I’m also angry about what happened, but this illness... the idea that a cure could be on the horizon and we’re going to avoid it for political reasons really sickens me!”

“Dr. Muller has thirteen of the best doctors in the world searching for answers. We just need to have some faith,” Sims assured her. “I don’t know if you’re aware of this, but I have received notices from many of my top military people who are threatening to resign if your request ends up being granted.”

Nicole quelled a surge of anger. “I’m disappointed to hear they feel that way, but if that’s what they’re thinking, then maybe this country’s better off without their services.”

“Frankly, although I’m not one of the people on that list, I do share their sentiment,” Sims said calmly. “I believe this will crush our administration.”

“If it means saving lives, then so be it,” Nicole snapped.

“Wanda is in the process of submitting a report to both your and the president’s offices. Please rethink this, Nicole. I realize your heart is in the right place, but unfortunately reality, though harsh, sometimes has to override our best intentions.”

With Dave Perry and now General Sims opposing her request, along with others, Nicole was beginning to feel like an outcast within the Administration. As the second most powerful person behind the president, Nicole realized the problems this dissention would cause, but she wasn’t about to back down.

The malfunctioning air conditioner in the chamber made the room colder than normal. Nicole put her favorite sweater over her shoulders. The light peach-colored sweater had been a present her grandmother made for her when she graduated from Summit.

As the Strategic Council members began filing in, Nicole grew incredibly nervous. Although she had been in this room dozens of times over the years, this felt like her first time. Seeking calm, she stared at the chamber's American flag with true reverence. Positioned at the front of the room, it was quivering in the cool breeze from the air-conditioning. This particular flag had high sentimental value; it had been discovered after the War Within, amidst the ruins of the old White House. It was amazing that the flag's fabric had withstood the destruction.

On this day, concern resided with a different type of fabric, the moral fabric of the nation. For Nicole, this was not about Anya Ahar's criminal actions or her character; this was about being given the opportunity to assist her fellow Americans.

The meeting came to order. Having had the opportunity to review the request over the last couple of days, it was now time for the fifty-three-member council to vote on whether the matter of Anya Ahar would be brought before the Judicial Triangle. A majority vote was required for this to occur. At each member's seat there was a button that would activate a flashing blue light. An illuminated light meant that member voted yes.

"Please commence voting on Request Docket SC-7B5," said the Strategic Council secretary.

Nicole pulled her sweater tighter as the air seemed to grow colder. She'd know the result of the vote in a matter of minutes. She thought about her late grandmother, Gloria, who had been a great help to Nicole during her time at Summit. Being a former legal psychologist, she was always there to help Nicole understand the dynamics of law. *Control the controllable and remain in control when facing the uncontrollable*, Nicole repeated in her head—they'd been her grandmother's words of wisdom, and they helped to calm her now.

Nicole sat up straight in her seat and looked intensely at each member as they voted one by one. The first eight members remained dark, but Nicole did her best to be positive, even though the situation was not looking very favorable. She felt a glimmer of hope when a blue light flashed above the next two members. That faint hope was dashed when the next four members failed to activate their lights.

By the time the first twenty-five members had voted, there were only eight blue lights blinking. Nicole pulled her sweater even tighter; the chamber now felt like a freezer in more ways than one. As much as she tried to remain optimistic, she was quickly becoming resigned to the real possibility that the request would not be granted. With thirteen votes left, Nicole needed to see ten lights. What were the odds of that happening?

Finally, to her surprise and delight, a wave of blue lights lit up. Now she needed to see at least one out of three lights in order to reach the majority vote of twenty-seven.

Once all the votes had been recorded, the secretary spoke. "Thank you, ladies and gentlemen. All votes have now been recorded. With twenty-nine votes out of fifty-three, I now declare Request Docket SC-7B5 will be argued in front of the Judicial Triangle in seventy-two hours."

As she sat there, elated by the result, she realized it was still only the first step. Dave Perry and General Sims were both sitting directly across from Nicole. General Sims looked at her and shook his head in disappointment, then rose abruptly and walked past her. Dave Perry, on the other hand, approached her, his face flushed with anger. "This is a big mistake," he growled. "I'll see you in that court—you'd better be ready for a fight!"

## CHAPTER 14

While tending to matters at the office, I checked my flash-pad and noticed I had received a message from Beverley Gibson's assistant, Fiona. The message contained all the coordinates pertaining to our upcoming trip to Washington.

"Wow, this is in two days," said a surprised Sharon when I showed her.

"Yeah, the conference date was moved up," I replied.

"Daddy, are we going to get to meet the president?" Riley asked, bouncing up and down with excitement.

"I don't know, Riles, but if you do, what are you going to ask him?" I shared a glance with Sharon and suppressed a giggle.

"I would ask him if he could help stop me from getting sick," replied Riley, suddenly serious. We instantly sobered.

"Hey Riles," I said, putting a smile on my face and some cheer in my voice, "tomorrow morning I have to perform some inspections from the robo-copter, so how about I bring you up to Moon Shade Bluff. We can have a picnic."

"Can Mommy and Jumper come with us?" asked Riley.

"Of course," I replied.

"I wouldn't miss it," said Sharon as she pulled Riley in for a hug.

Riley was up at dawn the following morning. When I came downstairs he was dressed and waiting at the door.

"Hey partner, you're raring to go, aren't you?" I said.

“I can’t wait!” Riley exclaimed.

After Sharon prepared a picnic basket filled with all of our favorite foods, we headed off to the VLP headquarters to board the robo-copter. Once airborne, I set the auto-radar, which was programmed to perform a general land inspection from the sky. Riley was really taken with the surroundings. “Look Daddy, down there—horses!” he cried out as we flew above Hislep Farms, which was known for its stable of prize-winning horses.

“Look over there, Riley,” said Sharon, directing his attention toward the Levin estate. “You know that place. That’s where we visit Uncle Skip and Aunt Dora.”

“Maybe I can see some of their really neat robots from up here,” said Riley.

As usual, when I looked down at the site where Dad’s robo-copter crashed, I became highly emotional. Minutes later, we landed on the center of the cliff.

“Whoa!” Riley shouted as his feet touched the ground. Although in recent years a railing had been erected around the edge of the cliff, we made sure Riley stayed in the center, and we happily watched Riley kick his soccer ball to Jumper. Amazingly, the Ro-Dog never failed to return the favor.

“Do you think they’re going to give Anya Ahar a chance?” I asked Sharon, my eyes still on Riley.

“I would be a hypocrite if I said they should.”

I looked at her. “How so?”

“Look at how I dealt with Dr. Langford’s situation. Don’t you remember how I preached on and on about how important it is to uphold the law? I was glad I didn’t compromise my principles, but now I wonder.”

“You simply did what you believed was right.”

Sharon thought for a moment, watching Riley. “I guess when it comes down to your own child’s life, even your strongest principles can become easily compromised.”

“Isn’t it amazing?” I said.

Sharon looked at me, eyebrows raised in query. “Isn’t what amazing?”



“To be up here, away from it all. I know it’s regarded as some kind of folklore, but if that ZeZ civilization really did exist and call Vexton their home, it’s no wonder they found such bliss in this place,” I replied.

Sharon and I sat in silence, watching Riley playing with Jumper. Then Sharon pulled the picnic basket toward her and opened it. “Come on Riley, lunch is served.” she called.

After enjoying a sandwich and a couple of Sharon’s orange-oatmeal cookies, Riley lay back and asked while staring at the clear blue sky, “Daddy, where are the angels?”

“What angels are you talking about, Riley?” I asked.

“My friend Christopher says there are angels here at Moon Shade Bluff. His older sister told him all about it.”

“Yes, that’s right. We just can’t see them.” I replied, humoring him.

“Are they invisible?” he asked.

“Let me tell you about the angels your friend was speaking about,” said Sharon, pulling Riley onto her lap. “Do you remember the pictures we showed you of Grandfather Dennis?”

“Yes, he was the man wearing the funny clothes.”

“Do you remember what I told you when you asked me where he was now living?”

“Heaven—way up in the sky,” Riley replied, lifting his arm to point upward.

“That’s correct. Now, up in heaven, there are many loving angels who are taking care of him.”

“What about us? Don’t they care about us?”

“Oh yes, they watch over us and help guide us through life here on Earth.”

Riley then asked me to get our neon hoops from the robo-copter. “You hold the red one and I’ll hold the blue one,” he instructed me, then turned to his Ro-Dog. “Come on, Jumper!” The robot jumped through the hoops. “Did you see that, Mommy?”

“Way to go, Jumper!” cheered Sharon.

After watching Jumper perform several more tricks, we decided it was time to head back to the VLP headquarters.

When we returned, Riley was, as always, eager to visit my director of operations, a young man named Wyatt Murphy. Whenever they met, Wyatt would show Riley a new magic trick. The fact that Wyatt's family also owned Vexton's Sweet World Candy Company also endeared Wyatt to Riley that much more.

"It's great to see everyone... where's the lovely Kayla?" asked Wyatt, who'd had a crush on Kayla for some time.

"Sorry Wyatt, she's spending the day with her friend Aaron," I replied.

"I don't know what she sees in that guy. I guess I'll just have to keep trying to win her over with my irresistible charm," said Wyatt with a chuckle.

"We went to Moon Shade Bluff in Daddy's robo-copter!" shouted Riley.

"You know the other VLP robo-copter you always ask me about, Riley?" I said.

"Yeah, the cool-looking one that looks like the American flag," said Riley.

"Yes, that's the one. Well, that's the robo-copter Wyatt uses," I told him.

"Someday I'll have to bring you up in my *cool-looking* copter," said Wyatt as he picked up Riley and lifted him over his head.

"Can we have candy when we go?" Riley asked, and we all laughed.

"I actually have some candy with me today. Do you like jelly beans?" Wyatt asked.

"I love jelly beans!"

"Now, in this jar there are fifty jelly beans, ten of each color. There's green, orange, red, purple, and yellow. Which color is your favorite, and which one is your least favorite?"

"Red is my favorite... and I really don't like the yellow ones."

"All right. I'm going to give this jar a magic shake and see if we can get rid of the yellows and change them into more reds. Here we go. Whoa! Let's see... do you still see the yellows in there?"

Riley studied the jar. "Wow. They're all gone—and there are more reds." Riley twisted to look back at me. "Daddy, look at this!"

“Magical Wyatt strikes again,” I said with a chuckle.

“Here you go, Riley. Take the jar with you. Just don’t eat them all at once. And don’t forget to give some to Kayla.”

On our way home, a tired Riley fell into a deep sleep. I carried him into the house and Sharon tucked him under the covers. A few minutes later, I saw our door-signal flash and opened the door to see Skip waiting on the doorstep with a large box resting beside him. “I’m in town visiting our plant, so I thought I’d come by with a present.”

Sharon exited Riley’s room and joined Skip and me in the front entrance.

“Skip, how are you? Another gift? My Lord, you just keep spoiling us. Open it up, Heath. The suspense is killing me.”

I snapped the tabs from each corner of the box.

“A Robo-Chef!” Sharon exclaimed. “Thank you, Skip. We’ll make good use of this.”

“I hope you enjoy it. It’s quite simple to use. But those cookies of yours, I hope you’ll still make them the old-fashioned way, just how I like them,” said Skip with a chuckle.

“Speaking of those cookies...” Sharon went into the kitchen and returned with a full bag. “Here you go, baked last night.”

“So, is the Robo-Chef ready to conquer the world?” I asked.

“Well, we’ve had amazing feedback. Dad just returned from the HKM the other day. They’ve been working hard over there, trying to keep up with the demand. Now, where’s my man Riley?” asked Skip.

“You missed him. He’s upstairs, out like a light. We took him to Moon Shade Bluff today,” I replied.

“Good ol’ Moon Shade Bluff. I still recall your dad taking *us* up there, years ago.” Skip looked at Sharon. “You should have seen little Heath, Sharon. We had to pry him out of the robo-copter.”

“And then once I did leave the copter, it was like I’d entered a new dimension. I remember being envious, watching the birds in flight,” I said.

“Well, it’s a good thing you didn’t try to emulate them,” said a laughing Sharon.

“He emulated me, though, reaching out to the cosmos. I had recently learned about the place in school, and I was fascinated by the myth. It’s amazing, what children will sometimes believe in.” Skip laughed.

“Yeah, I must say you guys do look rather amusing in that photo. I guess that’s why children are so special. Their minds somehow can see beyond their eyes,” said a laughing Sharon.

The next morning, the four of us arrived in Washington. Beverley had us picked up from the hotel after breakfast and brought to the Freedom Home. On the way, Riley kept talking about meeting the president.

“Hold on, Riley,” I warned him gently. “The president is a very busy man, and you have to understand we may not have a chance to meet him.”

As our grand-electro neared the Freedom Home grounds we saw large groups of protesters gathered in front of its gates. For the most part they were calm, though their message was powerful and very direct. The first sign we saw read *DEATH TO ANYA!* A second displayed the words *HOME OF THE WESTGALE TERROR GROUP.*

Beverley met us at one of the entrance gates, then had the Freedom Home’s senior tour guide lead us through the building. High-tech flash-screens were present throughout. With the exception of the Levin estate, this was an entirely different world from what we were used to in Vexton. When we came to the military’s office, we were astounded by its grandiosity.

As we turned the corner a large, distinguished-looking military man stood waiting. “Hello everyone,” he said in a friendly voice.

“Folks, I would like to introduce you to America’s defense director, General Clifford Sims,” said the guide.

“And who do we have here?” asked Sims.

“This is Mr. Heath Claremont and his family. They’re from Vexton,” replied the guide.

“Oh, that’s right. You’re here to speak at the farming conference. I’ve heard fantastic things about your town. Actually, almost all of the innovations in this building were made by Vexton-Tech,” said Sims.

“Are you a real soldier?” asked Riley.

“That I am, young man,” replied Sims, giving Riley a salute.

“Do you have real guns?” asked Riley.

“That’s enough, Riley. Please stop pestering the general,” I said.

“No, no, no—being inquisitive is a positive trait, Mr. Claremont. Seeking information is the only way to gain knowledge. And yes, I do have guns, Riley, but I only use them against the *bad guys*. Come into my office,” he said, leading the way. He quickly cleared us with security and we followed him into his spacious office.

“Wow! Look at all the toys, Daddy,” said Riley, drawn to the room’s assortment of miniature artillery replicas.

“These aren’t toys, Riley,” said Kayla.

“That is very correct, young lady. Personally, I refer to them as ‘instruments of freedom.’ They’re the very reason we’re all standing here right now.” Sims squared his shoulders and gazed proudly at the vast collection. “Let’s continue your tour. There are office settings in the military, too.”

“General, I’m sorry to bother you, but I must remind you of your meeting with Colonel Peters in ten minutes,” said a woman as she approached the group.

“Ah, yes.” Sims turned to us. “Well, I hope you all enjoy your time here in Washington. And you, little fellow,” he began as he tousled Riley’s hair, “you keep asking those questions; the fountain of knowledge is endless.”

The guide resumed the tour, showing us various office areas and chambers. As with all Freedom Home tours, we were prohibited from viewing the president’s living quarters and offices of operation. The last stop we made before the tour guide led us out to the Field of Honor was Beverley’s office. As soon as we arrived we noticed the presence of three hulking men in black suits, standing guard in front. Since these men were President Westgale’s personal security guards, the tour guide

decided it was time to clear the area. “It looks like Secretary Gibson is busy. I think we’d best be heading outside,” he said.

“Wait—Secretary Gibson told me to make sure you wait for her to finish with the president,” said a woman who turned out to be Fiona Tanner. “Please be seated—can I get you some refreshments?” she asked us.

Before we could respond, Beverley emerged from her office and called us in. Before entering the room, as expected, we were thoroughly checked again by security.

“You’re going to meet the president, Riles. Make sure you behave, son,” I whispered as we entered the office, quelling my own excitement about meeting a man I admired.

I was surprised by how worn out the man looked; he was clearly going through a difficult period, and it was wearing on his physical appearance. Nonetheless, he still exuded confidence as he greeted us.

We spent the next fifteen minutes or so speaking about Vexton. Of course, as with all conversations relating to Vexton, Vexton-Tech was front and center.

“Thanks to that company’s innovations, the lives of many Americans have been extended and made far more comfortable,” Westgale said. “And those consumer robots—loads of fun, indeed.” He grinned.

“Skip Levin has been my best friend my entire life,” I told him.

“Skip’s a fine man. I’ve always been disappointed that his father is so opposed to all that the PBA stands for. When my administration presented Vexton-Tech with the Technology Achievement award last year, Skip showed up to the gala, but Gerald declined. It’s unfortunate he views us as some kind of enemy,” Westgale said, shaking his head but softening his words with a chuckle.

“I’m going to be president one day!” Riley announced out of the blue.

“Riley, settle down,” Sharon hissed.

“That’s okay, Mrs. Claremont. The youngster’s showing his ambitious side, and that’s great to see. Just wait until my time as president is done before you decide to take over, okay Riley?”

Anyway, I hope you all thoroughly enjoy the Field of Honor tour and I look forward to seeing you at the farming conference,” said Westgale as his security staff led him out the door.

I had seen the Field of Honor many times on the World Connect, and was always fascinated by both the concept and the presentation. However, actually being there provided me with a new admiration for this remarkable tribute to history. The fact that Vexton-Tech had contributed so much to its production filled me with pride for my home town.

As the guide led us through the field, we watched American history unfold chronologically before our eyes on numerous flash-screens. They portrayed many of the nation’s heartwarming historical events, but they also depicted some of the trials and tribulations the country had faced.

“The PBA debated for quite some time about whether or not a recount of the War Within should be part of this display,” said the guide. “It’s a period most Americans wish to forget, but like any component of American history, it’s contributed to the country we know today.”

Tears filled my eyes as I watched the story unfold. Although it had been like a knife tearing through the heart of America, many said it had been the surgery required to remedy the country’s most serious ailment, political discord. There were those who believed the war was only the calm before a deadlier storm. When I thought about the country’s current state of affairs, I was concerned that the clouds of chaos left behind by that horrendous conflict were finally ready to explode.

When we reached the end of the tour, Kayla took Riley over to the expansive playground twenty yards away from the Field of Honor while the guide led us through the gates back to the building.

Nicole Kratz approached us. “Mr. and Mrs. Claremont, pleased to meet you; I’m President Westgale’s executive director, Nicole Kratz. Please call me Nicole. Secretary Gibson has told me all about your family. Would you kindly join me for lunch in the Presidential Lounge?”

“That would truly be an honor,” I replied.

The lounge was extravagant. Everything was so shiny and pristine. We were overwhelmed that we were having lunch with the second most powerful person in the country. From the second Nicole entered the room, the staff instantly fawned over her.

“I’m looking forward to this evening’s conference,” she said after we’d sat down. “Beverley has told me all about the great work you’ve done in Vexton. For you to have exhibited such a high amount of fortitude in such trying times is commendable.”

“Thank you. I’ve just done my best to continue my father’s legacy at Vexton Land Protection. He set a standard of excellence that those who followed him surely didn’t maintain. So, when it became my turn to take the helm, I made it my goal to restore that legacy and do his memory proud,” I replied.

Sharon smiled and patted my arm. “That’s the thing about my husband, whatever he says and does comes from the heart. In the midst of some of our most ominous storms, he hasn’t left a farm until he’s made certain all is safe. There have been times when he doesn’t come home for several days.”

As we continued our conversation, two military men walked by our table. Nicole greeted them pleasantly, but they responded curtly, and snickered as they passed by.

“I’m definitely not the most popular person in this room at the moment,” Nicole said with a laugh. “The atmosphere revolving around Anya Ahar has created loads of tension within the Administration. Besides telling me about the admirable work you’ve done in Vexton, Beverley also informed me that your son has LRS. I would like to ask you: what are your feelings concerning my request to grant Anya Ahar the opportunity to find the cause and a cure?”

“If you’re looking for an objective opinion, you’re obviously not going to get one from us,” I replied. “At this stage, we would do anything to cure our son.”

“Would that include helping me present my case?” asked Nicole.

I glanced at Sharon. “I don’t understand.”



“For the upcoming hearing, I’ve been permitted to call upon three witnesses who have been directly affected by the illness. I would appreciate having you on that list,” replied Nicole.

“Most certainly. What does it require?” I asked.

“Just do what your wife says you always do—speak from the heart,” replied Nicole. “Now, I must ask you a question I’m certain my opposition will be asking you in court.”

“What might that be?” I asked.

“If your son was not currently suffering from LRS, would you still support the request?” asked Nicole.

Sharon and I looked at each other as I let out a sigh. “Honestly, I don’t think I would,” I admitted.

“I appreciate your truthfulness,” said Nicole.

As Sharon and I began telling Nicole about Riley, a man approached our table. He looked familiar, but his name eluded me. “Sharon and Heath Claremont, this is US Attorney General Dave Perry,” said Nicole.

“I’m sorry to interrupt your lunch, but I thought you might like to see this, Nicole. After you read this, you might finally decide to take my advice and end this charade.”

Perry placed a thick document in front of Nicole. I glimpsed the title before she slipped it into her brief case: *AXE – The Doctrine*.

There was no doubt that the farming conference, like any other current event in Washington, was secondary news behind the Anya Ahar story, although for the farmers of America this symposium was of great importance. For the first time in years, farming communities across the country believed they were back on course.

Beverly Gibson’s dedication to the cause was definitely the impetus behind this renewed vitality. Even though the government farming subsidies were an enormous benefit, the problems emanating from weather extremes were still of great concern. Beverly and her staff believed it was vital for the country’s farmers to learn how to properly manage their farms—taking into consideration Mother Nature’s fickle ways.

As I watched the audience assemble, I naturally started to feel a tad nervous. I had spoken at several Vexton town meetings, but never to an audience of such gigantic proportions.

Beverley was relieved that Westgale and the rest of the Administration had finally come to appreciate the innovative work of Professor Kinsley and Forever Green. She was even more pleased by the fact that, after a series of meetings with the professor, he agreed to cooperate with the Administration by acting as a consultant on environmental issues.

Beverley began the event by introducing Kinsley: "It's with great honor that I get to formally welcome Professor Trent Kinsley as a special consultant to our Department of Agriculture and Environmental Safety. We believe his contributions to the Administration will be of enormous benefit to us all."

Kinsley followed with a passionate speech which focused on, as he described it, the nurturing of Mother Earth. At the end of his speech, delivered with deep emotion, the room broke out in cheers. To which he responded, "While I stand before the wonderful people in this room, I feel a true sense of purpose. I realize most of you have faced enormous challenges over the last several years, but your resiliency proves once and for all that you remain the *heart* of this nation!"

I had met the professor on several occasions back in Vexton. Before he started Forever Green, he occasionally spoke at VLP meetings and provided consultation.

"Great to see you, Professor," I said, approaching him after his speech. "That was a very moving speech."

"Heath Claremont! It sure has been a while. Secretary Gibson told me you were going to be speaking tonight. It's great to see you. And to think *two* speakers hail from Vexton, who would've thought?" said Kinsley.

"Yeah, and when you add Vexton-Tech's mark all over this place, it just goes to show how far our town has come," I said.

"How are Skip and Gerald? It's been quite some time since we've crossed paths."

“Skip is doing great. We’ve maintained our close friendship from childhood. As for Gerald... well, he’s the same ol’ Gerald: highly opinionated and rather bitter.”

“Yeah, that’s Gerald. There sure is no gray in his black and white. But then again, I think that’s what’s made him such a successful businessman.”

“Do you regret leaving the company?”

“I’ve always believed that my leaving Vexton-Tech enabled the company to spread its wings and really take off. My ‘moral compass,’ as Gerald used to call it, would never have enabled the company to flourish as it has.”

“How’s Hunter? The last time I spoke with him he was heading back to Finland to continue working on a project.”

“Hunter’s secret mission,” Kinsley said with a laugh. “He contacted me two days ago from Finland. He informed me that this project will be his final one with Forever Green.”

“He’s quitting Forever Green?” I asked, surprised.

“Yes, he’s decided to return to Vexton and work the family farm.”

“Wow, I know his father will be thrilled to hear that news.”

When the dinner break ended, I was the next person on the list of speakers. The professor’s passionate speech had energized me and quelled my nervousness. As I took the podium and began discussing some of Vexton’s more recent farming tragedies, I immediately sensed my town’s tales of woe resonating with the audience. When I explained how those issues were resolved through the perseverance of our revitalization projects, the dark shadow I had cast over the room was soon transformed into something of hope.

By the time the conference reached its conclusion, I was fatigued and looking forward to a good night’s sleep. The next morning Sharon, Kayla, and Riley headed back to Vexton, while I remained, preparing to take the stand in the Anya Ahar court proceedings.

## CHAPTER 15

Both furious and alarmed by what she'd read in *AXE – The Doctrine*, Nicole stormed over to the Federal Justice Center and ordered the guards to bring Anya into one of the interrogation rooms.

“Why didn't you tell me about this?” Nicole asked as she slammed the copy of the doctrine on the table in front of Anya. “Now the whole country will see, in detail, just how warped your mind really is. Firearms being permitted in the hands of children; extremist schools focusing on American supremacy; eliminating American aid to all foreign countries; permitting one child per American household; and this one really gets me, automatic euthanasia to those deemed terminally ill. How can such an intelligent young lady be so cruel and brainless?”

“I'm sorry you feel that way, ma'am, but these are all principles I strongly support,” Anya said, head held high as she flipped through the doctrine.

“How could someone so cold and callous be interested in science and medicine? Was it so you could learn how to develop deadly toxins? Or was it some dream of yours to one day practice euthanasia on a terminally ill child or grandmother? LRS, you yourself have said, is a terminal illness—why are you willing to waste your time searching for a cure?” Nicole was nearly shouting now.

“America needs its young; we are its only hope for salvation.”

“I knew your father. He was a fine man. How could you have turned into such a despicable human being?”

“My father knew my views, and although he didn’t agree with them, he respected my right to have them. Is this not a free country, Director Kratz?”

“You bet your life it is.”

“Then how come people like you are so quick to condemn others when they don’t agree with your particular views?”

“What this doctrine proposes is not a free country; it’s a dark and vitriolic abyss.”

“And what do you call the America that led to the War Within, and the one that has followed?”

“Oh, it’s not perfect, never has been and never will be, but we have to strive to make it as perfect as we can. And the only way to accomplish that is with pride, compassion, and a sense of decorum.”

“Guided by a government with its head buried in a vacuum of hypocrisy, leading the country to the brink of annihilation, as you coddle the wealthy and ignore the poor?”

“To think I’ve put my career and life on the line for someone like you! It sickens me. Those within my own administration can no longer stand the sight of me—but my conscience gnaws away at me as I see that list of sufferers growing.” Her tone grew less angry, more resigned. “And as much as I might be questioning my own sanity, I realize I can’t let this go.”

“At least that’s where our two worlds can intersect. I may not agree with your views on life, and you clearly don’t accept mine; however, we both want this illness to be cured, and you know I’m the one who can accomplish that.”

“After the information in this doctrine is exposed to the public, I’ll be lucky if I can even get into that chamber without being lynched.”

After the contents of *AXE – The Doctrine* were released on the World Connect, talk of Anya Ahar seemed to be everywhere, and everybody reveled in expressing their opinion. The anger toward Anya increased tenfold. President Westgale was furious, knowing America was watching a divisive battle unfold within his own administration. To make matters worse, the Outer Commission was watching.

A large group of both those opposed and those in favor of the request was gathered outside the Freedom Home. Nicole watched the madness from her office window, with the World Connect blaring in the background behind her as Cryptic began making its way around the large crowd, speaking to several of the protesters.

“What brought you here today, sir?” Cryptic asked a young man in his early twenties.

“Anger and disgust, that’s what brought me here! My aunt works in one of the buildings that was being targeted by AXE. To know that Anya Ahar was a part of that plot makes me furious!”

“These people don’t know what it’s like to watch your child suffer with LRS,” a second protester told Cryptic. “We need to find a cure.”

A teenage girl interrupted, shouting, “Are you crazy, man? You’re placing your trust in a terrorist—somebody who wants to kill terminally ill people, get rid of them like they’re trash!”

Nicole now feared for her own life. No matter what the outcome was, she knew that when the hearing was over and she walked out of that chamber, her life would never be the same again. Nonetheless, she was determined to see this through.

The hearing would commence in less than twenty-four hours. Nicole worked diligently at preparing her arguments. Still uneasy after her latest meeting with Anya, she decided to meet with Arthur Fine to see if he could shed some light on Anya’s character. Surrounded by a larger-than-usual security team, she went to Arthur’s office.

“Knowing what tomorrow means to you, I thought you’d be barricaded in your office this evening,” said Arthur when they were settled in his office.

“What can you tell me about her?” Nicole said, anxiety making her blunt.

“I presume you’re referring to Anya?”

“Have you read that doctrine? To think such an intelligent young lady would encourage such evil—I’m still in disbelief.”

“Nicole, first of all, I really can’t tell you very much about Anya. And second, yes, I did read parts of the doctrine, and I think it proves

just how the lingering effects from that war have left some very disenchanting young souls.”

“I guess I was shocked because Anya appeared to have everything going for her, not to mention a successful and famous father.”

“From the little I do know about her, I think that may have been a major part of the problem.”

“How so?”

“Well, Jack’s life was rather crazy. Between all his projects, the teaching, and his World Connect program, he didn’t have much time for the mundane but important things in life.”

“Like spending time with his daughter?”

“Let’s just say the only thing Jack really knew about Anya was that she was a brilliant scientist. I think after his wife died giving birth to Anya, part of Jack died.”

“I wasn’t aware of that.”

“That information was never made public; neither Jack nor Anya wished to discuss it. I was only privy to it because I was Jack’s attorney.”

“I imagine it was very tragic for him to live with that horrible memory.”

“Jack was considered one of the premiere doctors in this country, and he couldn’t save his wife—it crushed him. I think, for quite some time, it made him distant from all forms of love and affection, and Anya was a victim of that.”

“He seemed very loving toward her in some of the World Connect episodes I’ve watched, praising her academic accomplishments.”

“Oh, he was very thrilled about her academic success, but Jack and Anya were far from being close. In recent years, he tried to reach out to her, but I think it was too late; Anya was already locked into her world of darkness. Tell me, Nicole: have you been contemplating retracting your request?”

Nicole stared blankly at Arthur, then noticed a very familiar book, *Conflicts of Law*, on his desktop. “May I?” she asked.

“Of course,” replied Arthur.

She then began slowly turning the pages. “It’s been a while... you introduced me to this book back at Summit. I was fascinated by the many interesting legal dilemmas within these pages.”

“It’s a fascinating book.”

“Huh—with all the events of late, I guess we could probably add a few new chapters.”

“Unfortunately, this book doesn’t contain the answer to the question I asked you.”

“Oh—sorry, Arthur; my mind was drifting. What was it you wanted to know?”

“Your request regarding Anya. Are you thinking of withdrawing it from the Judicial Triangle?”

“No,” she said firmly. “However, I realize there are loads of people out there who wish I would.”

“I’d also like to think there are just as many people who back your position.”

“I’m afraid since this doctrine has been released, that’s no longer the case.”

At 8:00 a.m., Nicole was in her office, making some last minute preparations. Outside the Freedom Home, the mass of protesters had increased. It really wasn’t important which side the protesters were on, Nicole thought; the fate of the matter now rested with the Judicial Triangle.

Created as part of the Outer Commission’s New Order Treaty, though very rarely incorporated into the political spectrum, the Judicial Triangle was composed of three judges, including two Supreme Court judges and the current superior justice, Thor Hardy, who would be responsible for the third and deciding vote, if required.

Prior to the start of the hearing, Nicole visited General Gibson’s shrine. There she found one of General Gibson’s former security guards, Major Miles Harris.

“Good morning, ma’am,” Miles said as he placed a silver pendant in one of the shrine’s casings.



“Isn’t that your honorary military pendant?” asked Nicole. “I must say, to present that in memory of the general is an honorable gesture.”

“I really miss him,” Miles said, “but actually, this is Major Porter’s pendant. His attorney gave it to me. Garrett requested that I leave it here in honor of the man who was like a father to him.” Miles turned and looked at Nicole. “I’ve known Garrett for half my life. He’s not a murderer, ma’am. Once he’s had a fair trial, you’ll see that.”

As Major Harris turned away and left, Nicole reflected on what had brought her here: the memory of a vibrant, sunny morning years ago, when the general had taken her and her husband on a fishing trip.

*“Come on, Nicole, it’s not very different from being in court,” he’d told her as she made her first cast, “you have to be confident, dangle the bait, get their attention, and hopefully be able to reel them in.”*

She pulled the photograph Beverley had given her from her briefcase and added it to the shrine.

The hearing was scheduled to begin in a few minutes. Nicole hurried to the chamber. She was an experienced attorney and was usually extremely relaxed, but this day was an exception. Although she was unwavering in her feelings relating to the case, she was feeling the mounting tension. Her heart raced, and she realized she had to pull herself together and remain confident, as General Gibson had encouraged her. No, her life would never be the same. Yes, she had placed her life in serious danger. Just over the past week, her office had received more than fifty death threats. But she had to do this.

Situated on the top floor of the Freedom Home, the Judicial Chamber was much smaller than that of the Strategic Council. A beautifully sculpted gold eagle was mounted on the wall above the judges’ bench. Nicole kept her eyes on it as she drew and exhaled several deep breaths.

Nicole’s assistant Beth was already in the chamber and had prepared Nicole’s flash-pad for the proceedings. “I just checked the

AMO database this morning and the number of cases has risen to just over 320,000,” said Beth.

“Are you certain you want to be a part of this, Beth?”

“I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t, ma’am.”

Nicole looked over to her right and saw Dave Perry huddled with two of his assistants, ardently reviewing information on their flashpads. Seconds later, President Westgale and his security team arrived, followed by General Sims.

“All rise for the Judicial Triangle. Judges Hardy, Gonzalez, and Malone presiding,” said the justice secretary.

Justice Hardy’s seat was in the middle, above the other two judges’ seats. As the three judges sat, Nicole began to tremble, realizing the time had come. She was about to be an integral part of a historic event, for better or worse, a part of American history.

After the details of the request were read to the court, the justice secretary called on Nicole for her opening statement.

“Thank you, Justice Secretary, and thank you to the Judicial Triangle for allowing me this opportunity to present my request. I wish I didn’t have to be here today. I wish none of us did, but with over 320,000 young Americans currently suffering from Lethargy Reaction Syndrome—commonly referred to as LRS—it is vital that this hearing takes place. Sadly, that number continues to increase as the days pass.

“As the Judicial Triangle has been informed, I have concluded, through complete due diligence, that Dr. Anya Ahar appears on the verge of discovering both the cause and the cure for LRS. The fact that Dr. Ahar has committed deplorable crimes should not make us turn our backs on those who desperately need her to continue her research. I have the utmost regard for the current team of medical scientists who have been entrusted with this task; however, their efforts to date have not yielded positive results. Meanwhile, the team’s leader and the Administration’s medical chief, Dr. Charles Muller, asserts that Dr. Anya Ahar’s research has attained astounding results.

“I’m highly disappointed that this issue has become a politically contentious one. This decision should have absolutely nothing to do

with Peace-Bringers, Militants, or any other political movement. It should only be about saving lives. In no way am I diminishing the serious nature of the crimes committed by Dr. Anya Ahar, but in my opinion they are irrelevant to this request. As expressed explicitly in the request, if she is permitted to continue her research, she will do so under continuous supervision, and her work will be meticulously monitored. I've also placed very strict conditions upon her release from prison, if this were to happen. I plead with this court to rule in favor of this request—the future of this country may rely on it.”

“Mr. Perry, please proceed with your opening statement,” said the justice secretary.

David Perry came forward. “Thank you, Justice Secretary, and thank you, Your Honors, for presiding over this significant matter.” Perry paused as if to gather his thoughts. “Last evening, I visited the shrine honoring General Vance Gibson. He was an incredible man. He could be as tough as nails, and yet as calm and gentle as a summer breeze. Like anyone who was fortunate enough to be in his presence, I dearly miss him. As I visited that shrine, I also got to thinking about all the other honorable men and women in this country who have lost their lives in preserving this great nation. The more I thought about it, the more I realized how important it is for this country to function on the basis of valor. As the governing body of this country, it is paramount that the Administration function as the channel of that valor.

“My colleague, Executive Director Kratz, referred to Anya Ahar in her opening statement as Dr. Ahar. As far as I'm concerned, the day Anya Ahar decided to provide funding to the domestic terrorist group referred to as AXE and to commit the crimes she committed, she lost her rightful place in this society. A few specks—just a few specks—of the helcin she manufactured killed General Gibson. The most frightening thing in all of this is, as of this day, the whereabouts of the rest of that deadly poison remains a mystery.

“As the very doctrine she helped to create makes very clear, Anya Ahar's vision of America is cold, heartless, and downright terrifying. If this request is to be granted and she is successful in developing a

cure, she would undoubtedly be regarded as a hero—a hero who is a terrorist and despises the America we live in and cherish. In no way does the Peace Bringers Association of America wish to impart this message to our country. The only reason she’s agreed to continue researching the illness is so she can avoid her deserved penalty, and eventually be set free. Anya Ahar is not someone that I, as part of that channel of valor, wish to acknowledge in any form whatsoever.

“Finally, believe me, I am not some pitiless human being who wants to see an illness run rampant through the youth of America. That is miles from the truth. Director Kratz has continually insisted that Anya Ahar is the only hope for a cure. I don’t believe that for a second. We currently have a team of thirteen outstanding medical scientists searching for the cause and a cure for LRS, and unlike Director Kratz, I have utmost confidence in this group of highly acclaimed professionals. If you grant this request, you will be severely distorting the meaning of what it means to be American.”

After the opening statements were completed, the three judges huddled for the next several minutes. An eerie silence filled the chamber, while Dave Perry glared at Nicole. *If looks could kill*, Nicole thought, *I’d be wiped off this planet in an instant.*

A few minutes later, the judges returned to their posts. The justice secretary called out, “Director Kratz, please call your first witness.” “I call Mr. Travis Andersen to the stand,” said Nicole. A tall, trim gentleman made his way to the front of the chamber.

After Travis declared he would abide by all aspects of the New Order Treaty’s Witness Creed, Nicole proceeded with her questioning.

“Please tell the court your age and profession.”

“I am twenty years of age, and I am a professional soccer player with the New York Billionaires of the National Soccer League.”

“How many games have you played so far this season?”

“Six.”

“And your team?”

“Seventeen.”

“It is my understanding that you’re considered your team’s most efficient player; is there a reason you’ve only played in six games?”

“I was diagnosed with LRS.”

“Could you have played in the other eleven games?”

Travis took a deep breath and sighed. “No, I was not permitted.”

“Would you kindly explain?”

“Because of the nature of the illness, the league officials have deemed anyone suffering from LRS unfit to play.”

“So, I guess it’s safe to say your career as a professional soccer player is in jeopardy. Are you aware of other players in the league facing the same dilemma?”

“I believe there are another eight players who are in a similar position.”

“How does this make you feel, Mr. Andersen?”

Travis paused and blinked rapidly several times. Even so, his eyes glistened. “Completely devastated. I’ve worked so hard, training and developing my skills as a soccer player, and now I have no idea what the future holds for me, or my ill mother, whom I’ve pledged to take care of.”

“Do you fully understand the purpose of this hearing?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Have you read, in full, the report outlining the criminal improprieties and beliefs of Dr. Anya Ahar?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“What was your reaction to the report?”

“As a true American, it angered me.”

“As *a true American*, would you feel comfortable with this government enabling her to help you and the many others overcome this horrific illness?”

“As long as she was still punished in a reasonable manner, then yes.”

“And if she was successful, would you be comfortable with her being granted a stay of execution and serving twelve years in prison?”

“Yes, I think if she was able to cure LRS, that would be a fair compromise.”

“Thank you, Mr. Andersen.”

“Mr. Perry, is it your wish to question the witness?” asked the justice secretary.

“Yes.”

“Please proceed.”

“Good morning, Mr. Andersen. First of all I would like to extend my best wishes to you for a successful recovery. Although I currently reside in Washington, I am a huge Billionaires fan. I most definitely look forward to seeing you back on the field soon. Are you aware that seven of the eight other NSL players living with LRS have gone on record saying they would not support this request?”

“No, I was not aware of that.”

“Let me enlighten you. Last season’s top scorer, Patrick Lowen of the Chicago Storm Troop, is on record as saying, ‘In no way would I ever—’”

Nicole abruptly rose from her seat. “I object! If Mr. Perry wants testimony from Mr. Lowen, he should have him take the stand. How do we know this quote is authentic?”

“Overruled; the quote has been confirmed as genuine,” said Justice Hardy. Nicole sat back down, shaking her head in disapproval.

“Thank you, Justice Hardy. Patrick Lowen of the Chicago Storm Troop is on record as saying, and I quote, ‘In no way would I ever wish to be aided by a terrorist, even if it meant saving my life.’ Hugo Martinez of the Washington Androids is quoted as saying, ‘As much as I wish to be cured of this awful illness, I do not wish to be cured by someone who was more than willing to kill innocent people.’ Finally, Rudy Strenner of the Arizona Moonbeams said, ‘I most definitely would rather see the government’s current LRS team continue to try to find a cure; I believe it’s important that an ethical line is drawn in the sand.’” Perry paused, and then said, “Please tell me, Mr. Andersen, do you agree with Mr. Strenner’s comment regarding an ethical line?”

“Like I told Director Kratz, as long as Dr. Ahar is being appropriately punished for her crimes, I don’t see anything wrong with her being permitted to try to find a cure for LRS.”

“Would you describe yourself as a supporter of the PBA, MAA, or another political party?”

Nicole rose from her seat once again. “I object! That question is not relevant to this hearing.”

“What? You can’t be serious Nicole!” exclaimed Dave.

“Order! I will not tolerate these outbursts. Go ahead and answer the question, Mr. Andersen,” said Justice Hardy.

“I fully support the PBA.”

“So, I take it you do believe in laws. Is this correct, Mr. Andersen?”

“Of course I believe in laws.”

“Do you believe in a person’s right to fund terrorism and manufacture deadly toxins?”

“No, those are serious crimes.”

“Do you believe a person who admits to and is convicted of committing those *serious crimes* should still have the right to be a contributing member to society? A yes or no answer is what I’m looking for.”

“It all depends.”

“A yes or no is what I’m looking for.”

Andersen grimaced. “Uh... no.”

Perry smiled smugly. “Thank you, Mr. Andersen.”

“Mr. Perry, please call your first witness,” the justice secretary said.

“I call to the stand United States Defense Director, General Clifford Sims.”

The general rose and moved to the front of the room.

“Good morning, General, and thank you for taking time from your busy schedule to be here today,” Perry began. “To the best of your understanding, would you tell us what the most prevalent feelings are within the American military concerning this request?”

“Rage,” Sims said immediately. “Severe disappointment that it has even come this far.”

“You’ve submitted to this court a list of high-ranking military personnel who have stated they will be resigning from their positions if this request is granted. In all your years of service, have you ever seen anything like this before?”

“No, I have not.”

“If these resignations were to take place, what impact would this have on the American military?”

“It would be catastrophic; devastating.”

“I noticed you yourself are not on that list; why is that?”

“Believe me, Mr. Perry, I have given it some serious thought, but I can’t do it to my country.”

“So, as the country’s defense director, how do you personally feel about this request?”

“I strongly believe that if this request is granted, it will have a negative impact on this country, the likes of which we have never seen before.”

“Other than the aforementioned resignations, how else do you believe this will impact the country?”

“First of all, Anya Ahar will be glorified. This is a young woman who funded a domestic terrorist group and made the poison that killed my predecessor. We would also be compromising our constitution by allowing a person’s expertise in certain walks of life to circumvent our laws. This would also totally discredit Section 11.4 of the New Order Treaty.”

“And would you please enlighten this court as to the actual contents of Section 11.4 of the New Order Treaty?”

“It states that, by law, any person or group that has been convicted of manufacturing or distributing a lethal toxin within America will automatically be executed two weeks from the day they have been found guilty of committing such an offense.”

“Thank you, General Sims.”

Nicole then eagerly rose from her seat and began questioning Sims. “As defense director of the United States of America, what would you say are your main responsibilities?”

“In a nutshell, my role is to ensure the safety of the country.”

“By country, I take it you are referring to the land and its people.”

“That would be fair.”

“Would you agree that a life-threatening illness moving across the country would be compromising the safety of the American people?”



“Most definitely.”

“Then please tell me, General Sims, why you would want to prohibit the best prospect for eliminating that illness.”

“You’re putting words in my mouth, Director Kratz.”

“Even our own medical chief believes Dr. Anya Ahar presents us with the best hope for eliminating LRS.”

“I object to the fact that Director Kratz continues to refer to Anya Ahar as doctor. She no longer lays claim to that designation,” Dave said, his voice angry.

“Objection sustained. Please refrain from using that designation, Director Kratz, and advise your witnesses to do the same,” said Justice Hardy.

Nicole turned back to General Sims. “As I was saying, Dr. Charles Muller, the medical chief for this administration, has agreed that Anya Ahar is the person who gives us the best chance to eliminate LRS. Knowing this to be the case, accompanied by the fact that you are so strongly opposed to this request, how can you then sit there and tell this court that you are interested in the safety of the American people?”

“In case you’ve forgotten, this lady you so fondly speak of made the poison that killed one of the finest human beings who as ever walked this earth. As far as I’m concerned, she doesn’t deserve to take another breath!”

“So, I take it you are opposed to giving this country the best opportunity to find the cause and a cure for LRS?”

“If Anya Ahar is that ‘best opportunity,’ then yes, I am. However, unlike you, I am very confident that Dr. Muller’s team will find success.”

“I’m well aware of your military background, General; I must say, it is most impressive. I know for a fact that you are someone who truly cares for your fellow soldiers—the brotherhood. Now, what if one of those fellow soldiers was dying on a battlefield and you couldn’t do anything about it, but a medic who was from the enemy reached out to save that soldier’s life—would you prevent that medic from saving your fellow soldier?”

"I'm so disappointed in you, Director Kratz. You have no idea what it means to be a patriot—to be a loyal American."

"Objection," Nicole said, turning to the judges. "Please order the general to stop lecturing me and answer the question."

"Sustained; answer the question, General," said Justice Hardy.

"I would be doing that soldier an injustice to place him in the hands of the enemy, regardless of the situation."

"Thank you, General," Nicole said. "I have no further questions."

Following Sims's questioning, the justice secretary announced that the next witness would be the last for the day.

"I call upon Dr. Charles Muller," said Nicole.

Dr. Muller had stated in the past that his perspective on this case was neutral. He always stood by the belief that his duty as medical chief was strictly the well-being of the nation from a health perspective, not a political one.

"I understand that, as well as serving as medical chief for this administration, you are also on the boards of many organizations, with Summit University being one of those. Is this correct?" she asked him.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Have any of your colleagues from Summit ever mentioned the name Anya Ahar?"

"Yes, I've heard several members of the school's faculty speak of Miss Ahar in the past."

"In what context?"

"She has been the recipient of numerous awards at Summit, and she is widely regarded as the most brilliant mind to ever come through the science division."

"How many members of your current LRS team teach at Summit?"

"Six of the thirteen."

"Besides brilliant, what other words have you heard your colleagues use to describe her?"

"The word genius has often been used. Her approach to science and medicine has also been described as being highly unorthodox."

"What about with regards to her personality?"

"Quiet... reserved would be how I've heard her described."

“Having studied her report on LRS, would you say her insight into the illness is more advanced than that of your current LRS team?”

“Oh yes, through her unconventional methods, she has found a way to break the illness down in a most impressive manner.”

“On a scale of one to five, how much closer would you say she is to discovering a cause and a cure for LRS than your current LRS team of doctors?”

“I would say... four.”

“Thank you, Doctor, that will be all.”

Dave Perry approached, face flushed. He wasted no time trying to erase the damage that had just been done. “Doctor, I just have a few questions for you. Would it be safe to say that Miss Ahar’s extensive scientific knowledge would have been very useful to her in manufacturing helcin?”

“Absolutely.”

“Without going into details of the actual manufacturing process, would you please tell us what it would take to produce such a complex and lethal toxin?”

“It would take an extremely knowledgeable scientist displaying enormous dedication over a period of several months.”

“Besides being used as a lethal weapon, would helcin serve any other purpose?”

“It’s what it is—a lethal toxin.”

“If Anya Ahar were given every opportunity to continue trying to find the cause and a cure for LRS, would you say it’s a certainty she would be successful?”

“A certainty? No.”

“Would you say it’s a certainty that your current LRS team will not be successful in finding the cause and a cure?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Thank you. I appreciate your time, Dr. Muller.”

As the session ended and the three judges made their way out of the chamber, the tension in the room was apparent. Dave Perry and his team appeared very confident upon their exit. Nicole remained seated at her table, reviewing notes with her assistant, Beth.

## CHAPTER 16

As Nicole and her security guards walked down the hallway to her office, she received a flash-message from Gil Robichaud requesting a meeting. Realizing this had to be important, she obliged.

“I’m sorry to be bothering you, Nicole, but this couldn’t wait,” said the normally calm Gil, looking flustered. Usually neat in appearance, this evening his clothes were disheveled.

“Are you okay, Gil? You seem a little off,” said Nicole.

“It’s been a crazy day, but I finally got to the bottom of it.”

“The bottom of what?”

“I should have known, Nicole—I should have known.”

“Known what?”

“He’s been set up.”

“Who’s been set up?”

“Garrett—Garrett Porter.”

“What on earth are you talking about?”

“I’ve been on this for the last two days. The counterfeit money—it was tampered with.”

“How do you know that?”

“Someone or some group placed Garrett’s fingerprints on it weeks after the stuff was originally discovered.”

Nicole lifted an eyebrow. “Are you certain?”

“Very certain. Our central Washington lab recently installed a device that can precisely pinpoint minute details relating to

fingerprints. Things like how long they've been on an object, how they got there—all kinds of information," Gil replied.

"Whoever's behind this is obviously working very hard at trying to lead us astray, and I must say they've been doing a fabulous job," Nicole said, feeling a glimmer of anger. "I guess they also found a match for that hat and those sunglasses. We need a list of all the people who would have had access to that counterfeit money," she said firmly.

"I'm afraid that's a lost cause, Nicole. Unfortunately, after the money was seized, New York Justice used it in a couple of sting operations."

Nicole gaped at him. "You mean it wasn't secured as evidence against Dwight Wagner?"

"With all the evidence against the guy, the case was so solid that the counterfeit money wasn't really considered relevant."

Nicole tried not to sputter. "Does the president know about this?"

"Does the president know about what?" Westgale's voice came from the doorway. The president stepped into the office and shut the door. "I got your message. What did you want to see me about, Gil?"

After Gil explained this latest discovery to Westgale, the president slumped onto the sofa at the back of Nicole's office and remained silent for several seconds. Finally he erupted with, "I spent the day watching my executive director and my attorney general battle it out in front of the Judicial Triangle, and now I learn that we've wrongly accused a man who has dedicated his life to this government of multiple murders. How is this happening?"

"I promise you, sir, I will get all of this sorted out," said Gil.

"I've always believed in you, Gil; you're the best in the business," said Westgale.

"Thank you, sir. Your confidence means the world to me," replied Gil.

"That being said, this situation can no longer continue to fester. We need answers. We need to find that damn helcin, and who committed those murders. You have to get me some answers, or I'll have no choice but to remove you from the case."

\* \* \*

“All rise for the Judicial Triangle. Judges Hardy, Gonzalez, and Malone presiding,” said the justice secretary, opening the second and final day of the hearing.

Nicole called her first witness of the day, a lady named Celeste Benson, whose fourteen-year-old daughter Sarah was one of the first young Americans to be diagnosed with LRS. After Celeste and Nicole went back and forth regarding Sarah’s illness and its awful impact on both mother and daughter, she became highly distraught, and admitted that she’d almost backed out of being a witness.

“My husband is a dedicated marine,” Celeste said, winding a tissue between her fingers. “He’d do anything for his country. It’s just so terrible, the way he’s been treated since word got out that we were in support of this request.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Nicole said. “Has he been threatened in any way?”

“Not physically, but some of his fellow marines have been calling him a traitor, and he’s really been ostracized. Even his superiors are—”

“I object! If the witness’s husband is having these issues, he should file a formal complaint with his unit. That is not why we’re here today,” exclaimed Dave Perry.

“Sustained. Ma’am, I would recommend your husband heed Mr. Perry’s advice,” said Justice Hardy.

“That will be all. Thank you,” said Nicole, returning to her seat.

Perhaps realizing there would be no point in badgering this emotionally fragile witness, Dave instead called his next witness, a twenty-four-year-old man named Mateo Malu. Mateo was an intriguing witness. He was a sufferer of LRS, and also worked in one of the New York City government buildings that AXE had planned to blow up.

“Would you kindly tell us a little bit about the government building you work in?” Dave began.

“We are an office that assists people who are destitute for one reason or another.”

“I take it you assist them in finding shelter?”

Mateo nodded. “Yes, that’s correct. We help them find shelter, provide medical attention when necessary, or try to locate any relatives or friends who may be able to help care for them. The people who work in the building are very compassionate and dedicated.”

“On average, how many people would be in that building at any given time?”

“Uh... around one hundred.”

“How does it make you feel to know this very building was targeted to be blown up?”

“It sickens me to think that such evil lurks in our world.”

“What do you think should happen to those who had something to do with this sinister plot?”

Mateo’s jaw tightened. “They don’t deserve to live.”

“Mr. Malu, how has having LRS affected your life?”

“It’s a nightmare. I now realize I’ve always taken my health for granted.”

“How do you feel about the request before this court?”

“Disgusted,” Mateo answered. “It’s absurd.”

“Please explain.”

Mateo shifted forward. “Look, like I said, this illness has turned my life into a nightmare. Of course I hope a cure is found. But if this monster provides the only hope, then I’m willing to face whatever LRS has in store for me. I do not wish to be saved by someone who was willing to kill me and so many others in such a cowardly manner.”

“Thank you, Mr. Malu.” Dave turned to Nicole. “Do you wish to question the witness, Director Kratz?”

“No,” Nicole replied. “I call Mr. Heath Claremont as my next witness.”

\* \* \*

I’d met up with Nicole in the Judicial Chamber’s main foyer before the day’s hearing began. “Are you sure you’re okay with testifying, Heath?”

“Since the day you asked me to do this, I admit, I’ve been caught in a tug-of-war. But... this is for my son.”

She nodded. “I understand. Thank you.”

I entered the chamber, passing General Sims and his security guards on the way to my seat in the gallery.

“Mr. Claremont, it’s wonderful to see you again,” Sims called, and I stopped. “That was quite a speech you delivered the other evening—most enlightening.”

“Thank you, sir; it was an honor and a privilege to be given that opportunity,” I said.

“What brings you to this circus? I noticed you were here yesterday, as well. I take it Beverley got you some kind of pass to watch the proceedings.”

“Actually, I’m here in support of the request.”

The general’s expression changed instantly. The easy smile was gone. “You are? And here I thought you were a man of principle, a true patriot. I never saw you as someone who would be willing to support a terrorist. When that adorable son of yours—I’m sorry, his name escapes me...”

“Riley.”

“Riley, that’s right. Tell me, Mr. Claremont, when Riley grows older and asks you why you supported a terrorist, what are you going to tell him?”

“Let’s put it this way, General: if I don’t do this, there’s a good chance Riley won’t even have the chance to ask me that question.”

Sims didn’t seem to have an answer to that. “You have yourself a wonderful day, Mr. Claremont,” he said, turning away.

The moment was at hand. I took out a picture of Riley to remind me of the reason I was in that chamber. It was the picture of him holding the NSL championship trophy with the aid of a few of his favorite Washington Androids. Before Riley contracted LRS, I’d promised him he could begin playing organized soccer. Because of his illness, I had to break that promise. It was very difficult for him to see so many of his friends playing while he was stuck on the sidelines.



From the time Riley had been diagnosed with LRS, I had somehow found a way to remain strong and optimistic. Everybody around Sharon and I had provided such incredible support, which helped us remain positive. But today, I knew raw emotion would get the best of me.

As expected, Nicole began with some general questions regarding Riley and his LRS diagnosis.

“Up to this point in my life,” I answered, “there are specific memories that will always haunt me. The first being, at the age of ten, learning that my father had died in his robo-copter. The second was that frightful moment when I first saw my eight-year-old son in a catatonic state... and later that day hearing the doctor tell me Riley had this illness called LRS, which neither my wife nor I had ever heard of.”

“And your son, Riley—how has it changed his life?”

“That’s the amazing thing. He doesn’t want to see my wife and I upset, so he... pretends everything is okay,” I said, pausing to compose myself before adding, “But we know what it’s doing to him.”

“Would you kindly explain, Mr. Claremont?”

“He feels inadequate. When he’s playing with his friends, he’s worried he’s going to have an episode.”

“So, he’s embarrassed?”

“Oh, no; it’s more like he doesn’t want to ruin their fun by becoming sick.”

“I can only imagine how difficult it must be for him.”

I nodded sadly. “He was really looking forward to playing soccer this year, but because of his illness we couldn’t sign him up. Thankfully, he has Jumper to cheer him up.”

“Jumper?”

“Jumper’s his robot dog. The thing means the world to him. He knows it won’t judge him or think he’s some kind of freak—as some of his peers do.”

“Has your son ever told you what he hopes to accomplish in the future?”

I smiled. “Riley has many hopes and dreams. Of course, like many young American boys, he dreams of being a professional athlete—a soccer player. He would also like to build robots. I know this sounds crazy, but his greatest ambition is to one day be... president.” I couldn’t hold it in any longer—I broke down, letting the emotion flow.

“If we don’t have our hopes and dreams, we really don’t have anything at all, do we?” Nicole said gently. “Thank you, Mr. Claremont.”

As I was being questioned by Nicole, I could see Dave Perry inputting several notes into his flash-pad. Unlike Celeste Benson, I knew he would not spare me; I would have to face his wrath.

Dave Perry rose and approached me. “Hello, Mr. Claremont. My heart goes out to you and your family. I sincerely hope your son will soon be on his way to soccer stardom.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“After listening to your compelling speech at the farming conference the other night, it was clear to me that you exemplify the true American spirit. What was your inspiration behind becoming the director of Vexton Land Protection?”

“I followed in my late father’s footsteps. As a child I watched him give his all to the farmers of our town, and I guess I was really captivated by the example he set.”

“Would you agree that the actions of those who come before us help to strongly shape our outlook on life?”

“Yes, that would be fair.”

“Now, I didn’t have the pleasure of meeting your son, but General Sims did. In fact, he was really taken with how adorable and clever Riley is. He also noticed that he’s very inquisitive. Would you agree that Riley’s inquisitive?”

I smiled. “That would be a correct characterization.”

“So, if our government were to grant this request and Anya Ahar was successful at finding a cure, do you not think Riley would want to learn about the person who helped to make him better?”

“Objection. This is purely hypothetical!” Nicole nearly shouted.

“Sustained,” said Justice Hardy.

“Okay, I’ll phrase it another way. If your son were to ask you about Anya Ahar, what would you tell him?”

“I’d be honest and tell him the truth.”

“That being?”

“She’s an appalling person, and she’s not somebody he should want to be like.”

“Does this reflect your personal feelings toward Anya Ahar?” Perry asked.

“Of course. I would never mislead my son.”

“Have you read the AXE doctrine?”

“I’ve seen snippets of it.”

“Would you kindly read this segment of the doctrine, titled ‘American Farming,’ out loud to the court?” He presented me with a flash-pad.

*“Under the AXE law, American farmers will be employed as servants. They will function under strict guidelines governing what they produce and how they go about producing it. Their output will not be profit-driven, but will instead serve as a means to their survival. Sadly, since the beginning of time, most of these second-rate citizens have been inflicting enormous harm on our nation. They’ve continued doing this without shame or regret. After all, they never actually meet or even see their victims. However, a murderer is a murderer, whether they pull the trigger from a zap-fire machine gun or they kill you little by little, day by day, with the poison they bring to our society. We will bring an end to this injustice.”*

“Thank you, Mr. Claremont,” Perry said, taking back the flash-pad. “How do you feel about what you just read?”

“It’s misguided, totally wrong.”

“Yet you’re willing to give a person who took part in creating this *misguided* and *totally wrong* doctrine an opportunity to assist this country’s government?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Would you be backing this request if your son was not ill with LRS?”

“Objection,” Nicole called. “That is another hypothetical question.”

“Sustained.”

“Your wife, Sharon Claremont, I’ve come to learn, is the district attorney for Vexton. Is this correct?”

“Yes, that is correct.”

“Being DA of an American town, I’m sure there have been many instances where she had to send people to prison. Am I safe to assume some of those people were actually, at one time, productive citizens?”

“Yes, not everyone she has sent to jail is some down-and-out person off the street, if that’s what you’re asking,” I said.

“Like veterinarian Dr. Frank Langford. Are you familiar with his case, Mr. Claremont?”

“Absolutely.”

“Do you recall why your wife sent Dr. Langford to prison?”

“Objection, I can’t see how this is relevant,” said Nicole.

“Overruled. Please answer the question, Mr. Claremont.”

“Dr. Langford and his staff were found to be using unapproved medications on several of the animals they had been treating.”

“My research has told me that many of the town’s farmers actually rallied against what they believed was an overly harsh prison sentence of three years, but DA Claremont would not relent. Do you recall this?”

“Yes, I do.”

“In a Vexton court document I have in front of me, DA Claremont, your wife, is quoted as saying, ‘Although Dr. Frank Langford is highly admired and is recognized as the premiere veterinarian by the farmers of this town, this in no way excuses him from breaking the law. I have received dozens of requests asking me to approach Judge Webb and have Dr. Langford’s sentence reduced to a fine, but I have adamantly refused. As DA of this town, it is my legal and moral obligation to uphold the law.’” Dave Perry looked up. “Hmm, *upholding the law*... I must say that is an honorable concept, for without it, we have chaos. Thank you, Mr. Claremont.”

“The court will take a one-hour recess,” said the justice secretary.

When I left the stand, I felt a whirlwind of emotions. Although it was an ordeal to go through, I was thrilled to be able to express my heartfelt views on the matter. My son’s life was on the line, and I was willing to do whatever it took.

As I exited the court, Nicole came rushing over to me. “How are you feeling, Heath? As I expected, Dave was rather ruthless with you.”

“Nothing he could ever say to me would even come close to causing the heartbreak Riley’s illness has caused me.”

“The hearing is definitely going to wrap up by the end of the day; are you planning to stick around?” she asked.

“Yes, I need to be here.”

## CHAPTER 17

Up on the top floor of the Freedom Home, Dr. Muller met with the president.

“Charles, you look concerned—more bad news?” asked Westgale.

“Anya Ahar was correct, sir. Twenty minutes ago I received official word that we’ve seen our first LRS fatality,” replied Dr. Muller.

“That’s terrible news,” Westgale said, coming out from behind his desk.

“An eighteen-year-old boy from St. Louis. He was one of the first diagnosed cases.”

“When did he die?”

“Yesterday.”

“Has the news been made public?”

“No. The hospital followed the protocol we set out. Once they confirmed he died from LRS, they contacted the AMO. Now I believe they’re trying to reach his only next of kin, his sister.”

“Are they certain his death was LRS related?” Westgale asked.

Charles nodded. “There’s no doubt. I had the autopsy reports sent to my office, and outside of having LRS, the young man was completely healthy.”

Westgale frowned and turned away. “This is not good... not good at all.” He turned back to face Muller. “Has your team been able to make any inroads into solving this illness yet, or is Nicole correct when she insists Anya Ahar is our only hope?”

“That’s the other reason I came to see you.”

Westgale lifted his eyebrows. “Please tell me you’re closing in on a cure.”

“Believe me, Mr. President, I would like nothing more than to tell you that, but I would be lying.”

“Then what’s the other reason you’re here?” Westgale asked halfheartedly. “If it’s more bad news...”

“No, no, this is actually some positive news. It’s not related to the cure, but it is related to the cause.”

Westgale’s brows went up again. “I’m listening.”

“The autopsy revealed high levels of zioxite in his system.”

“Zioxite?”

“It’s a poison.”

“Are you telling me that’s what caused his LRS?”

“Yes,” Muller said firmly. “We’re one hundred percent certain.”

Westgale calmly sat back down in his chair. “Charles, this is great news. When I saw the credentials of the scientists you brought in to work on this, I knew you’d get answers.”

“I’m sorry to deflate your enthusiasm, Mr. President, but this news isn’t as valuable as you may think it is.”

Westgale jumped to his feet. “Why not?”

“Zioxite stems from many different sources and can only be detected in one’s system after death.”

“If it emanates from so many different sources, then how come far more people aren’t affected by it?”

“That’s another strange characteristic of the chemical,” Muller replied. “In most people, the immune system fends off the poison instantly. Others aren’t as fortunate.”

“Did Anya Ahar’s report mention zioxite?”

“Her report did have the cause narrowed down to a small family of toxins, which includes zioxite.”

“I’ve known you a long time, Charles. After all, you brought my three children into this world. You’re a good man, an honest man. I need that honesty from you right now,” Westgale said solemnly.

“The feeling’s mutual. You can always count on my honesty.”

“This ordeal has completely sundered the Administration. Nicole and David are battling it out like savages in the Judicial Triangle, while most of my high-ranking military officials are threatening to resign if this request is granted. I need to ask you: can we find the answers without Anya Ahar?”

“Honestly, William...” Muller sighed, removing his glasses and then rubbing his eyes. “I don’t know. All I can tell you is that I’ve brought in thirteen brilliant medical scientists to try to find those answers.”

“Yeah, but I’m concerned those answers are currently sitting in a prison cell,” Westgale quipped wryly.

\* \* \*

While waiting for court to reconvene, those involved in the hearing were gathered in the concourse just outside the courtroom. A documentary on the history of the PBA played on the large flash-screen on one wall of the room, mostly considered ambient noise by those conversing or eating lunch—until the screen suddenly shifted to the UCIT logo. The words *LRS Fatality in St. Louis* appeared below it.

Seconds later, a young lady appeared on the screen, clearly hysterical. “While those bastards sit there in their so-called Freedom Home arguing about whether they should let some demented scientist try and find a cure, my brother is lying—”

The screen went black, and a warning flashed, announcing that court would resume in three minutes.

My body literally shook after I heard the news. I was sitting with Celeste Benson and her husband. We had met only a few minutes before, but we immediately bonded through the trauma of our personal tragedies.

From my flash-pad, I retrieved a recent photo of Riley on Moon Shade Bluff and stared at it with affection. Would the tragic death of this young man bring about a heightened urgency to this situation? I wondered.



\* \* \*

“All rise for the Judicial Triangle. Judges Hardy, Gonzalez, and Malone presiding. Mr. Perry, do you have any further witnesses whom you wish to call?”

“Yes, but unfortunately my staff has informed me that the witness has been delayed. I ask the court to please allow me an extension.”

“As you are well aware, Mr. Perry, this is the highest court of law in this nation, and procedure must be strictly enforced. It is your responsibility to ensure your witnesses are present and on time. Therefore, I will not allow an extension,” said Justice Hardy.

Frowning, Dave sat back down in his chair, while Nicole rose from hers. “Your Honor, I ask the court to respectfully grant the extension. I believe it is vital to all of us in this room—and the country, for that matter—that Mr. Perry be permitted to present his complete case. I will be more than glad to call my final witness next.”

“Very well,” replied Justice Hardy.

“I call to the stand US Secretary of Agriculture and Environmental Safety, Beverley Gibson.”

Secretary Gibson came forward. Once she was settled, Nicole began. “We’re all aware that Anya Ahar is the person who manufactured the deadly toxin that killed your father. One would wonder how you could possibly be in favor of granting this request. Would you kindly explain?”

Beverley drew a deep breath. “My father treasured this country in every way imaginable. He appreciated its history, he was in awe of its beauty, and most of all, he adored its people. I know with certainty that he would be one hundred per cent behind this request, regardless of the circumstances surrounding it.”

Perry rose. “Objection. I ask the court to completely disregard that last sentence. Unless Secretary Gibson has a way of communicating with her father in the afterlife, this is purely speculation.”

“Overruled. I have deep reverence for the father–daughter relationship,” Justice Hardy said firmly.

Nicole turned back to Beverley. “Having had the pleasure of associating with your father over the years, I always admired his enthusiasm toward the young people of our country. Would you give us some examples of how he embraced America’s youth?”

“At least twice every month my father found time to visit schools, orphanages, and children’s hospitals across the country. He would donate all types of resources and spend hours speaking with the children, even helping many of them receive assistance regarding personal issues.”

“Would you tell the court what your father was doing the evening he was murdered?”

“Dad was concerned that the ‘youngsters of this country,’ as he called them, were becoming far too caught up in the material and technological ways of life, and that they were losing perspective on what it meant to be an American. So he came up with an idea to have young students from across Washington submit drawings of what it meant to be an American. He was reviewing those drawings when he...” Beverley paused and swallowed, “when he was killed.”

“Thank you, Secretary Gibson,” Nicole said, finished with her questioning.

Dave huddled for a minute or so with his assistants, then approached the stand. “I first want to begin by telling you how much I admired your father, and tell you how much I miss him.”

“Thank you, Mr. Perry. My father admired you as well, especially how you rose to such prominence after enduring such a difficult youth.”

Dave lowered his head and strolled toward Beverley, as if casually musing. “The other day, while preparing for this hearing, I came across some interesting comments your father had made about the War Within.” He looked up. “One that really captured my attention was ‘The War Within crushed an already fractured society... the only way we will ever make this nation fully whole again is through strong leadership and proper governance. If we expect the people of this nation to live life in accordance with our laws, as leaders we must set an appropriate example.’ As one of the

leaders of this government, do you believe that by honoring this request, you are heeding your father's advice?"

"I'm well aware of that quote made by my father, and I fully agree with his sentiment," Beverley said. "However, being his daughter, I can share with you one of his lesser known quotes, one that might be interesting for this court to hear." Tears welled in her eyes. "He said, 'Pity those who need our pity, and never turn away from those in need.' And that, Mr. Perry, is why I'm up here on this stand. Our fellow Americans desperately need our help. Maybe you can, but I sure can't turn away from doing everything in my power to provide that help."

Dave nodded and lifted a flash-pad. "The more I read this doctrine, the more it shocks me just how much anger is directed at America's farmers. Being the governmental leader of America's farming industry, how does it feel to see our farmers referred to as murderers? Perhaps, maybe you agree?"

"You don't have to sell me on how contemptible the words in that doctrine are," Beverley countered, "but as far as I'm concerned, this hearing should have nothing to do with Anya Ahar's social and political beliefs. It should be solely about saving lives."

"But that's where you're wrong, Secretary Gibson. Miss Ahar has already become a household name. There are extremist underground movements out there now, regarding AXE as some new type of religion. Oh, and by the way, wasn't it our very own President William T. Westgale who, when speaking about the recent violent World Harmony Program protests, said, 'It's amazing how young people in this country become so influenced by all they see and hear.'" Dave Perry turned away, saying, "Thank you, Secretary Gibson."

"Mr. Perry, has your final witness arrived yet?" asked the justice secretary.

"Yes—" Dave began, as the large steel doors of the chamber opened. Two Federal Justice Guards entered, escorting a woman. "I call to the stand Anya Ahar," he continued as those in attendance let out a collective gasp.

When it was first established that this hearing would take place, it was expected that Nicole would be calling Anya as one of her witnesses. However, once the AXE doctrine was made public, Nicole changed her mind. Although for the most part the Judicial Triangle functioned in a regimented manner, a list of witnesses was not required to be submitted prior to the beginning of a case. Dave obviously believed it was in his best interest to put Anya and her disturbing musings on display.

The shackled woman led to the stand was pixie-like, with large horn-rimmed glasses covering half her face. She had a subtle smile and was extremely cordial to the court staff. She couldn't have appeared more nonthreatening.

An eerie silence filled the courtroom as she took her place on the stand. One of the court clerks immediately approached the stand and lowered the sound-blast. Dave then advanced. "Miss Ahar, have you ever manufactured a deadly toxin known as helcin?"

"Objection. Miss Ahar has already admitted to the crime, and Mr. Perry is well aware of that fact," Nicole said.

"Sustained."

"Do you regret the fact that the helcin you manufactured was used to kill the former United States defense director, General Vance Gibson?"

"It was not my specific intention, but I do not have any regrets," Anya replied.

"What was your intention when you manufactured that lethal toxin?"

"It was created for AXE, as part of our movement's arsenal."

"The very same movement you helped to fund and that had planned to simultaneously blow up six government buildings?"

"Yes," Anya replied calmly.

"So, let me get this straight. Your goal with AXE was to one day take charge of America, but at the same time it was your plan to blow up buildings and kill loads of innocent Americans. Am I missing anything?"

"Every major conflict in history has casualties, and this would have been no different," Anya said.

Dave widened his eyes. “No different? You’re talking about defenseless people being slaughtered in the most cowardly, heinous manner imaginable.”

“When those people entered those government buildings they chose to associate with and enable the enemy. Therefore they became subject to the consequences. Upon their expiration, they would have served as sacrifices for a very important cause.”

“What are your feelings toward religion?” Dave asked. “Is there a specific god you pray to?”

“My god is within. My god is not some mythical being used out of convenience.” As Anya gave her answers, those in the courtroom appeared suspended in their own disbelief. She didn’t show an ounce of emotion.

“The doctrine’s introduction describes AXE as a youth extremist movement,” Dave continued. “Can you please explain?”

“Your America, like the rest of the countries in the world, Mr. Perry, is misguided. It’s the jaded minds of middle-aged and elderly men who, throughout our world’s history, have been responsible for war after war.”

“Ha,” Dave snorted. “So I take it we’d be better off in the hands of people like you and Dwight Wagner?”

“At least it would be a land of honesty and prosperity.”

“A land where those who are terminally ill would be put to death like animals. A land where children are encouraged to run around with weapons and farmers are treated like mere slaves.” His voice escalated with each point. “This is your idea of honesty and prosperity? Who the hell are you! What in the hell—”

“Objection. I’m tired of this,” Nicole said, her tone long-suffering. “Mr. Perry continues to try to turn this hearing into his own personal diatribe.”

“Sustained. Mr. Perry, please control your anger and proceed accordingly.”

Dave looked over at Nicole and snickered. “I have one final question, Your Honors. He turned back to Anya Ahar. “You speak of others being sacrifices for your cause, yet you’re trying to make a

deal where you avoid death. Do you not see that as extremely hypocritical?"

"Saving young Americans with LRS is my immediate goal. Continuing to live... well, I see it as a gift to those who will follow my path for the rebirth of this country."

"I've heard enough," Dave said in disgust. "That will be all."

"Director Kratz, is it your wish to question this witness?"

"Yes, it is," Nicole said. She realized she had to find at least a glimmer of light to oppose the dark shadow cast by Anya Ahar's disturbing disposition. "Miss Ahar, I'm not about to stand here and speak to you about your crimes or your political views, but would you kindly address the court regarding the situation surrounding your birth?"

"Objection! This is a waste of the court's time!" shouted Dave.

"Overruled. However, I will need to see where this is going, Director Kratz," said Justice Hardy.

For several seconds, Anya stared straight ahead without saying a word. Then, finally, she displayed her first sign of emotion: her body began to quiver.

"Miss Ahar, are you okay?" asked Nicole.

"I'd rather not speak on that subject," Anya said mechanically.

"Miss Ahar, I'm going to ask you to please respond," interjected Justice Hardy.

Once again, with her body trembling, Anya stared straight ahead. Then she turned and glared at Nicole, and spoke. "It was an extremely cold December morning. My mother and father were on their way to a restaurant to have breakfast when my mother went into labor. Dad raced her to the nearest hospital, but when they tried entering the hospital, all the doors were locked." Anya paused as if picturing the moment in her mind. Her trembling became more pronounced.

"Are you able to continue, Miss Ahar?" asked Nicole.

Anya took a deep breath. "There was no way for my father to enter that hospital, so he brought my mother back to their vehicle, but the doors had frozen shut. My birth was imminent. With no other

choice, he lay my mother down on the icy pavement and delivered me himself.” Anya stopped and lowered her head. She stared at her lap for several long seconds before looking up again. “My mother never even had a chance to hold me in her arms. If not for a Good Samaritan named Anya Moreno, who rushed over to my father with a bunch of blankets, I wouldn’t have made it either.”

“Did your father ever find out why the hospital doors were locked?” Nicole asked.

Intense anger clouded Anya’s face. “Yes, he did. The hospital was locked because it was being used as a Peace-Bringer detention center. It was during the first week of the War Within.”

“Thank you, Miss Ahar,” said Nicole.

The guards came to remove Anya from the stand. That eerie silence had returned. This time, however, it had less to do with the mystery surrounding Anya and more to do with her startling account.

Since no closing statements were permitted in the Judicial Triangle, the case was now in the hands of the three judges.

“All have spoken. This court is now in recess. We will reconvene at 4:00 p.m.” said the justice secretary.

The giant steel doors were opened. As everyone began filing out, Cryptic was waiting in the concourse with the UCIT camera crew.

The robot approached Dave Perry. “Mr. Perry, may I have a moment of your time?”

Perry stopped and faced the camera. “Sure. I always have time to speak to the American public. After all, they’re who I work for.”

“With the announcement of the first LRS-related death, have your feelings on this matter changed?” Cryptic asked.

Dave’s eyebrows puckered in concern. “This is very horrible news, but it does not change my feelings in the least.”

“As you wait for the court’s decision, are you confident you’ve made your case?” the robot asked.

Perry nodded firmly. “This country is a democracy. It is also a very fragile democracy. As I said in the courtroom, to provide a reprehensible individual like Anya Ahar with any form of acknowledgement is absurd. Unlike Director Kratz, I remain

confident this matter can be resolved without the assistance of a highly disturbed terrorist.”

“Were you caught off guard by the account of her mother’s death?” Cryptic asked. “Did it make you feel any sympathy toward her?”

“I can’t deny it’s a sad story, but in no way does it excuse her actions.”

“In summary,” Cryptic said, wrapping up the interview, “do you think the request will be granted?”

Perry scowled. “I hope to God, in the name of justice, it isn’t.”

Cryptic then attempted to interview Nicole, who was speaking with Dr. Muller. After politely declining Cryptic’s invitation, she led Dr. Muller to her office.

“Zioxite...” she said thoughtfully as she sat down at her desk and Muller took a seat across from her. “Wasn’t that the toxin found in some who were killed during the War Within?”

“Yes, that was when it was first discovered.”

“I know this would be going quite a ways back, but would you be able to review the autopsies of those who had zioxite in their system?”

“That’s exactly what I’ve been doing,” Muller said. “In the cases I’ve studied, the zioxite came from defective sting-guns used during the conflict. That’s all the information I have so far.”

“Thank you, Doctor.”

After Dr. Muller exited her office, Nicole looked at her time-pin. It was 3:30 p.m. She tried her best to remain calm, but her nerves began getting the best of her. As she was used to doing during difficult times in life, she called her mother, Miranda, for support.

“Hi, Mom, it’s me, Nicole. How are things back in New York?”

“Nicole, honey,” her mother said, “everything’s fine. I’m surprised to be hearing from you at this time. Isn’t the big decision about to be announced?”

“I just really needed to hear a warm, caring voice,” Nicole admitted with a sigh. “How’s Dad keeping?”

“You know your father, once he begins presiding over a case he becomes engulfed by it.”

“What kind of case is he overseeing?”



“Oh, I don’t want to bore you with the details,” her mother said.

“No, please, Mom—I need the distraction.”

Her mother hesitated. “I just don’t want to upset you, honey.”

“Believe me, Mom, compared to the hell I’ve been facing the last few days, I don’t think anything you tell me could possibly sink me any lower.”

“Okay... your father’s residing over a case where three young—just fifteen years old!—students had planned to blow up their school.”

Nicole shook her head ruefully. “I guess I’ve been so busy preparing for this hearing that this comes as total news to me.”

“New York Justice has done its best to hush it up, but it’s just a matter of time before the story makes headlines.”

“Is there any theory on the kids’ motive?”

“Oh Nicole...” Her mother hesitated again. “I hate upsetting you like this.”

“Please, Mom, answer me, and give me all the details.”

“Well, apparently these students had become obsessed with that AXE doctrine. The police discovered that one of the young men had been fanatically trying to reach Anya Ahar in prison. And they found an image of Anya Ahar on his flash-pad, and he had typed the words ‘In Honor of’ underneath it.”

In the concourse on her way back to the chamber, Nicole encountered President Westgale. “Nicole, I want to wish you the best of luck. You’ve done a very commendable job in there, and regardless of the outcome, I’m very proud of you,” he said as she stopped.

“Thank you, sir. That means a lot to me.”

The three-minute warning signal flashed on the giant flash-screen, and they moved to the chamber together. Nicole entered a chamber full of people heavy with anticipation. Westgale moved to join his wife in the back of the chamber.

“This court is back in session. All rise for the Judicial Triangle. Judges Hardy, Gonzalez, and Malone presiding.”

The chamber went dark, with one spotlight shining on Justice Thor Hardy. Described as a no-nonsense kind of person, over the years Hardy had served as both presidential executive director and US attorney general. In fact, most in the PBA believed he would have become president over Westgale if he had run. He propped himself up in his large white chair, adjusted his sound-blast, and prepared to speak.

Those in the room sat transfixed. Dave Perry wiped the sweat from his brow, while Nicole bowed her head in prayer.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I wish to thank everyone who has participated in this trial. I first call upon Honorable Justice Rafael Gonzalez to announce his decision.”

The spotlight shifted over. “I, Rafael Gonzalez, as a Justice of the PBA Judicial Triangle, vote in support of Request SC-7B5.”

Filled with joy, Nicole reached over and squeezed her assistant’s arm. Beth grinned back at her. On the other side of the room, Dave Perry shook his head in disgust. General Sims began whispering to one of his associates, his arms jerking angrily.

“Order. Please, may I have your attention,” Justice Hardy said loudly. “I now call upon Honorable Justice Phillip Eagan Malone to announce his decision.”

The justice cleared his throat as the spotlight swung to him. “I, Phillip Eagan Malone, as a Justice of the PBA Judicial Triangle, vote in opposition of Request SC-7B5.” Gasps of both relief and concern echoed throughout the chamber. Westgale remained motionless; his wife placed her hand on his shoulder.

“Since we are left with a split decision, under Section 17.1 of the New Order Treaty, as Superior Justice of this court I will be responsible for the final ruling. I realize you’re all impatiently awaiting my decision, but I feel it is imperative that I clearly explain what has led me to this decision.

“In over forty-five years working in the legal system, as a criminal lawyer, US attorney general, and Judicial Triangle judge, I have never been involved in a more compelling or significant case. For the last couple of days, I sat in this chamber and listened to

passionate arguments from Executive Director Kratz and Attorney General Perry. I also sat here in great admiration for the witnesses who took the stand under such difficult circumstances.

“Several hours ago we learned that a young man in St. Louis lost his life to LRS. This morning, when I checked the AMO database, I noticed the number of diagnosed LRS cases has increased by 10,000 since this hearing commenced. This is enormously upsetting.

“I also received news this morning that three young students had planned to blow up their school in New York City. Authorities claim these students were following in the footsteps of Anya Ahar and the AXE movement. As part of my preparation for this trial, I thoroughly reviewed the AXE doctrine. With every flash of my screen I became more and more disturbed by this ugly, depressing, frightening dogma.

“At the same time, I reviewed Anya Ahar’s impressive accomplishments. Miss Ahar is obviously an incredibly brilliant scientist, capable of true greatness. However, as proven by her manufacturing of helcin and helping to fund and form AXE, she is also very capable of creating true horror and mayhem. The death of her mother is a tragic story that sheds light on why she may have developed into such an angry and malicious young lady. That being said, it does not exempt her from her wrongdoings.

“In the middle of this quandary we have a team of thirteen highly acclaimed medical scientists working day in and day out on a cure for this awful illness. As I did with Miss Ahar, I also spent time studying the backgrounds of these accomplished men and women. I have great faith in their capabilities.

“Over the last twenty-five years, America has strived to rediscover itself. In particular, the Westgale Administration has made tremendous progress in guiding this country from potential ruin back to a land of vitality. However, there is still work to be done. Our PBA governing body will be facing a challenge from Devan Bedlam and the MAA in the upcoming election, and we must remain unified. The Outer Commission is also watching every move this government makes.

“Finally, the threat to this country’s preservation in the form of nihilistic underground movements spearheaded by disenchanting youth of America is real and remains very serious. As expressed by Attorney General Perry throughout this trial, this government has a duty to set an unyielding example for its people by preserving the law and refusing to condone terrorist activities.”

Hardy paused. “I will now formally disclose my decision. I, James Thorton Hardy, as Superior Justice of the PBA Judicial Triangle, vote in opposition of Request SC-7B5. This case is now closed.”

Nicole couldn’t believe her ears. She heard the words, but kept thinking there had to be a mistake. She sat frozen in her seat as Beth tried to console her.

Dave Perry was all business as he and his staff marched out of the chamber with their heads held high.

## CHAPTER 18

I left the gallery and made my way toward Nicole.

“You can’t come through here, sir,” said a member of her security staff.

“Let him through,” Nicole said, sounding tired, defeated. “I’m so sorry, Heath. Today I learned that the human spirit no longer matters in the larger scheme of things. We are only pawns in the game of politics. She shook her head and her voice hardened. “Politics, that’s the sole reason for this travesty. May God bless you and your family, Heath.” She abruptly exited the chamber.

Feeling bitter and dejected, I attempted to clear my head by grabbing some dinner in the concourse. While I was waiting for my food to arrive, my flash-pad lit up. It was Sharon.

“Heath, how could they do this?” she said immediately. “Is Nicole going to appeal?”

“The decision’s final, honey. I know it’s difficult, but we have to remain strong and positive. We need to hope that answers will be found.”

“When are you heading back?”

“Tomorrow morning. I can’t wait to be home. How’s my little champion?”

“He’s right beside me. I’ll give him the pad.”

“Hey champ, I’ll be back tomorrow. How are you doing?”

“I’m okay, but Jumper hasn’t been feeling well.”

“Don’t worry, Riles, when I get back we’ll get Jumper feeling better than ever. Now, be good to Mommy, and I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Heath... Heath, are you still there?”

“I’m still here, Sharon. Problems with Jumper?”

“Yeah... I don’t know; he seems to be working fine, and then all of a sudden he just shuts down.”

“Ah, it’s probably some technical glitch. I’ll address it when I get home.”

After finishing my dinner, I heard a voice call, “Mr. Claremont.”

I looked up to see the medical chief approaching. “Dr. Muller, it’s an honor to meet you.”

“I was very touched by your heartfelt testimony,” he said, shaking my hand. “That must have been very difficult for you.”

“I dearly love my son, Doctor.”

“That was evident.”

“I just hope you and your team can find the cause... the cure... anything to bring an end to this tragedy.”

“I assure you, we won’t stop until we do. The president has provided us with the necessary resources, and I’m surrounded by brilliant associates.”

“Is it possible the illness could be incurable?” I ventured, dreading the answer.

“I won’t lie to you, it’s very possible. But I prefer to remain optimistic.”

\* \* \*

Just outside the Freedom Home’s front gate, Devan Bedlam was being interviewed by Cryptic.

“Why had the MAA not commented on the request?” Cryptic asked.

“It was not our place to speak on the matter while it was before the Judicial Triangle,” Bedlam replied. “But now that the hearing is over, I will tell you that this is just another example of how broken the Westgale Administration is. How can they run this country properly when they can’t even manage themselves? If ever the Outer Commission were to enforce its power and cast out the Westgale Administration, this would be the perfect opportunity. America is

desperately in need of a change, and the Militant Alliance of America is clearly the only solution.”

“If it were your decision, would you have granted the request?” the robot asked.

“No comment.”

“These youth-oriented extremist movements—do you feel they pose a threat to the MAA?” Cryptic asked.

“Not at all,” Bedlam replied. “These movements are simply a drastic reaction to the awful governance displayed by the Peace Bringers Association of America for the last several years. The Alliance is not about reckless violence and creating chaos. Our mission is to revive America from its current malaise by ensuring our rightful place as the most powerful country in the world by means of innovation and military supremacy.”

\* \* \*

Sleep didn’t come easy to President Westgale that night—in fact, it didn’t come at all.

“Come on, William, you can’t do this to yourself,” April urged. “The matter was argued before the highest court in this country, and if it weren’t for you, it wouldn’t have even made it that far.”

“A young man has died, April. Died because of LRS,” Westgale said, his voice anguished. “And another 335,000 young people have to wake up every day wondering if they’re next.”

“I realize this is distressing, but you can’t keep beating yourself up.”

“And now...” William lowered his head and shook it. “I have to stand in front of these sick young people and their families and tell them everything’s fine because they’ll be receiving monetary assistance? And what really pains me is the fact that now I can’t even tell them what it is that’s making them sick!”

An hour later, as Westgale entered the hallway leading to his office, he saw a weary-looking Nicole sitting in the large reception area.

“I can see you got about as much sleep as I did last night,” he said as he led her into his office.

Nicole didn't respond. She looked around. "It just exudes so much power," she said.

"What's that?" asked Westgale as he began tending to files on his desk.

"This building, this office—it exudes such power. I guess that's why it's so effective at burying the truth."

Westgale looked up. "You're losing me, Nicole."

"You know that damn request should have been granted. You know in your heart it was the right thing, but you didn't have the guts to publicly say it!" she growled.

"My hands were tied," he said. "My impartiality toward the matter was essential. As a political strategy, I probably would have been better off actually outright denouncing the request, but I didn't. I couldn't do that to you."

"That's really something," she snapped. "I never saw you as someone who would pander to the masses."

"You read that bloody doctrine, Nicole. Even the staunchest MAA supporters were horrified by it. How could you expect me, as president of this country, to support anything to do with Anya Ahar?"

"Of course—just let the politics guide everything. Just let your executive director and your attorney general battle it out while you sit back and watch."

"It was a fair hearing, presented before the highest court in the land," Westgale said evenly, trying to calm her. "Somehow you'll have to come to terms with the result."

"And what if? Just what if I was successful and the request was granted? What kind of spin would you have come up with? I'm sure you would have placed the blame on your *bleeding heart* executive director."

Westgale sighed. "No spin, Nicole. Along with the majority of my military leaders, I would have simply resigned, and this office would have been all yours."

"Well, at least we're thinking on the same level. Here." Nicole handed him an envelope.



Westgale slowly opened the envelope and began reading. He looked up. "Is this for real?"

"It sure is."

"Well, I guess I'm not surprised... but I am disappointed. You're the backbone of this administration. We need you, Nicole."

"I'm sorry, sir, but I can't be a part of this anymore. It's all one big game of lies and corruption, and I'm tired of it."

"I've never told you this—in fact, I haven't told anybody—the only reason I got myself into this whole presidential thing was because I knew I would have *you* as my executive director."

"I appreciate those kind words, and I'm especially grateful for how you saved my life that day outside of the Freedom Home, but with all due respect, I've made my decision, and as you can see in my letter, I've requested that my resignation be immediate."

"I will see to it that's it taken care of immediately," he said stiffly. "Believe me, I fully respect your decision. And you're correct: in my heart, I do believe the request should have been granted, but in order to preserve the righteous future of the PBA and this country... I'm glad it wasn't."

"As far as my departure goes," Nicole said, ignoring Westgale's response, "I've briefed Beth and the rest of my staff on all pending matters, so everything should be in fine order. As I've stated in the letter, I will remain available for the next four weeks, if clarification is needed on any issues."

"So, this is it?"

"I wish you all the best, sir," Nicole said, then turned to exit the office.

"Nicole."

She turned back. "Yes, Mr. President."

"Thanks. Thanks for showing me there is actually someone who still cares."

## CHAPTER 19

“Daddy’s home! Mommy, Daddy’s home!” shouted Riley as I came through the door.

I was thrilled to be home. “Riley—come here my boy,” I said, and he jumped into my arms.

Riley twisted in my arms as Sharon entered the room. “Can I tell him, Mommy? Can I? Please?”

“Tell me,” I said. “The suspense is killing me.”

“Look, Daddy, the president sent me a message.” He pointed behind him as Sharon pulled out her flash-pad.

She handed it to me and I read:

*Dear Riley,*

*It was fantastic having a chance to meet you and your family. Everybody at the Freedom Home thought you were a terrific young man. I really think, one day, you’ll make an excellent president.*

*Keep smiling,*

*President William T. Westgale*

“Wow, Riley, we’ll have to show this to Grandma when we go visit her tomorrow,” I said, handing the flash-pad back to Sharon. “She’ll be so proud of you.”

“Where’s my grandson?” Mom crowed when we arrived. “I’ve got some fried chicken and cornbread with the name Riley Claremont on it—come on over here, my little prince.”

After dinner, Riley showed everybody his message from the president. “That is amazing, Riley. The president only sends messages to important people,” Mom said, pulling Riley in close to her.

“With the mess they’ve got going on over there right now, they could probably use a dose of Riley’s positive attitude,” Zack said sardonically.

We went into the common area of the retirement home so that Riley could show all of the residents Jumper’s amazing abilities. They really enjoyed seeing Riley put Jumper through his marvelous feats.

“Watch, everyone, Jumper’s going to add numbers,” Riley said to those gathered. He turned back to his robot. “Okay, Jumper, what’s three plus three?” To the audience’s delight, Jumper barked six times. “He can do subtraction, too,” Riley told everyone. “Okay Jumper, what is seven minus two?” Jumper barked once, twice, but as the robot was about to bark a third time, it conked right out. Riley whirled to me and wailed, “Oh no, it happened again!” Then he began to cry.

“Let me take a look at the thing, Heath,” said Zack, who was sitting beside me. “I’ll go inside and see if I can find some tools to try and fix this critter.” He lowered his voice and leaned toward me. “But Heath, I think it’s probably best Riley doesn’t see me open his little friend up.”

I nodded, then called, “Riley, Uncle Zack’s going to see if he can help Jumper feel better. Why don’t you go inside with Mommy and Grandma and get some dessert?”

“I want to stay with Jumper,” Riley said, pouting.

“Riley, Grandma made your favorite dessert, rice pudding with caramel,” I reminded him. “Jumper will be okay; Uncle Zack and I will take good care of him.”

“Oh... okay.” He let Sharon lead him into Mom’s unit.

Zack came back out with some basic tools. He unscrewed a panel on the belly of the Ro-Dog and popped it off. “Now let’s see,” he said, leaning over the open cavity, adjusting his checkered suspenders. “All right—hmm... very interesting.”

“Do you think you’ll be able to figure out what’s wrong?” I asked.

“Oh yeah. The only problem is, I won’t be able to fix it with these tools. I’ll get my son to bring over some of my equipment tomorrow morning.”

“I wouldn’t want to put you to all that trouble, Uncle Zack. I can just take it to the Vexton-Tech plant in the morning.”

“It’s no trouble, Heath. I’ve built far more complex machines than this, back when I was running Hampton Robotics. Plus, it’ll give me a good opportunity to study this most interesting creation.” He grinned at me.

After finally convincing Riley to let Jumper remain overnight with Uncle Zack, we made our way home. While Kayla and Riley played games on her flash-pad, Sharon and I tuned into the president’s press conference.

As he began to speak, he appeared more distraught than ever:

“Good evening, my fellow Americans. I would like to start off this evening by informing you that Nicole Kratz resigned as executive director yesterday. I want to thank former director Kratz for her enormous contributions to the Administration. Without her dedication, the World Harmony Program, along with many other significant initiatives, would never have been established. I also want to wish her all the best in her future endeavors.

“Replacing Nicole Kratz as my new executive director will be US Attorney General David Perry. Mr. Perry will bring a wealth of political and legal expertise to his new position. Mr. Perry will be holding his own press conference tomorrow evening.

“I would also like to announce that replacing Mr. Perry as attorney general will be Mr. Champ Sutton, who has served as Mr. Perry’s legal deputy for the last three years.

“Finally, I am here to inform you that the LRS Compensation Program has been formally set in motion. If you have been officially diagnosed with LRS, or are caring for someone who has been, please visit the LRS assistance component on our PBA view-

file and register. I want to assure you that this government remains passionately committed to finding the cause and a cure for this terrible illness.”

I wasn't surprised to hear of Nicole's resignation. It was obvious that Nicole wore her heart on her sleeve and would never compromise her beliefs for the world of politics.

The following day, Sharon began the registration process for the LRS Compensation Program, while Kayla brought Riley to Hislep Farms to visit its vast array of ponies and horses.

Early in the afternoon, I had received a flash-message from Zack requesting I come by the retirement home. When I arrived, I went around back and saw Zack out on the patio surrounded by all kinds of pieces of what used to be Jumper.

“Hey, Uncle Zack, please tell me you're going to be able to put Jumper back together, or you're the one who will have to explain it to Riley,” I joked.

Zack wasn't smiling. “I can easily put it back together... if you want me to.”

“Why wouldn't I want you to?”

Usually very relaxed, Zack looked downright concerned. “This is a very fascinating creation. Do you see this part here? This is the brain.” He showed me a very intricate, circular piece of metal.

“I know the thing has a complex brain—sometimes I wonder if it's smarter than I am,” I said, trying to relieve some of the tension coming from Zack. It was to no avail. “You're really starting to worry me. Why so glum?”

“I don't know how else to tell you this, but this brain is composed of a metallic compound called Andrel 5.”

“Is that supposed to mean something to me?”

“Andrel 5 was banned many years ago. Andrel 1, Andrel 3, and BCM are the only compounds that are permitted to be used in machines such as this.”

“You mean to tell me Vexton-Tech is using a metal compound that was prohibited? Why would they do that?”

“Andrel 5 serves the exact same purpose as the other compounds, but it’s vastly cheaper,” Zack answered. “Only Andrel 5 is poisonous.”

I stared down at the parts of Jumper. “Are you certain this is Andrel 5?”

“Absolutely. Do you see that bluish tinge within the silver? That’s a sure sign of Andrel 5.”

“Why was it banned?” I asked, still trying to digest all I was hearing.

“Do you remember hearing the story of two fifteen-year-old boys who were killed in Washington, while trying to escape detention during the War Within?”

“Yeah, the Avery twins—I do remember that story. Weren’t they considered the first two casualties of the conflict?”

“That’s correct.”

“They were accidentally killed, weren’t they?”

“Exactly. A sting-gun was used to try to stop them from fleeing. It was only supposed to temporarily subdue them, but they ended up dying three days later. It was discovered afterward that others died under similar circumstances.”

“The sting-guns contained Andrel 5?” I guessed.

“Yes, and when autopsies were performed, a poison called zioxite was found in the systems of many of the deceased.”

“Zioxite? Zioxite? The kid in St. Louis who died from LRS— isn’t that the poison they found in his system? I knew I’d recently heard that word. God help us! Is it these bloody robots that are causing LRS?” I said, my voice rising in anger.

“You may very well be correct,” Zack said. “But zioxite can also come from certain foods, industrial machines, soils, and many other things.”

“Yeah, but what the hell is it doing in this toy!”

“That’s a good question... a very good question, Heath,” said Zack.

I asked him to piece the Ro-Dog back together again, minus the metal brain, which I sealed in a container. When I started to think back, I realized Riley had become ill before we acquired Jumper, but

he would have been exposed to the Home Servant robot for quite some time prior.

“Uncle Zack, bring your equipment; I need you to dismantle another two robots for me,” I said, thinking of the Home Servant and the Robo-Chef.

On the way home, Zack began reflecting on his past business life and his dealings with Vexton-Tech. “It wasn’t just my business Gerald sabotaged, Heath. He was this big-money real estate guy who really didn’t know anything about technology, so he relied on Professor Kinsley, and of course stealing ideas from people like me.”

“What about the ATSS? If Vexton-Tech’s been using this Andrel 5 in these robots, then how have they gotten away with it?”

“Probably how Gerald Levin usually gets away with most things: he flashes a large pile of dollar bills,” Zack replied.

“But Skip—I can’t see him being part of this.”

“You have to remember, Heath my boy, the apple usually doesn’t fall too far from the tree—especially when it’s a big old money tree.”

When we arrived home, the house was empty. Kayla and Riley were having a great time at Hislep Farms, and Sharon had yet to return from the government office. “This is Max, our Home Servant robot,” I said as I presented it to Zack.

“This is what happens when we humans become lazier and lazier,” Zack said as he began to examine the machine.

Minutes later, Sharon returned. “What is going on here?” she said as she entered the living room to find Zack dismantling our Home Servant.

“We need to talk, honey,” I said, and led her into the kitchen to explain.

“My Lord, Heath,” she said when I’d finished. “You’ve known Skip your entire life. Do you think he’s capable of something so awful?”

“I sure hope he isn’t,” I said with feeling.

“If Vexton-Tech has done such a terrible thing, it needs to be addressed immediately.”

“I completely agree with you, but I want to wait until Zack has finished before drawing any conclusions.”

“Those bastards have made our son sick,” Sharon fumed, her anger growing. “They’ve made so many people sick. I can’t believe this is happening!”

“I know how difficult it is, but we need to remain calm, honey.”

“Poor Riley! How on earth are we going to take Jumper from him?”

“The first thing we need do is shift his attention by buying him what he’s been bothering us to buy him for the past year,” I suggested.

“A pony?”

I nodded. “It’s actually good timing, now that he and Kayla are visiting Hislep Farms. Since Zack thinks he’ll need a couple of hours, why don’t you go down there and let Riley pick out one of those adorable Hislep ponies.”

Sharon agreed. I sent a flash-message to Kayla to inform her that Sharon was on her way to the farm, and returned to watch Zack working on the robots.

I thought about Skip. What if he *was* directly involved in such a heinous scheme? The more I thought about it, the less I could believe it. He was the most honest and sincere person I’d ever met. Back in high school, he’d helped out less fortunate schoolmates—he’d spent months helping our school’s best athlete, Speedy Dmitry, learn English. While the rest of us had been out playing sports after school, Skip had been spending hours tutoring Dmitry. One day I’d asked Skip why he was so determined to help him, and he’d responded that he thought it was his duty as an American to help Dmitry feel at home. “I want to help him feel he’s a complete person, too,” he’d confided, “and not just some star athlete.”

“Well, it appears to be two out of three,” Zack announced. “The Ro-Dog and the Home Servant brains are made from Andrel 5, but the Robo-Chef contains the accepted Andrel 1.” He rubbed a hand over his eyes, and I noticed how fatigued he looked.

“Thanks, Uncle Zack. I really appreciate your help. You’ve uncovered something very important.”



“So tell me: what is it you plan to do with this information?”

“I’m not quite sure, but I do plan on getting to the bottom of this.”

“The sooner the better, considering how many lives are at stake,” Zack said somberly.

I joined the others at Hislep Farms. “Hey Joe,” I said to the owner, “thanks so much for having your staff entertain Kayla and Riley.”

“It’s my pleasure, Heath. They’re all down at stable five. Riley’s got his eye on this really beautiful chestnut pony. He said he remembers seeing it when he was up in your robo-copter,” Joe said with a chuckle.

When I arrived at the stable, I saw Riley on top of the pony, with one of the farmhands standing beside him, making sure he didn’t fall off. Sharon pulled me aside. “Kayla and I had a long talk with him about Jumper, and you were right, picking out that pony really eased his mind. Joe’s going to have one of his staff bring it to us tomorrow morning.”

“Daddy—this is General!” shouted Riley.

“General?” I replied.

“Yeah, I named him after General Sims. He was very nice to me,” said Riley, beaming.

When we returned home, Sharon and I knew we had to have a serious discussion.

“Heath, I looked at the LRS number today, and it keeps climbing,” she said. “If Zack is correct and this metallic compound is at the root of the problem, we have to do something about it—now.”

“I’m going to New York to see Skip first thing tomorrow morning,” I told her. “I already made an appointment.”

Sharon hesitated, then plunged ahead. “I know he’s like a brother to you, but as DA of an American town, I wouldn’t be doing my job if I didn’t report this immediately.”

“You’re right,” I sighed, “he’s like the brother I never had. Maybe I just don’t want to believe he’s capable of doing something so immoral. His father—well he’s a whole other story. Please, Sharon, let me go down to the Vexton-Tech headquarters and get to the bottom of this.”

Sharon crossed her arms and regarded me. “Do you think Skip and Gerald are just going to admit they’ve been up to no good? This is a company that makes millions and millions of dollars off these damn machines. This needs to go through the proper channels.”

“And it will,” I assured her. “Just give me until tomorrow.”

“What really troubles me is why the ATSS would have given clearance for these things to be sold if they presented a danger to the public’s health and safety.”

“Zack’s of the opinion Gerald’s bank account took care of that. Is there any way we can check the robot specifications from the ATSS database?”

“Understandably, that’s very highly guarded information,” Sharon said. “There’d have to be a request from a high-level government official.”

Bright and early the next morning, I was off to New York. I had been to the Vexton-Tech head office on a couple of prior occasions, and next to the Freedom Home it was the most extravagant building I had ever entered. Even Skip had told me more than once that he felt his father’s lavish taste was excessive. The building’s lobby, just like Gerald’s massive living room, was filled with all kinds of exquisite paintings and sculptures. There was even a large glass case filled with ancient artifacts. I was particularly captivated by a large collection of arrowheads. How far we’d come, from arrowheads to weaponry relying on lasers, seemed inconceivable, to say the least.

I passed several flash-screens providing details about various Vexton-Tech products on the way to the elevators, stopping to watch a view-file about the company’s consumer robots. I felt a rush of anger I never thought I was capable of feeling. Was all this glitz surrounding me just camouflage hiding some dark wickedness? As the view-file continued, the narrator’s enthusiastic voice praised the Ro-Dog, telling the viewer how the “wondrous Ro-Dog will soon be your child’s best friend.” She forgot to mention that it could also be a child’s last friend.

When I entered the elevator, I joined a young lady who informed me she was applying for a marketing position. “I’m really nervous,”

she said, which was quite obvious when I noticed she had left the price tag on her new attaché case. “I’ve dreamed of working for Vexton-Tech from the time I started university. This company is so innovative, so American.” She flashed me a glowing smile.

My destination was the top floor, where the offices of Gerald and Skip were located, as well as a luxurious company boardroom.

“There he is,” Skip said jovially as his assistant showed me into his office. “Mena, this is *the* Heath Claremont, the guy you’ve heard me speak about so often.”

“Ah, so you’re the little smiling guy wearing the soccer jersey,” Mena said, referring to one of the pictures on the office wall.

“That was taken on Heath’s ninth birthday. My dad had all the Android players sign that jersey for him. Thanks, Mena, and please hold all my calls.” As his assistant left, Skip gestured me to a chair and leaned forward. “So, tell me: to what do I owe this pleasant surprise?”

“It’s urgent that I speak with you,” I said, too agitated for pleasantries.

Skip studied my face a moment. “Is everything okay, Heath? It’s not Riley, is it?”

“Actually, it does have to do with Riley.”

“I heard about your testimony in Washington. What a shame.”

“What do you think, Skip? Do you think it would be a good thing for the country to get to the bottom of why over 350,000 young Americans have mysteriously become ill?”

“Why would you ask me such a ridiculous question?” Skip asked, leaning back in his chair. “Something’s really bothering you.”

“You didn’t answer my question.” I sounded angry. I didn’t care.

“Come on, Heath,” he said cordially, “of course I want to see the thing get resolved. What’s eating at you, partner?”

“This is what’s eating at me!” I slammed the containers holding the brains from the Ro-Dog and the Home Servant on his desk.

Skip surveyed them a few moments, then looked up at me. “I’m no engineer by any means, but these look like they’re brains from our consumer robots.”

“That they are!”

“Were the devices malfunctioning or something? And how the heck were you able to remove these? You’d have to be an experienced robotics engineer just to know where to begin.”

“Have you had any of your Home Servants or Ro-Dogs returned?” I asked.

“Fortunately, we haven’t had too many problems, because when we do, they have to go back to our plant in the HKM. I’ll tell you what, let me send you out two new machines today. I’ll find a new Ro-Dog that’ll perfectly match Jumper. Riley won’t even know the difference.”

“Stop it! Just stop it, Skip!” I shouted. “You were like a brother to me. I’ve always admired you, looked up to you! How could you do this? How much damn money do you and your father need?”

Skip’s face sagged in surprise. He held up his hands. “Hold on. Wait a second. I have no idea what you’re talking about!”

“Don’t play me for a fool! My son... Damn it, my beautiful boy—” I choked off a sob.

“Heath, please tell me what’s going on!” Skip cried.

At any other time I probably would’ve continued my tirade, but I knew Skip so well that I sensed he was being truthful. Calming myself, I explained what I’d discovered. Skip listened attentively, and appeared deeply concerned.

“Was Zack certain these both contain Andrel 5?” he asked.

“He was very certain. He said the bluish tinge told him right away.”

“Did he look at the Robo-Chef?”

“Yes. He said it was okay—he claimed it was composed of Andrel 1.”

“I take Zack Hampton’s word,” Skip said. “I know he has it in for us, and deservedly so, but that man is a brilliant robotics engineer.” Skip dropped back in his chair and gusted out a sigh, shaking his head. “Wow, I can’t believe this.” He picked up his flash-pad and called for his father, who responded by asking us to meet him in the boardroom.

We approached the boardroom doors, emblazoned with the VT logo in gold, and Skip opened them to reveal a large plaque on the wall within that read *TOMORROW'S TODAY!*

"Heath, I hope you finally came to your senses and took that job offer," said Gerald, smiling as he crossed the room toward us.

"Dad, please sit down," said Skip.

Gerald frowned, noticing our expressions. "What's wrong with you guys? You both look like you've just walked out of the apocalypse."

"Please, Dad, tell me—what do you know about this?" Skip placed the two robot brains on the boardroom table. As he started to relate what I'd told him, Gerald interrupted.

"Wait a minute here. You're basing this solely on what Zack Hampton has to say. That man probably has dreams of me rotting in a prison cell," Gerald retorted.

"Yeah, the same man whose company you once sabotaged by planting moles. I guess he's only wise when he's of use to you!" I said, my anger continuing to mount.

"Dad, be honest with me—what do you know about this?" Skip asked him again.

Instead of answering, Gerald touched his flash-pad. "Brendan, please come up to the boardroom immediately, and bring the MCP detector with you," he said, summoning one of the company's lead robotics engineers. He looked at me. "Once we get expert analysis, we'll have this all cleared up. I realize you're looking for someone to blame for your son's illness—that's only natural."

"All I know is, if these damn robots are to blame, there'll be hell to pay," I said through gritted teeth.

The boardroom door opened. "Come in, Brendan," said Gerald. "Run the detector over these, and tell me what kind of metallic compound we're dealing with."

As Brendan approached, I looked over at Skip. He was nervously tapping his fingers on the tabletop.

Brendan frowned down at the brains. "Hmm..." He looked up. "Where did these come from? Even with the naked eye, I can tell you this is Andrel 5. This stuff's been banned for years."

“Are you sure?” asked Skip as Gerald stood up and ran his hands down his face.

“Yes, I am. Do you see that blue tinge? That’s why I can tell just by looking at it,” replied Brendan.

“Brendan, please, just place the detector over the material,” Gerald urged.

He complied. “Like I said, this is Andrel 5,” he said when he finished.

“That will be all. Thank you, Brendan,” said Skip. When Brendan was gone, he began pacing.

Gerald just sat there silently, looking very small in one of the giant boardroom chairs. It was the first time in my life that I’d seen him lost for words. He appeared helpless.

Skip suddenly lashed out on his father. “How the hell did this happen?” he shouted.

At this point, I was unsure what to believe. I trusted Skip, but I couldn’t help but remain extremely suspicious of Gerald. I could tell that even Skip was looking at his father with distrust.

“Look, gentlemen, we all know that I’ve made some very unethical business decisions over the years,” Gerald began in a sincere voice, “including what I did to Hampton Robotics, but my divorce—well, it changed me, made me realize what I was becoming. Of course, I still love to make money, but never, and I mean *never* would I sell something harmful to the public, regardless of how much money I could make. You know me better than that, Skip.”

Maybe he was telling the truth. For the time being, I decided to take him for his word. “Then who is responsible for this?” I asked, gesturing at the robot brains.

“First things first. Let me check these damn ATSS compliance files,” said Gerald as he pulled up a flash-screen from the desk. “Ah, just as I thought. Come here and look.” We stepped up behind him to look over his shoulders. “Here’s the specifications for our consumer robots. There’s no sign of Andrel 5 anywhere. There just couldn’t be. We’d never have been allowed to sell these things.”

“Does this mean someone at the ATSS had to be in on this?” I asked.

“Not necessarily. What it could mean is that our production people in the HKM weren’t actually producing the robots according to the proper legal specifications,” said Skip.

“Then who would be responsible for that?” I asked.

“Goran Rackert,” Skip answered. “Dad’s put complete trust in the guy. He had him overseeing the entire consumer robot manufacturing operation in the HKM. I always had my doubts about him.”

“I remember him. I met him at your gala,” I said, recalling the well-dressed man with the thick accent.

“I was just in the HKM for the Robo-Chef production run, and everything was running like clockwork. My staff and I went over every detail,” said Gerald, perplexed. He contacted one of his assistants. “Jessica, get me Goran Rackert in the HKM.”

“Are you sure you want me to call him at this time?” she asked. “He’ll probably be sleeping.”

“Call him—now!”

We waited a few minutes, then Jessica reported, “There’s no answer, sir. His flash-pad’s not responding.”

“Then get me Jim Ellis.”

“I have Mr. Ellis on the line,” Jessica said a couple of minutes later.

“Jim, Gerald Levin here. I urgently need to speak with Goran, and Jessica’s informed me his company flash-pad is not responding.”

“I’ve also needed to speak with him, and for the last couple of days he’s nowhere to be seen,” Jim said. “I was actually going to call your office today, if he didn’t show up.”

“Maybe you can help me out, Jim,” Gerald said.

“Of course, Mr. Levin; I’ll help you however I can.”

“As director of purchasing, please tell me the types of metallic compounds purchased for our consumer robots?”

“Oh, that’s easy. There’s Andrel 1 and 3, and for the Farmhand we use BCM.”

“What about Andrel 5?”

“Oh no,” Jim said immediately. “Andrel 5 was banned many years ago. Over the years, I’ve heard of that stuff still floating around in the underground here in the HKM, but it’s not something Vexton-Tech would ever bring in.”

“Thanks, Jim,” Gerald said. “If you should hear from Goran, have him contact me immediately.”

“Is there something I should know?” Jim asked.

“Nothing you need to worry about.” After ending the call with Jim, Gerald blurted in rage, “That rotten bastard, he’s been deceiving this company!”

“Doesn’t the ATSS perform random inspections at your HKM plant?” I asked.

“They occasionally do, but somehow, I’m sure, Goran made sure they only saw what he wanted them to see,” said Skip.

“What about your company’s own internal audits?” I asked.

“They were being performed under Goran’s watch,” replied Gerald.

“Why do you think he would have done all of this?” I asked.

“A chance to make loads of money. Obviously, he made some type of crooked deal with our HKM supplier,” Skip replied.

“What do you recommend we do about this, son?” Gerald asked, his tone grave.

“We have to do the only thing we can do, immediately shut the entire system down and report this to the authorities,” Skip said somberly.

“How... how did it come to this?” Gerald walked toward that plaque on the wall and stared up at it.

Skip pulled up another flash-pad. “Who are you calling, Skip?” I asked.

“I’m going right to Dave Perry with this,” replied Skip.

“Hello, David, congratulations on the new position,” he began when the call connected.

“Thank you, Skip; it’s too bad it all went down the way it did. I don’t know what happened with Nicole—I guess people change.



Anyhow, I'm sorry you couldn't make it to the gala; we had a blast. Gil Robichaud's dance moves stole the show."

"Unfortunately, I had some business to tend to down south."

"So, how's the world of robots? We just can't live without that Robo-Chef—I think there are about eight of them in the Freedom Home now," said Dave.

"We need to talk, David. What I'm about to tell you is mind blowing." Skip explained in detail.

"Are you talking about every single consumer robot you guys have ever made? You guys have sold millions of those things."

"I can't tell you, David. It's our belief the Robo-Chef is fine—my father and his staff were in the HKM during production—but the Home Servant, the Farmhand, and the Ro-Dog... we need to get the message out to everybody, and soon. I've stopped production at our HKM plant, and we're working on contacting all the retailers we can, including through the World Connect."

"I'll have our people begin getting the information out to the public, and I'll be directing the ATSS to initiate a ban on all your consumer robots, including the Robo-Chef," Perry said. "In the meantime, you and your father hold tight. I'll be sending my people to your office to get further information. And Skip," he paused, "I hope you realize the severe consequences you guys are about to face."

The call with Dave Perry ended, and I prepared to leave the boardroom and get back to my family. Before I left, Skip took me aside. "I am so sorry, Heath. We really messed up."

"I know you had nothing to do with this, Skip."

"That's no excuse for what happened. I realize no words I say can heal your pain, but I want to let you know I'm here for you. I don't know how much time and resources Dad and I will have left after this all unfolds, but whatever we have will go to helping to find that cure."

"You can be very certain of that," added a contrite Gerald.

## CHAPTER 20

An hour later, Gil Robichaud, along with several federal agents, arrived from Washington. A team of government agents was also sent out to Vexton-Tech's plant in the HKM.

"How in the world could you guys have let this happen?" Robichaud almost growled. "A company of your magnitude, how could you not have safeguards in place?"

"I'm totally to blame, Agent Robichaud. I gave too much power to the wrong person. I guess you could say... I lost control," said Gerald, his expression full of remorse.

"This... Goran Rackert, we've put a worldwide APB out on him, and we've frozen all his financial accounts. Do you think anybody else from your company was involved in this?" asked Gil.

"I couldn't tell you. All I know is that Mr. Rackert was really hands-on. When it came to the manufacturing of those robots, he was in complete control," replied Gerald.

"What do you know about this guy?" asked Gil.

"I brought him on board personally; he beat out dozens of people for the position," Gerald said.

"And what was it about him that won you over?"

"He had an impressive resume, but most of all, I thought he was trustworthy." Gerald sighed and shook his head. "I really believed he was dedicated to the company."

"Who supplied Vexton-Tech with metallic compounds?" Gil asked.

“For the Home Servant, the Farmhand, and the Ro-Dog, it was a large HKM company whose name in English translates to Silver Tiger. For the Robo-Chef, we used an American supplier called Winston Metals.”

“How did you decide on Silver Tiger as a supplier?”

“Rackert handled that matter on his own. He sent us a report on the company, and Skip and I performed our due diligence and believed all was in order. Their pricing was on par with their competitors, but Goran gave them the edge because of their vast experience and highly regarded product quality.”

“Since they were supplying the Andrel 5, there’s no doubt they had to have been working with Rackert,” Gil concluded.

“Yeah—billing Vexton-Tech for the more expensive material while actually supplying us with Andrel 5, with Goran taking in a sizeable kickback, I’m sure,” Skip added.

Opening his flash-pad, Gil called his office in Washington. “Shamir, I want you and the rest of the team to find out everything you can about an HKM company called Silver Tiger Materials.”

\* \* \*

At Vexton-Tech’s HKM plant, it was confirmed by the ATSS that only the Robo-Chef was not manufactured using Andrel 5. It didn’t matter. All four of these treasured devices, once symbols of luxury, were now regarded as killing machines. A shocked public wanted to know how the government could have let this happen.

In his preliminary review, Attorney General Champ Sutton learned that Goran Rackert had turned the ATSS inspection team away on two separate occasions, claiming the Vexton-Tech plant was in the middle of some kind of crisis. During the first two audits that were performed at the HKM plant, Rackert had insisted on choosing the machines to be inspected himself. ATSS director Rosemary Crisp had personally overseen the next audit herself, stipulating that she expected full cooperation.

As anticipated, after Sutton’s review, Westgale addressed his ATSS officials.

“This tragedy took place under our watch. You and me—we failed America. We failed to protect the people we were elected to serve. They’re the only reason we’re here—at least they *should* be the only reason we’re here! How the hell were toxic robots allowed to be sold in this country? Ten people have already died, and more than 350,000 American lives are at stake because of our incompetence. I don’t care how clever this sinister plan may have been, *this never should have happened!* Just because a product receives initial clearance doesn’t mean we don’t follow up.”

Westgale grew angrier and angrier. “Oh, here’s a wild idea—instead of taking a two-hour lunch, go into a store, grab a Home Servant robot off the shelf, and see if the *actual* end product being sold is the same product we originally tested. The terrible thing about all of this is that as this type of failure helps to shatter our administration, the entire Peace-Bringer reputation crumbles along with it.”

Following Westgale’s address, several of the department’s officials, including its director, Rosemary Crisp, were fired.

Within days, every state and major city was setting up centers where people should bring their consumer robots for disposal. Vexton-Tech’s insurance companies established financial reimbursement programs. One thing was certain: if Vexton-Tech did survive this tragedy, the company would never be the same again.

\* \* \*

On Long Island, a black grand-electro pulled up to what appeared to be a rundown warehouse. Three men and a woman emerged from the vehicle and entered the building. Inside, the building was anything but rundown. It was state of the art, with several flash-screens on the walls, encircling an exquisite white marble table in the center of the room, surrounded by six huge red leather chairs. Along the walls below the flash-screens were steel bins and shelves containing an assortment of high-tech weaponry.

“It’s nice to see everyone,” said a man sitting at the head of the table. He was stocky, with jet black, perfectly slicked-back hair.

“This has been quite a process, but as they say, patience is a virtue. I guess now that Mr. Rackert has had a very unfortunate fatal accident, we’re left with an extra chair... along with some extra funds. Never do business with a man who allows his conscience to get the best of him.

“I must begin by commending the gentleman to my right for getting the job done in his usual professional manner. And thankfully, for his sake, he didn’t have to wear those ridiculous-looking sunglasses this time. Congratulations, Johnny T.”

“Thank you, Mr. Ry.”

His real name was Barry Kent. He was the same Johnny T who had been approached by General Clifford Sims to infiltrate AXE.

\* \* \*

*They’d met in a seedy restaurant. After a breakfast of surprisingly delicious omelets, Sims had leaned over the table toward him. “Listen, Johnny, we’ve recently learned there’s a serious and credible threat out there posed by a group calling themselves AXE. It’s another one of those youth terrorist groups, and Westgale has called upon me to personally deal with the matter.”*

*Barry leaned back and slung one arm along the back of the booth’s bench seat. “And let me guess—you want me to infiltrate them.” He didn’t hide his sneer. “Well, you’re a little too late. I’m planning to hand in my resignation later this week. To hell with this whole damn government.”*

*“I know,” Sims said, giving Barry pause. “I heard. That’s the very reason I’ve called on you.”*

*Barry lowered his arm and sat forward. “Well, that surely doesn’t make any sense.”*

*“You’re furious, aren’t you, Johnny. Fed up with this administration—am I right?”*

*“Damn right, I am,” Barry growled. “I can’t handle all the bullshit. My best buddy in the agency, Chewy Lever, is dead because his idiotic supervisors told him to get close to a girlfriend of some psycho anarchist. Next thing you know—just a day later!—Chewy’s lying dead in an alleyway. And then the imbeciles go and fire his*

*father, two weeks after that. He'd been working for the agency for over thirty years. They said it had to do with cutbacks. Bullshit. Westgale and the entire PBA are a sad, pathetic joke."*

*"You're preaching to the choir, my friend," Sims said. "I'm surprised Westgale still allows the military to even have flash-screens. A change needs to be made, Johnny. This whole Peace-Bringer thing is an outright disaster. That's why I need you to do this."*

*Barry frowned. "And how's infiltrating this group going to change things for the better?"*

*"It's all part of a larger plan. A larger plan to help reshape this country, and I'd be more than thrilled to bring you on board."*

*Barry rested his elbows on the table. "I'm all ears."*

\* \* \*

One of Mr. Ry's henchmen placed a large duffel bag on the table. "Miss Crisp, I believe this is for you," Mr. Ry began—then added, "Why so sullen?"

Rosemary Crisp remained sitting with her gaze in her lap, her thoughts elsewhere, until Mr. Ry said, "Are you okay, Miss Crisp?" As if she'd just been awakened, Rosemary lifted her head and gave it a quick shake. "Come on, cheer up," Mr. Ry said. "I even threw in an extra million dollars for you. And the best part of all this is that nobody's going to know about your little drug issue, especially those lovely daughters of yours."

Rosemary shifted uneasily, then said, her voice cracking with anger, "I was lied to. I had no clue it was Andrel 5 that was being used in those machines. My twelve-year-old nephew has contracted LRS." Gaining strength fueled by rage, Rosemary's voice escalated. "How can you bastards look at yourselves in—"

"Johnny. We can't accept weakness," said Mr. Ry to the man seated next to her.

"Hey... hey! What are you doing? Get away from me!" Rosemary shrieked as Johnny T pressed a styngor into her neck. Her body went limp and she collapsed face-first on the marble table.

“Well, it looks like we have another extra chair... along with some additional cash.” Mr. Ry observed. “Oh, it will all be so upsetting for Westgale to learn that someone he recently fired has overdosed on drugs. What will the public think of that? Now, is there anybody else in this room who is not fully committed to Project Red Lens?” Mr. Ry gave the man on the other side of Rosemary Crisp an intimidating stare. “General Sims, I do hope your men are on board for the final component.”

“Most definitely, sir. However, can we be certain Silver Tiger’s transgressions won’t somehow be traced back to you?”

“There is no need for concern, General; I supplied the Andrel 5 *and* helped to finance Silver Tiger in a most clandestine manner. Only the owner of the business knows of my involvement, and he cares for his wife and daughter far too much to cross me.”

“Great. Things seem to be moving in the right direction,” said a confident Sims.

“They certainly are... they certainly are,” Mr. Ry replied, his expression smug.

Sims had first met Leo Ry at a New York City convention. Publicly known as an investment banker, Ry made his true living through his involvement in a large HKM underground arms manufacturing cartel known as The Network. In recent years, this group was emerging as a trailblazer in its industry.

\* \* \*

*“General, it’s a pleasure to meet you,” Ry said. “I’ve heard a lot about you.”*

*“I’ve heard many things about you too—things you may not want me to know,” Sims replied, grinning.*

*“And what could that be? Oh, like how the organization I secretly represent is somehow responsible for providing about a quarter of the illegal weapons found on your American streets?” Ry countered lightheartedly.*

*Sims lost his smile. “Between our new weapons laws, severe military cutbacks, and the emergence of the World Harmony*

*Program—which even your country has so strongly embraced—I take it your operation has faced a major setback as of late.”*

*Ry sighed dramatically. “Indeed, you are correct. But you know as well as I do that your president’s idea of world peace is a ludicrous fallacy. True evil will never be vanquished from this world.”*

*“I can’t disagree with that assertion, Mr. Ry.”*

*“I know for a fact that Westgale’s depletion of America’s vaunted war machine has caused your military enormous anxiety. So, I guess we share something in common, General. Perhaps we can discuss this at a more convenient time,” Ry suggested.*

\* \* \*

Mr. Ry rose and proclaimed enthusiastically, “We’ve now completed the most difficult components of the project. We’ve established mass upheaval within the Westgale Administration, and we’ve created such public outrage that the Peace Bringers Association of America has become as fragile as a dollhouse made of glass. It won’t be very long before Mr. Bedlam here is in his rightful place, leading America. Now, are there any questions before lunch?”

“I have a question, Mr. Ry.”

“Yes, Johnny T.”

“What about the helcin—were your people able to get it into spray guns?”

“Ah, I’m glad you asked,” said Mr. Ry. He walked over to a bin containing several spray guns. “That disenchanting little imp, Anya Ahar, ended up being of great value to us.” He held up one of the spray guns. “I like to think of this as a hel-gun.” He smiled, looking fondly at the weapon.

“It’s my belief that this entire extremist youth movement is actually in our best interest,” Devan Bedlam said. “Once our militant schools and academies are up and running, we’ll be able to harness some of that exuberance and lead this dedicated group accordingly. They just need some proper direction.”

It was Devan Bedlam’s calm, methodical temperament that more than anything had led him to becoming leader of the Militant



Alliance of America. He spoke with true conviction and never became riled. However, those around him also knew it was a big mistake to cross him. Bedlam had emerged from a lower-class upbringing to become the country's premier bare-knuckle fighter by the age of eighteen. As champion for the next seven years, he amassed a financial fortune and a larger-than-life celebrity status. Following his fighting career, he opened a chain of restaurants across the country. By his late twenties, he became dedicated to the Militant Alliance of America, becoming its leader a few years later.

After Clifford Sims and Leo Ry had planted the seeds for Project Red Lens, they'd approached Bedlam.

\* \* \*

*Using view-files and financial reports displayed on the warehouse flash-screen, Ry introduced Bedlam to the project.*

*"And this," Ry said, displaying a large factory on the screen, "is currently owned by your country's largest technology company, Vexton-Tech. This is where they have begun manufacturing a new line of consumer robots in the HKM. The robots are called the Home Servant, the Farmhand, and the Ro-Dog. It has come to my attention that a fourth creation is also in the works. A company called Silver Tiger Materials has been contracted as Vexton-Tech's sole supplier of the metallic compounds that compose the brains of these robots. Through my associates, I've organized funding for the large but secretly unstable Silver Tiger. To our financial benefit, Silver Tiger will be covertly supplying a banned metallic compound to Vexton-Tech."*

*"Why is it banned?" asked Bedlam.*

*"My research has indicated it produces a toxin called zioxite, which is harmless to most, but poisonous to some," Ry replied. "In the past, zioxite has been traced to many other sources, so it will be extremely difficult to trace it to these robots. The overall harm it will cause—well, that's not entirely clear. However, we must realize that collateral damage is to our benefit—that, my friends, is the essence of war. Our goal is to make money, and lots of it, in order to support*

*our cause. At the same time, we must also obliterate the positive image of the Westgale Administration and the Peace Bringers Association of America.”*

*“Just who at Vexton-Tech will be working with us on the inside?” asked Bedlam.*

*“That’s a very valid question, Mr. Bedlam.” Ry displayed a photo of a man on the flash-screen. “This man is Goran Rackert. He’s been placed in charge of the entire manufacturing operation in the HKM. But you see, Mr. Rackert is a very disgruntled employee. He sees himself as underappreciated, which is another way of saying he believes he’s extremely underpaid. Let’s say that, through his cooperation with us, Mr. Rackert will soon change his outlook. All of this, combined with the fact that General Sims is about to become the country’s next defense director, means we’re on the proper path.”*

*“And General Gibson,” said Bedlam. “Is he planning to retire?”*

*“Let’s just say it will be something of a forced retirement,” replied a grinning Sims.*

*Ry was also grinning. “So gentlemen, it will take some time and effort, but we will achieve our goals. General Sims will see the return of the powerful America he so proudly cherishes. Mr. Bedlam, you will attain your goal of becoming the next American president. And The Network will gladly assist both your causes.”*

## CHAPTER 21

“When did Vexton-Tech receive the signal, Shamir?”

“Very early this morning. A few hours before their head office opened... let me see. It was at 4:37 a.m.”

“And they just sent it to us now?” Gil said in disbelief.

“Due to the current chaos within the company, they didn’t have access to it earlier, Agent Robichaud.”

“So, what are we listening to?”

“It’s a distress signal from Goran Rackert’s corporate flash-pad. All Vexton-Tech employees are equipped with this device. Here’s the voice part.”

*“Hey, what are you doing? Oh god, no! No!”* A loud thud followed Rackert’s panicky words, then ten seconds of dead air.

“That definitely sounds like a man fearing for his life. Were they able to trace where the signal came from?” Gil asked.

“It came from the East Long Island Transport Station.”

President Westgale and Dave Perry entered. Gil briefed them.

“Has a body been recovered?” asked Dave.

“No,” answered Gil.

“What about video security?”

“Nothing. He must have been killed out of sight,” replied Gil.

Westgale’s flash-pad began buzzing. “Hold on gentlemen, I’m receiving an urgent message,” he said as he moved to the back of the room. Moments later, he uttered, “Oh no... are you sure?”

“What is it, sir?” asked Dave as Westgale returned.

“That was Washington Justice. It’s Rosemary Crisp—she was just found dead in her backyard.”

“Does anyone know what happened?” asked Gil.

“The agent told me an empty bottle of pills was discovered beside her body. It appears she overdosed. To think I just terminated her the other day... I feel so responsible,” Westgale murmured, his face creased with concern.

“Don’t do this to yourself, sir. You had to let her go; you had no choice,” said Dave.

“Do either of you know if Rosemary had a drug problem?” asked Gil.

“Besides caring for her daughters, she was usually all business,” Dave replied. “She really kept to herself. I do remember seeing her at a couple of government functions with General Sims’s son Griffin.”

“I find it very interesting that two of the people who’ve emerged as important pieces in this puzzle have died around the same time. I think I’ll pay a visit to Griffin Sims,” said Gil.

\* \* \*

Gil made a visit to Griffin Sims’s Washington restaurant, Griffin’s Gourmet.

“Hey, Agent Robichaud, dining by yourself today?” Griffin said by way of greeting as he approached the table.

“Actually, I’m here on business,” replied Gil.

Griffin lowered himself onto the seat across from Gil. “Dad’s okay, I hope.”

“This is not about your father, Griffin. It’s about Rosemary Crisp.”

“Rosemary?”

“She’s dead. The news hasn’t been made public, but it will be soon.”

Griffin widened his eyes and slowly shook his head. “Phew... what happened? I mean, I heard she was recently fired.”

“It appears to be a drug overdose, but we’re waiting for the autopsy report to come back. Were you aware of her having any substance issues?”

Griffin sighed. “Yeah, that’s the main reason I broke up with her. I tried helping her, and in fact Dad was supposed to have her go see that doctor many of his soldiers go to see.”

“Dr. Durant.”

“That’s the guy.”

“So, your father knew Rosemary had a problem?”

“Yeah, he knew, but from what I know, she was very professional at work. Except for this whole Vexton-Tech mess, I guess.”

“Do you know if she ever went for that help?”

Griffin snorted. “Not if the last time I saw her was any indication.”

“When was that?”

“About a week ago, here at the restaurant. There was a group of us sitting together, and Rosemary was really drunk, or high. She was saying some really crazy things.”

“Like what?”

“Well, a couple of the people at the table were speaking highly of President Westgale, and that seemed to prompt a tirade. She started pounding her fist on the table and saying, ‘Westgale’s time is done! Bedlam for president! Bedlam has all the answers. We have to feed the banker, Mr. Ry and his network!’ She was really slurring her words. I tried to settle her down, and she said, ‘Your father, he and his friend Johnny T—they’ll save us from all impending doom.’ She’d laughed, then said, ‘Together—an almighty America!’ It seemed really bizarre. Nothing made any sense.”

“Did she say who this Mr. Ry is?” Gil asked.

Griffin shrugged and shook his head. “She was hammered. None of us even bothered to ask her.”

Gil had returned to his office, perplexed by what Griffin had told him, and began researching on the World Connect. He’d found a few investment bankers going by the last name Ry and decided it was time to brief Dave Perry.

After Gil had described his interview with Griffin Sims, Dave asked in disbelief, “You mean to tell me General Sims knew

Rosemary Crisp had a substance problem?” He frowned. “It’s not like the general to just let something like that pass.”

“It sure isn’t,” Gil agreed. “It’s actually against the code he’s sworn to uphold.”

“And this Johnny T—isn’t he the federal agent who helped Sims bring down the AXE group?” Dave said.

“Yeah, that’s the guy; Barry Kent is his real name. I don’t know about you, but I’m really starting to believe this whole Vexton-Tech issue is even bigger than we think. Are you aware of any banker named Ry? And what’s this ‘network’ Rosemary was referring to?” Gil wondered.

“The name Ry doesn’t ring a bell, but the network does. When I asked Dwight Wagner where he purchased his artillery, he said it came from ‘The Network.’”

Dr. Muller arrived. “Sorry to interrupt, gentlemen, but I have Miss Crisp’s autopsy report.”

“Have a seat, Doctor. Are we dealing with an overdose?” asked Dave.

“That’s what whoever killed her wanted us to believe, but this was clearly a murder,” replied Dr. Muller.

Gil’s eyes widened. “She was murdered? What about the pills?”

“Oh, they were in her system, but they were put there shortly after she was murdered,” Muller said.

“Could you determine how she was murdered?” asked Gil.

“Yes, it was by means of a styngor,” Dr. Muller said. “The murderer tried their best to eliminate any trace of the injection, but our equipment is way too sophisticated. It’s the same type of styngor that was used to kill Kurt Hollis. It’s very rare, manufactured in the HKM.”

Gil and Dave exchanged a glance. “Like I said, Dave, this thing is even bigger than we think,” Gil said ominously.

Dave nodded, then turned to Dr. Muller. “Thank you, Doctor.”

He nodded once. “I’ll be briefing the president once he’s free from his meeting,” he added as he made his exit.

Later that day, Gil's staff was able to identify a banker named Leo Ry as an invitee to a New York City banking convention, which had also been attended by several important members of the Westgale Administration. Gil passed this information on to Dave, who asked:

"Do you know where the weapons we collected from Wagner are currently being stored?"

"I don't know which yard they're being stored at, but I can make some calls to find out," Gil said.

"No, no, no... I'll obtain full clearance for you to gain access to Athena without anyone's knowledge," said Dave.

"What about Sims? Since he's defense director, are we not required to inform him of our obtaining information from the Athena database?" asked Gil.

Dave offered a slow smile. "Ah, that's where being former attorney general becomes useful. Section 27.3 of the New Order Treaty allows for exemption if both the country's president and the executive director believe there is just cause to exclude alerting the defense director."

"And the just cause?" asked Gil.

"It looks like we have a defense director who was aware of a fellow department head's substance abuse problem. I need to see Westgale. I'll get you that clearance," Dave assured him.

\* \* \*

I'd received a call from Skip, who'd informed me he was visiting his father's house and was hoping Sharon and I would come by. Understandably, Sharon remained enraged by the entire situation. "How the two of them aren't behind bars right now is beyond me," she huffed when I told her about the invite.

"I'm sure the authorities performed a full investigation, and they must have determined Skip and Gerald were not at fault."

"They run the bloody company—of course they're at fault! And our son could die any day, due to their negligence."

Eventually, after some extensive pleading, I'd convinced Sharon to join me in visiting the Levin estate.

The atmosphere was different this time around. Whereas normally a Home Servant robot would open the door, this time Skip himself opened the door. His cheeks were sunken, and dark circles hung under his eyes. I had never seen him like this. “Hello, Heath... Sharon. Come on in,” Skip said, his movements jerky as he stepped aside to let us in, as if he were nervous. As he led us to the living room, I noticed a bright yellow gadget attached to his wrist.

Seconds later, Gerald appeared sporting the same gadget. “Nice to see the both of you,” Gerald said, his voice somber. “I’m having Paolo prepare some lunch for us,” he said as he offered us some tea.

The entire scenario felt strange. I’d seen not a single robot. Two of the wealthiest and most powerful men in the country appeared to be lost in a state of malaise.

“I’m glad you both came. I wouldn’t be surprised if you never wanted to see our faces again. In fact, I wouldn’t blame you for wanting to see us burn in hell,” Skip said.

“Believe me, I’ve thought about it,” Sharon said brusquely. “What I want to know is why you two aren’t behind bars?”

I quickly jumped in. “Sharon, come on...”

“No, no, Heath, she has every right to ask that question. Dad and I were each questioned separately for six hours, and Attorney General Sutton decided not to indict us for the time being, but as you can see by these bracelets on our wrists, our every move is being monitored. If it’s of any consolation to you, Sharon, we may not be behind bars, but Dad and I are in a much worse prison—we’ve been imprisoned by our own consciences.” Skip’s eyes looked like deep black holes.

“And what about the company?” I asked.

“All our operations have been ordered suspended until further notice,” replied Gerald.

“And all those employees?” I asked.

“Our valued employees will be taken care of, I can assure you of that,” replied Skip.

“I just don’t understand. How on God’s earth could such a gigantic company allow something like this to happen?” asked Sharon.

“Blind trust,” said Gerald, turning toward the *Nightfall* painting.



“So, this Goran Rackert guy—do you know what made him do this?” I asked.

“I wish I could go into details, but I can’t,” Gerald said.

“Like hell you can’t,” Sharon snarled. “Because of your damn company every time I hear my son speak, I don’t know if the words he says will be the last ones I’ll ever hear him say. When I say goodnight to him, I don’t know if I’ll see his smiling face in the morning. You’ve made our lives a living hell!”

“The folks in Washington believe we were the target of some massive sinister ploy. Former ATSS director Rosemary Crisp was murdered, and from all accounts it appears Goran Rackert was murdered as well,” Skip said.

This piqued Sharon’s interest. “Was Rackert bribing her?”

“They believe he threatened to expose a secret about her if she didn’t go along with him. They also believe there are more people involved. As a matter of fact, they’re considering the idea this is all linked to the suicide of Dr. Ahar, and the murders of General Gibson and Kurt Hollis,” replied Gerald.

“My goodness—how so?” I exclaimed.

“Right now, they’re just trying to fit all the pieces together,” said Skip.

When Sharon and I returned home, Kayla came to the door, features pinched in concern. “Is he okay?” we simultaneously asked.

“He’s running a bit of a fever, and he said he feels more tired than usual,” replied Kayla.

“I’ll call Dr. Holt—he told us he’d come by whenever we need him to,” I said, striving for calm. Sharon nodded, and I saw the fear on her face.

After the call, I entered Riley’s bedroom as Sharon was taking Riley’s temperature. I pulled up a chair and sat by his side. “We called Dr. Holt to come by and see you, Riles.”

“I hope he can help me feel better,” Riley said in a weak voice.

“He will. Now you just relax... that’s my boy. Just relax.” I stroked his hot forehead.

“Daddy, is Jumper in heaven with grandpa and the angels?” he asked, his voice fading. Before I could answer, he drifted off to sleep.

Sharon remained by his bedside as I went into the kitchen to grab a glass of water. I could see the World Connect on our living room flash-screen. The sound was muted, but I could read the headline: *Nine More Deaths Officially Linked to LRS*. I immediately turned the flash-screen off and fell back into the couch.

Kayla brought my glass of water over to me and began to quietly weep. “If anything happens to him... I love him so much—he’s like a little brother to me.”

“We need to remain strong, Kayla,” I said gently. “At least now that the doctors know what’s causing the damn illness, that might lead them to the cure.” I looked away, trying to hide my own deepening fear. *Nine more deaths...* As I looked out the window, I saw a flash of lightning slice the sky. Several loud crashes of thunder followed.

“Were they expecting a storm today?” asked Kayla.

“I checked the weather radar at VLP today, and there was absolutely no sign of this coming,” I replied, sitting up with a frown.

Sharon came out of Riley’s room. “Did you guys hear that? Wow—look at that sky!”

A few minutes later, Dr. Holt arrived. “I’m glad you made it okay, Doctor,” I said.

“My Lord, it’s vicious out there. I just saw two trees get knocked right over on my way here. Now, let me go see how my little buddy’s doing.” Dr. Holt flashed a pleasant smile and headed for Riley’s bedroom.

As he examined Riley, the three of us waited in the living room. We were so nervous that we somehow became oblivious to the roar of the thunder. I held Sharon’s hand as Kayla rested her head on Sharon’s shoulder. As the minutes went by, we tried to find something to converse about, but it was a lost cause; we were gripped by fear.

Feeling a minor cramp in my leg, I got up to stretch and walked toward the window. By this time, I had noticed that the thunder had

subsided. Looking out the window, I saw a cluster of tiny dewdrops on our living room window. Then, just like that dreadful day when my father died, I saw a perfect Vexton rainbow. At that moment, Dr. Holt emerged from Riley's room.

"He's fine, folks. I was able to get his fever to subside, but he remains a little dehydrated. He just needs to get some rest and drink lots of water. I'm certain he'll be up and riding his pony again in no time," Dr. Holt said.

As I escorted the doctor to the driveway, I asked him to be candid with me. "Is this related to his LRS?"

His expression unsettled me. "Your son has a very serious illness, Heath. I don't want to frighten you, but you did ask me to be candid."

"Yes, I did."

"We've now seen ten deaths, which is a small number compared to all those who have been diagnosed. Now, to our knowledge, in all those deaths the sufferers faced three or four outbreaks similar to what your son was dealing with today before succumbing to the illness." He paused and rested a hand on my shoulder. "Stay strong, my friend, and if there are any problems, be sure to call me. Otherwise, I'll see you at Riley's next checkup."

## CHAPTER 22

“Westgale’s on board with permitting us to look into the AXE artillery collection without Sims’s knowledge,” said Dave. “In fact, he was furious to learn that the general never reported Director Crisp’s substance abuse issues. Here’s the official clearance.” He slid the document across the desk toward Gil Robichaud.

“That’s good to hear. I keep going over what Griffin Sims told me about Rosemary Crisp’s drunken tirade. I’ve been wracking my brain, trying to figure out what she was trying to say.” Gil frowned at the memory, perplexed.

“Why was she linking this Ry fellow to The Network?”

Gil nodded. “Yes, what’s the connection? And then there’s the part about Bedlam. I’m sure Bedlam and The Network have probably had some dealings in the past.”

Recalling that as part of the World Harmony Program’s strategic planning, Nicole spearheaded an inquest into arms dealers across the globe, Dave decided to give her a call and request a meeting.

Dave felt very uneasy about facing Nicole in the aftermath of the Anya Ahar hearing. Although it wasn’t always evident, he had immense respect for both Nicole and her father. When he was eighteen, Dave had appeared in front of Nicole’s father in court, where he’d been found guilty of illegal drug possession for the third time. With a stern jail sentence staring him in the face, Dave was very fortunate that Judge Kratz saw something positive in his character. Instead of sentencing him to prison, Judge Kratz ordered

him to work for two years in three different youth detention centers while he continued to receive extensive counseling.

Years later, after Dave had cleaned up his act and attained his law degree, he'd applied for a position within the PBA. He was instantly turned away due to his past indiscretions, but once again, Judge Kratz came through for him. He submitted several letters to the PBA, fully supporting Dave's character. This was something he would never forget.

Before Dave's scheduled meeting with Nicole, Gil came bursting into his office. "Now that I've had a chance to review the AXE artillery file, a few things have caught my attention."

"Like what?" Dave asked, knowing it must be important for Gil to enter unannounced.

"First of all, Sims has placed an extension on the file's Weapons Demolition Order." Gil paused, eyeing him expectantly.

"What does that mean?" Dave asked.

"Normally, all the weapons in that collection would have been destroyed by now, unless they came from one of our authorized suppliers. In that case, each item would be analyzed to potentially be placed in our system. However, being that they're from The Network, these weapons are definitely not from one of our suppliers."

"Hmm... does Sims give a reason for the extension?" Dave asked.

"No, nor is he required to. As defense director, he has that power."

Dave mulled over the implications. "What else have you come up with?"

Gil subconsciously leaned in closer. "This is probably the most damaging discovery. The inventory listing shows 258 stynyors, but Shamir's current physical count indicated there are 257. I now have our people seeing if these particular stynyors are a match to the one that killed Rosemary Crisp and Kurt Hollis. If they are, then our defense director has a lot of questions to answer."

\* \* \*

When Nicole entered the Freedom Home, she made a visit to General Gibson's memorial shrine. A man in uniform was already there, kneeling in prayer. She recognized him as Garrett Porter.

"Major Porter, I'm sorry to interrupt," she said. "The last time I was here, Major Harris was placing your military pendant in the casing on the center mantle. That was such an honorable thing to do."

"That's nothing in comparison to what this man did for me."

"After the trouble we put you through, I'm so glad to see you've stayed on as part of Judge Malone's security team," Nicole offered.

"I owe my life to the PBA. Although I felt betrayed and wronged at the time, I fully understand why I came under suspicion for those murders. I realize now I was very carefully set up. Does anyone have any idea who actually did kill General Gibson?" Garrett asked.

"To my knowledge, it's still an ongoing investigation."

As she walked down the corridor on her way to Dave Perry's office, which used to be her own, Nicole stopped in front of a flash-screen relaying the story behind the World Harmony Program. She'd seen the view-file on prior occasions, but this time a new segment had been added. It paid tribute to her immense contribution to the program.

She blinked back tears as President Westgale praised her efforts: *"This administration owes a special thank you to our former executive director, Nicole Kratz, for her dedication in implementing this very special program. Without Director Kratz's strong political acumen and resolve, this program very well may have remained just a distant dream."*

She took a few seconds to gather her emotions, then she continued on her way.

"Nicole, it's wonderful to see you again," Dave said as she entered his office. "What have you been up to?" he asked, trying to ease the tension.

"Well, I've actually been spending some quality time with my family. By the way, congratulations on the appointment; I'm sure you'll do an admirable job."

“If I can be half the executive director you were, I’ll come away feeling proud of myself,” Dave said with feeling. “In the end, I didn’t treat you very well, and a day doesn’t pass without my feeling regret.”

“You had a job to do, and you did it,” Nicole said matter-of-factly. “No hard feelings on my end.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

Nicole couldn’t resist adding, “I still believe the Judicial Triangle severely erred in their final decision, but we all need to move on.”

Dave prudently changed the topic. “How’s your father?”

“He’s looking forward to his upcoming retirement.”

“The judicial system will be losing a great man. I’m so grateful he saw whatever it was he saw in me.”

Nicole smiled. “I think he saw a young man who believed in himself; a stubborn, hardworking, intelligent young man who just needed to be given a chance to prove what he was capable of.”

Dave got down to business, explaining recent events within the Administration. “I know that, technically, I’m not supposed to be discussing these matters with you, but I believe you can be of great assistance.”

Nicole was frowning. “From what you’ve told me, this sounds rather serious. When I put that report together I focused on the major underground arms operations. The Network was definitely in the forefront. But I can also tell you that just a few months before I resigned, I had a follow-up report completed, and by that time The Network had become a marginalized player. In fact, they were on the verge of collapsing.”

“The effects from the World Harmony Program?”

Nicole nodded, her expression smug. “Most definitely. Our success put a lot of these illegal operations out of business.”

“In the process of studying The Network, did you ever come across a man named Ry?”

“Yes, Leo Ry,” Nicole said immediately. “I couldn’t prove it, but I was certain he was the main man behind the operation. He was very adept at hiding in the background, claiming to be some big-time investment banker. I know the authorities in the HKM had been after

Ry and his associates about some illegal business activities, but because of their deep-rooted connections with the HKM government, they always seemed to come away unscathed. Are you thinking he is somehow involved in this Vexton-Tech disaster?”

“Yes, I am. You said The Network was on the verge of collapsing, correct?”

“The way things looked, I wouldn’t be surprised if they’d ended up hitting rock bottom,” Nicole answered.

“And from what you’re telling me about Leo Ry, I would bet he was financially dependent on The Network. That Rosemary Crisp appeared to have some association with him is a real eye-opener.” Dave thought a moment. “The company that was supplying the Andrel 5 to Vexton-Tech... Silver Tiger—the owner of the company admitted they used Andrel 5 as part of a crooked scheme, but when Attorney General Sutton interviewed the company’s staff, they were at a loss. This led him to believe the material had to have come from an outside source.”

“And most likely, fearing retribution, the owner of the company wouldn’t reveal that source,” Nicole supplied.

“Something tells me that source was Leo Ry.”

“Good luck, David. Be careful, though—if what I’ve heard is correct, you’re dealing with a very ruthless individual. Keep me posted.” Nicole shifted gears. “Oh, and before I go, Dad asked me to give this to you. He found it in his files.” She handed him the employment letter Dave had written, when he first applied to the PBA. At the bottom of the letter he stated that his goal was to one day become executive director of the PBA. “Why not President?” Nicole asked with a chuckle.

“I guess I wasn’t that naïve, after all,” joked Dave.

\* \* \*

At the Federal Justice Center, newly appointed Attorney General Champ Sutton had just begun a new round of questioning with Silver Tiger’s owner, Oscar Mantis. “Mr. Mantis, you’re sure you don’t know this man, Leo Ry?”



"I've told you a hundred times already, I don't know who he is!"

"We both know the Andrel 5 had to be coming from somewhere—and since your company supplied it to Vexton-Tech, you had to know where it came from," Sutton said.

"The supplier didn't give me their name. They delivered the material in unmarked vehicles. It was all part of the deal."

As with his interrogation of Dwight Wagner, Dave had a plan, which Champ was in on. He wasn't sure it would work, but he knew it was worth a try. In the middle of the interrogation, Dave rushed into the room in a seeming state of panic. "Mr. Mantis, I'm United States Executive Director Dave Perry. Is this your daughter?" He showed the man a photo of his daughter, Autumn.

Mantis looked at the photo, then up at Dave, his eyes wide with alarm. "Why do you have a photo of my daughter?"

"We just received word that your daughter has been kidnapped. We believe, along with HKM officials, that a group called The Network, led by a man named Leo Ry, is responsible," said Dave.

"No! That son of a bitch! He promised me he wouldn't hurt my family if I—" Mantis stopped and hung his head. "My poor Autumn."

"Is there anything you'd like to tell us about Mr. Ry?" asked Champ. Mr. Mantis didn't respond, just sat staring at the floor. "Take him back to his cell."

"Good work, Director Perry. He took the bait," said Champ after Mantis had been removed.

\* \* \*

Back at the Long Island warehouse, Leo Ry began the proceedings. "Good evening, gentlemen. Please enjoy some delicious fruit, compliments of Vexton-Tech." He laughed, a sinister sound. "I'd like to start off by welcoming Mr. Dao Sloan as the newest member to Project Red Lens." He indicated the huge, rugged-looking man who was stacking fire-zaps into one of the large steel bins. "Mr. Sloan is the MAA's coordinator of military affairs. After seeing his brother killed before his eyes, and coming within seconds of losing

his own life during the War Within, he has vowed to seek revenge on the Peace-Bringers; he has dedicated his life to the MAA.”

The others nodded a greeting, some reaching toward the fruit bowls aligned down the center of the table.

Mr. Ry continued: “Time is of the essence. I’ve assembled you here today because my sources have informed me that the Outer Commission will soon be voting on whether or not the Westgale Administration will be removed from office, as it very well should be. If this vote falls in our favor, we will have succeeded, and peacefully the Military Alliance of America, led by Devan Bedlam, will step in to rule America. If the vote doesn’t go in our favor, well... we are then prepared to make the War Within seem like children having a snowball fight. General Sims, how are things going with your associate Colonel Peters and the rest of your military cohorts?”

“Everybody is on board, sir, and they only know what they need to know.”

\* \* \*

“Discovering the cause of LRS has aided us immensely in our quest for a cure,” Dr. Muller had reported to President Westgale in a meeting between the LRS team and the PBA Strategic Council. “I estimate that within a month’s time, we will be ready to test specific medications.”

Buoyed by this news, Westgale met with Dave Perry in his office afterward. “What do you have for me, David?”

“Well, Mr. President, Gil and I have concluded that we need to put eyes on General Sims immediately. We’ve discovered instances where he has not followed proper protocol.” Dave revealed that Sims had placed an extension on the Weapons Demolition Order.

Westgale’s face darkened. “I’m still furious over this Rosemary Crisp drug situation, and now you’re telling me he hasn’t even destroyed those weapons. Damn it! I can’t have my defense director acting in such a manner. Get him in here right now!”

Dave held up a hand. “I don’t think that would be wise, sir.”

“Why the hell not?” Westgale growled.

“If you bring him in here and question him directly, he’ll know we’re onto him.”

Westgale frowned. “What on God’s earth are you trying to tell me?”

Dave dropped his bombshell. “Gil and I believe he was directly involved in the murders of General Gibson, the school board employee, Kurt Hollis, Rosemary Crisp, and Goran Rackert. We also believe this is all linked to the Vexton-Tech scandal, along with the threat made against Dr. Ahar.”

“If you’re telling me you believe Sims is behind all of this, then he has to be linked to the helcin.”

“Yes. We also believe he set up Garrett Porter. When he and one of our federal agents, Johnny T—whom we believe is the person who actually committed the murders—worked together on bringing down AXE, they used the mission for their own benefit,” Dave said.

“How so?” asked Westgale.

“Through their surveillance on the group they found out about the helcin and purchased it with counterfeit money. And those weapons? They used AXE to buy them off an HKM arms dealer known as The Network for their own purposes.”

Westgale frowned, perplexed. “Their own purposes? Why would they be doing all of this?”

“They want to bring an end to the Peace Bringers Association of America,” Dave said.

Westgale gaped at him for several long moments as he digested this. His ruddy face paled. “Are you talking about an uprising?”

“Yes,” Dave said solemnly. “The MAA in conjunction with key units of our very own military—with Leo Ry’s Network more than willing to help supply the artillery, of course.”

Westgale found his way to a seat, shocked. “All this time, we’ve been deceived by our own people. Sims has been lying to our faces.” He scowled. “That bastard!”

“They’ve been doing whatever they can to destroy this administration. They knew that under the New Order Treaty, the Outer Commission would be forced to call a vote on our future. We

figure they're waiting for the outcome of that vote before they make their next move."

"This is complete madness!" Westgale rose, once again decisive. "Contact Gil. Have him place both eyes and ears on Sims and this Johnny T. And find Leo Ry. And David, one more thing: make certain they are eyes and ears we can trust."

\* \* \*

When he received the order, Gil rounded up several of his top agents and began putting a plan together. Listening and video surveillance devices were planted in and around General Sims's office. The agents also began to tail Sims and Johnny T, who was now residing in Washington.

Sims was heard telling his assistant, Wanda, to take the next couple of days off. He then met up with Johnny T at Griffin's Gourmet. After a quick lunch, they headed to the Washington Transport Station and boarded an express to Long Island. Although at some stages it became rather tricky, two agents were able to follow them to a warehouse. The agents kept their distance, monitoring the suspects with vision-scopes and flash-pads.

"Agent Robichaud, this is Agent Gallio," one of them reported. "We have the suspects clearly in our view. Can you hear me, sir?"

"Loud and clear."

"The suspects have arrived at the warehouse... Okay, I'm seeing some other people entering the gate. Besides Sims and Johnny T, we can see Devan Bedlam... oh wow, Colonel Peters is also here. There's also a guy who matches the photo of Leo Ry, and some other individual—very intimidating looking. He has a large scar running down the right side of his face. I'll send you a flash-photo," said Agent Gallio.

"Shamir, I've got a photo for you," Gil said when the photo came through. "We need to figure out who this guy is."

"They've all entered the building, except for the drivers, who are all waiting in their respective vehicles," said Agent Gallio.

"I've got it," Shamir said to Gil. "The other guy is Dao Sloan. He's Bedlam's main military guy."

“Damn it!” Gil blurted in frustration. “If we only knew what was taking place in that warehouse.”

“Sir, how are we to proceed?” asked Agent Gallio.

“Agent Gallio, I want you to continue focusing on General Sims and Johnny T. Do not let them out of your sight!”

\* \* \*

What was taking place was the coordination of the military part of the uprising.

“My friends, let’s all hope and pray the Outer Commission sees the light and brings a peaceful end to the Westgale Administration. But as I stated at our last meeting, we need to be fully prepared for a full-out militaristic takeover,” Mr. Ry said. “General Sims, would you kindly enlighten us.”

General Sims stood to address those gathered around the table. “As our plan dictates, we will begin by taking over the country’s major cities. We are currently dealing with a fragile country, and fortunately most Americans are looking for change. They are angry. We’re here to provide that change. This entire operation must be performed with tactical precision. This is not about killing fellow Americans; this is about preserving their future.”

\* \* \*

“I find it so hard to believe that Colonel Peters could be involved in this plot,” said Westgale when Dave briefed him on their findings a short time later.

“Well, he was definitely at that meeting. These pictures don’t lie. Military Intelligence has told us he’s been the main figure in organizing the military part of this planned uprising. Apparently, without him, this plan wouldn’t have a hope. Sims knew he had to bring the colonel on board.”

“Yeah, I get that, and I was well aware he’d become quite a malcontent of late, but to be involved with killing General Gibson...” Westgale slowly shook his head. “Those two men looked

out for one another. Whether it was during the War Within or when General Gibson was going through his divorce, Mitchell was always there for him—that’s why I find this so difficult to believe.”

“Unless... Colonel Peters has only been told what Sims wants him to know,” Dave speculated.

“There’s only one way to find out,” said Westgale, touching his flash-pad. “Susan, please invite Colonel Peters for dinner in the presidential dining room.” He disconnected and looked at Perry. “David, are we prepared for the worst?”

“As prepared as we can be. The contingency plan is in place. Let’s just hope and pray it doesn’t come to that, sir.”

## CHAPTER 23

Sharon and I were relieved to see Riley feeling so much better. Unfortunately, the weather hadn't improved, which meant Riley wasn't able to spend time with his new friend, General. The VLP weather radar indicated the storms would remain for the next few days, which meant I would be extremely busy. This put a real damper on our family's plan to travel out of town and surprise Sharon's parents on their fortieth wedding anniversary.

Though there was no way I could leave, I still encouraged Sharon to make the trip. "We'll be fine, Sharon; I'll be busy, but at least Kayla will be here to help me take care of Riles. Your parents will be so thrilled."

Sharon frowned uncertainly. "I don't know, Heath, what with Riley being sick like he was the other day..."

"Let's be positive. That was great news we learned from Dr. Muller on the World Connect today. It really seems like they're going to get to the bottom of this."

Sharon's tense shoulders softened as she surrendered. "Make sure Riley takes his medication, and make sure he's careful when he's with that pony."

"The way the weather forecast looks, I doubt he'll be spending much time with General."

With Sharon preparing for her trip and Riley safely with Kayla, I left for an extremely rough workday that turned into twenty-four hours of performing a dozen emergency farm inspections. I was worn out

when I finally landed my robo-copter at the VLP headquarters, though unfortunately, I knew my work wasn't finished yet.

Kayla was attending a friend's birthday party that evening, and the harsh weather was preventing Sharon from returning from her parents until the following day, so Riley stayed with Wyatt at the VLP headquarters. Wyatt was up to his neck in filing reports, so Riley bided his time playing games on his new flash-pad. Knowing my highly energetic Riley, I was certain boredom would eventually set in.

When I entered the building, Riley came running over to me and introduced me to a new game Wyatt had shown him on his flash-pad. "Look Daddy, it's a soldier on a horse that actually runs through Vexton. You get points by killing all these bad guys and evil monsters that are chasing him."

"Hey guys, come here—look out the window!" Wyatt called, his tone animated. "Oh my Lord! This is incredible! This has to be it—the Vexton Gleam! They say it's been over 135 years since this last occurred."

When I looked up I saw three enormous stars shimmering in the Vexton sky, forming a perfect V. Around their perimeter, a turquoise light cast a breathtaking glow.

"Whoa! Daddy, that's amazing!" shouted Riley.

Wyatt turned to me. "Hey Heath, they say this thing only lingers for about half an hour. We have to get to Moon Shade Bluff. It will be an experience of a lifetime. It will also give Riley a chance to ride in my robo-copter."

"Can we go, Daddy? Can we?"

"Hey, a once in a lifetime opportunity—let's go!" I said.

I felt a rush of excitement as we took off in Wyatt's robo-copter.

"This is going to be great! I wish Mommy and Kayla were with us!" Riley exclaimed.

"Don't worry, we'll tell them all about it, and we'll even make a view-file for them," I said.

The closer we got to the cliff, the more we could feel the power of this phenomenon. When we landed and exited the copter, it was



like stepping into a land of fantasy. The trio of stars were so bright, everything was illuminated as if it were noon on a sunny day.

“Look, Daddy, I’m doing like you did in that picture!” Riley stretched his arms toward the sky.

Wyatt and I both had our flash-pads out and were recording the entire event. We spent the final few minutes sitting in the middle of the cliff, just taking in the splendor of the moment. Eventually the gleam began to fade, little by little, until the sky became pitch black.

“Oh... why does it have to end?” said Riley, his voice subdued by disappointment.

“Everything always has to have an ending, Riley. We have to appreciate the fact that we were fortunate enough to see this, especially from way up here,” I said.

“I can’t wait to show Mommy and Kayla our view-file.”

For the next few days the Vexton Gleam was the talk of the town. In fact, the event even gained national attention, accompanied by debate over what it was. Most believed it was just another astronomical phenomenon, while other theories ranged from it being the work of extraterrestrial beings to the coming of some new age deity.

\* \* \*

“Professor, it’s me, Hunter,” Talbot said when Kinsley answered the call.

“Brainy! How’s Finland treating you?” Kinsley asked.

“It’s incredible here. When Mother Nature wrote her story, I’m sure this land had to be in the forefront of her mind.”

“Good, because I’m expecting your final Forever Green project to be beyond even my wildest dreams,” Kinsley said. “So, are you ready to return? I’m sure your father will be thrilled to discover you’re coming back home to stay.”

“Yes, I am. There’s a lot I need to catch up on, like this whole Vexton-Tech story. I’m still in shock. They’re saying Gerald and Skip Levin weren’t even aware of what was happening. Do you believe that?”

“In relation to the actual crime, I believe they’re innocent. However, I also believe Gerald, in a strange way, has been the architect of this entire disaster. When Gerald and I started that company we were contributing to society, creating things that actually made the world a better place. Then all of a sudden Gerald became so high and mighty that he felt he needed to create machines to pour him his glass of wine and serve him his caviar. Now, when are you actually planning to come back?”

“I’ll be there in a couple of days.”

When Professor Kinsley got another call from Hunter Talbot, it wasn’t what he’d expected.

“I just got in,” Hunter announced.

“Great, I’ll send somebody to pick you up.”

“I’m not in California,” Hunter said.

Kinsley hesitated. “Where the heck are you?”

“I’m in Washington at The Prestige, and I need a favor from you.”

“What are you doing in Washington?”

“I can’t go into detail right now, but I need you to get Beverley Gibson to come and meet me here immediately.”

“Yeah, like I’m sure she has nothing better to do,” Kinsley drawled.

“I need you to do this, Professor. It’s more urgent than you can imagine. Please, do this for me.”

“I must say, you really have my curiosity. Okay, leave it with me; I’ll get back to you.”

A half-hour later, Professor Kinsley called Hunter to tell him Beverley would meet with him in the hotel lounge within the next hour.

As promised, Beverley arrived, accompanied by her driver, Marcus. “Okay, Marcus, that will be all for now. I’ll let you know when I need you,” she said, then turned to Hunter when he’d left. “So, Mr. Talbot, Professor Kinsley told me it was urgent that I meet with you.”

“Thank you for obliging,” Hunter said. “It’ll be worth your while.”

“You took me away from some very important business, so I hope it is. What is it you need to tell me?”

“I don’t know how to tell you this other than coming right out with it... I’ve discovered the cure for LRS.”

Beverley gaped at him. “Is this some joke?”

“It’s not a joke. I discovered the cure in Finland. That’s why I’ve been over there.”

“Forgive me, but I don’t recall you being a doctor...”

“You’re correct, Director Gibson. I’m not a doctor. I’m an agent of nature. This cure doesn’t come in the form of medicine. It grows on bushes,” Hunter said.

“Grows on bushes?”

“Yes, ma’am; they’re called teal-berries.”

“Like I said, if this is some kind of joke—”

“I wouldn’t joke about something that could have killed me,” Hunter interrupted.

“What are you trying to tell me?”

“I *had* LRS.”

“And these so-called teal-berries cured you?”

“After eating ten a day, for one month straight, I was fully cured.”

Beverley remained skeptical. “How can I substantiate that what you’re telling me is true?”

“You need to come to my room,” Hunter said. “Trust me.”

“Please, lead the way.”

They rode the elevator up to the fifth floor and stopped at the door to room 521. Hunter turned to Beverley. “Please don’t be alarmed,” he said as he gradually opened the door.

A man sat at a desk with his back to them. He slowly turned around. “Secretary Gibson, it’s wonderful to see you.”

Beverley took one look and almost fainted. “Oh my God! Dr. Ahar—what in the world is going on here?”

“Hunter did it. He found the cure. It comes from our sacred Mother Earth.” He rose and approached, holding out an envelope. “Here’s a complete report of our study.”

Beverley knew she wasn't dreaming, but it was extremely difficult to believe this was real. "And your supposed death, Doctor?" she asked.

"It was the only way. Not long after I was forced into telling that awful lie about the acid rain and Hunter confronting me in California, I learned of my daughter's horrific indiscretions. I was completely devastated, and blamed myself for Anya's actions. However, I was still determined to solve the LRS dilemma, but I knew I couldn't do it on my own," replied Ahar.

"How did you end up connecting with Hunter?" asked Beverley.

"In actuality, I was growing very impressed with Forever Green's work over the years, and when I met Hunter at that lecture hall, I was taken by his sheer will and determination. After staging my death with the aid of my attorney, I contacted Hunter to see if he would work with me on the LRS cure. Little did I know, he'd been working on finding a cure himself and required my medical expertise," explained Ahar.

"You mean to tell me a highly regarded attorney like Arthur Fine agreed to this?" asked Beverley.

"At first he was vehemently opposed to the idea, but I was able to convince him, because when I reviewed Hunter's original reports I strongly believed he was on the verge of finding that cure," replied Ahar.

"Did Anya know your suicide was a hoax?" asked Beverley.

"No."

"What about the fact Arthur backed Anya in *her* quest to find the cure?" asked Beverley.

"I asked him to. I figured if the teal-berries weren't the solution, and we had to rely on traditional medicine, then Anya was our best hope. Fortunately, the berries provided the cure," explained Ahar.

"May I see that report?" asked Beverley, finally reaching for the envelope.

"Most certainly."

"Very interesting," Beverley said as she browsed through the report. "So, you're telling me by eating ten of these berries a day for one month, Hunter was completely cured?"

“Precisely,” said Ahar. “The berries directly eliminated the zioxite from his system.”

“Are you certain this will be effective for everyone who has the illness?” asked Beverley.

“Guaranteed. One hundred percent,” Ahar said confidently.

“If this is for real...” Beverley stared at the data she held, then looked up. “This is absolutely remarkable.”

“I’ll gladly present the report to Dr. Muller,” said Ahar.

“How in the world did you become aware of these berries?” Beverley asked Hunter.

“My girlfriend was working on a couple of environmental projects in Finland. A few months ago, she did a study on the large forest area where the berries are present. When I started to look at the data, there was something in the teal-berry’s makeup that caught my attention,” replied Hunter.

“There is one concern I have,” said Beverley. “If Dr. Muller agrees with this report and we decide to move forward, this will be a huge undertaking. You do realize just how many berries we will require to heal close to 400,000 sufferers?”

“We can import enough berries from Finland to cure those in dire need and begin harvesting the teal-berries here in the US. I’m confident we’ll be fine,” replied Hunter.

“Have you told anybody about this, other than me?” asked Beverley.

“Not a soul outside of this room. I haven’t even told my girlfriend,” replied Hunter.

“Great, let’s keep it that way.”

Satisfied with what she had seen and heard, Beverley called the Freedom Home to organize an emergency meeting for the next evening, at which she planned to reveal the news. She asked that both Hunter and Dr. Ahar attend.

\* \* \*

At 7:00 p.m. sharp, Colonel Peters was escorted into the presidential dining room.

“Mitchell, come on in,” said a cheerful Westgale. “How are you keeping, Colonel?”

“I’m still on the right side of the grass, so you’ll get no complaints from me,” the colonel quipped.

“I’m so glad to hear that.”

“Now, how are *you* keeping, old boy? You must feel completely worn out from all that’s been going on.”

Westgale sighed. “Well, it comes with the territory. At times the challenges can seem overwhelming, but we always seem to find a way, don’t we? I guess when it comes to leading this nation, we must be steadfast in our commitment.”

Moments later, dinner was served. Colonel Peters looked directly into Westgale’s eyes as he began to slowly cut into his prime rib. He chewed his food slowly. His level of anxiety seemed to increase with every bite. He had to have been wondering what this meeting was about.

“How’s your prime rib, Colonel?” Westgale asked.

“Absolutely delicious.”

“I hope you don’t mind that the potatoes are a little on the crispy side. The chefs know that’s how I like them, but I’ve come to learn that some of my guests prefer them a little less cooked. Here, you haven’t even tried the mushrooms. They’ve been sautéed in a lemon butter sauce that is simply out of this world. April’s sister gave my chefs the recipe.”

“Everything just tastes fantastic, William. I probably won’t be able to fit back into my uniform tomorrow,” Peters said, but sweat beaded on his forehead.

When dinner was finished, Westgale and the Colonel gazed out into the Field of Honor, which was lit up until 9:00 p.m. every evening. “All those stories being told out there on those flash-screens—that’s us, Mitchell, it’s who we are,” Westgale said after a moment. “And God only knows they’re not always filled with happy endings, but I believe it’s overcoming those obstacles that makes us that much stronger. I guess in a way it unifies us.”

“United we stand, divided we fall,” Peters replied.

“And that’s the very thing that has really concerned me over the last little while. I know the decisions to cut back our national security budget created some strong concerns amongst you and your fellow brothers in arms. I’m just pleased we’ve been able to remain unified,” Westgale said.

“That’s all water under the bridge, William. The time has come to move forward.”

“You’re entirely correct, Colonel. I know that’s what this man right here would have wanted,” Westgale said as he picked up a photo of General Gibson.

“Ah, good ol’ Vance,” said Peters, gazing intently at the photo. “When I think about it, I owe my life to that man.”

“Then why the hell are you supporting the very man who took his?” Westgale snapped.

Peters’s gaze snapped to him. “And where would you ever get the idea I’m a supporter of Cobra Pix and the Iron Lotus?”

“Cobra Pix and the Iron Lotus?” Westgale repeated. “What do they have to do with the general’s murder?”

“Come on, William. You can’t be that naïve, to think you can keep the truth hidden forever.”

“The truth?”

“Vance’s murder, and all these other crazy things that have been going on around here.”

“I can’t believe this,” Westgale said. “He played you—played you for a total fool. I wondered how he got you to go along with his scheme.”

Peters frowned, confused. “Played me for a fool? What are you talking about?”

Westgale pulled an envelope out of his jacket pocket and displayed three separate photos of the colonel and General Sims walking into the Long Island warehouse.

Peters looked at them, then his eyes shot back to Westgale. “Where did you get these? And what makes you think Sims is playing me for a fool?”

“It’s true that Cobra Pix and the Iron Lotus want nothing more than to see this country fall to ruins, but they are in no way

responsible for the death of General Gibson, nor are they responsible for anything else that's happened around here. They've tried to make inroads here, but their presence in America is nonexistent," Westgale said.

Peters looked at him for a long moment. "Come on, William; we go back a long way. You can be honest with me."

"Can't you see? Sims wanted you to believe Pix was behind Vance's murder so you would come on board with his twisted scheme of destroying this government."

"For God's sake. What are you trying to tell me, William?"

"What I'm telling you is that the person responsible for killing Vance is none other than his successor, and the man who has been feeding you all these horrific lies—General Clifford Sims."

Peters barked a laugh. "Ha! Come on, is this some way for you to ease your conscience?"

Westgale placed a styngor in front of the colonel. "This exact type of styngor was used to kill Kurt Hollis and Rosemary Crisp. Sims has been supposedly guarding 258 of these things. They were seized from the AXE terror group. Somehow one of them mysteriously went missing. Here's a formal report supporting what I'm telling you." He slid a flash-pad across the table toward the colonel.

The Colonel carefully read the document, then looked up. "Yeah, but I thought General Gibson was killed with helcin."

"That's correct. While they were infiltrating AXE, Sims and his buddy Johnny T bought the poison from Dwight Wagner with counterfeit money. And in case you're still in doubt, here's more proof." Westgale handed him another report.

The colonel carefully studied this new information, then suddenly rose to his feet. "That lying rotten son of a bitch! If this has been going on, then why in the hell is he still a free man?"

"Oh, he's not free, Mitchell. Every move he makes is being watched. We know he has far bigger plans in the works, and we also know you're a part of those plans. And now I know how that came to be," Westgale said.



Peters sighed heavily and sagged back into his chair. "You're correct, he conned me, William. He used me—and he used the memory of Vance to convince me to become part of his plot."

"There's even more to it, Mitchell." Westgale described how Sims and Leo Ry had orchestrated the Vexton-Tech scandal. "Not only were they making millions of dollars to support the resurgence of Ry's arms operation, they were also doing everything in their power to blacken the reputation of this administration in hopes the Outer Commission would force us out."

"You mean to tell me those sick, coldhearted bastards were willing to kill young Americans?" He leaned forward and spoke earnestly. "William, I've done what I've done and you can charge me with attempted treason or whatever you want, right this second. But I beg you, please let me help you put them away!"

"I'm not one bit surprised you weren't aware of all the details," Westgale said. "I never thought for a second you'd be part of all this."

"Sims needed me. Without me, he would never have received the necessary military support. All those faithful men I lied to..." He shook his head in shame. "If you'll let me, I'll get all of this corrected."

"With the lies you were being told, now I can see why you became so enraged. I just wish you had come to me," Westgale said. "I guess I could overlook your involvement in this if you help us bring this travesty to an end."

"You have a deal. We have a meeting scheduled at the Long Island warehouse tomorrow evening. Let me record the meeting and help you get all the evidence you need."

Westgale nodded. "I'm placing my trust in you, Mitchell. Now, I have heightened security outside this building, and I need to ask you: do you think there's a chance the Freedom Home may be ambushed at any time, as the White House was all those years ago?"

"According to the current plan that has been relayed to me, not a single movement is to be made until the Outer Commission has voted. That being said, it's now become obvious, I only know what they want me to know."

\* \* \*

By now Gil Robichaud's team had figured out the route the general took from the Freedom Home to the Long Island warehouse. On this rainy evening, things were no different. A black grand-electro pulled up to the back exit of the Freedom Home's military offices. A driver opened the back door and Sims, wearing a hooded trench coat, entered. A second pair of eyes picked him up at the Washington Transport Station. When he arrived in Long Island, he was followed to the warehouse.

"Agent Herta has informed me Sims is approximately twenty minutes from the warehouse," Agent Gallio informed Gil, back at his Freedom Home office.

"Has everyone else arrived?" asked Gil.

"Yes, they have. Our plan is in place. We're waiting on Sims."

\* \* \*

After overcoming the shock and unease of Dr. Ahar's return from the dead, the excitement in the Freedom Home's main conference room became palpable as Dr. Ahar and Hunter began telling the story behind the teal-berry discovery and their LRS cure.

Westgale was overcome with joy. "This is amazing news. We'll need Charles and his team to analyze this further, but at the same time, we'll need to start preparing to get things in motion. How long do you see the review taking, Charles?"

"Dr. Ahar has already performed some rather extensive analysis, so I'd say, if all checks out, we'd be ready to go public with the news in a few days," replied Dr. Muller.

"I'll have my people start coordinating a nationwide plan," added Dave Perry.

"Dr. Ahar has asked one favor, Mr. President," said Beverley.

"What is it, Jack?" asked Westgale.

"For everybody's sake, I think it's best I remain silent in all this, at least for the time being," replied Dr. Ahar.

"I agree. I realize you were caught between a rock and a hard place, but faking your death and then taking off to Finland... I just

wish this had been handled in a more appropriate manner,” said Westgale.

“I just hope you can find it somewhere in your heart to forgive me. I truly believed I had no alternative,” said Ahar.

“Keeping this quiet until—”

Dave never finished. The large wooden doors creaked open and a man burst into the room wearing a gas mask and holding a spray gun. “Everybody, get in the back, right corner of the room! Now! If anybody tries anything, you’re all dead!” he shouted.

The man pulled off his gas mask. “Hello, William,” General Sims said. “Don’t look so surprised.” He snickered. “Sometimes you can’t even trust your own personal chefs. I really hope you enjoyed your prime rib and crispy potatoes last evening.”

“You cold, deceitful pile of dirt,” hissed Dave Perry.

“*I’m* the one who’s deceitful? No, no, no, David—I’m the honest one. At least I know what it really means to be a true American,” said Sims.

“A true American? You’re a demented maniac,” Dave growled.

Sims gazed at the ceiling as if trying to recall something. “Let’s see, the last time I checked, it was you who was more than willing to let all those young Americans remain ill, and all for your own righteous illusions.”

“And you’re the deranged bastard who caused them to become ill in the first place!” shouted Westgale.

“Sadly, war always has a price. Like the price poor General Gibson had to pay. I really respected your father, Beverley, but unfortunately he was in the way of my glorious plan. Please do accept my apologies,” Sims said sarcastically.

“What is killing us going to accomplish?” snapped Dr. Ahar.

“Listen to the man with nine lives over here,” Sims drawled. “Isn’t it ironic that the poison in this spray gun was made by your lovely daughter? I must say, she is a talented young scientist.” Sims grinned.

“What is it that’s making you do all this, Cliff? Do you think this is going to somehow avenge the murder of your parents? That store

owner was involved in organized crime. With that gun the authorities took away from him, he'd murdered four people. The murder of your parents was a tragedy, but that gun law wasn't the reason they were killed," said Westgale, trying to reason with him.

"Well then, since you're all criminals in your own way, I guess it's suitable that you're all sitting here defenseless. What a shame it is to know that this amazing LRS cure will forever remain hidden," Sims sneered. "Another black mark for this administration and the PBA as a whole, especially if the country were to discover it was me, the country's very own defense director, who was the *bad guy*."

Westgale struggled to control his fear. A quick glance around showed pale faces and tense postures. They were all aware that if Sims released even the smallest amount of that helcin, they'd be killed instantly. They had been cornered, both figuratively and literally. Sims had ordered them into a back corner of the room, well aware that it was the one area where there wasn't any type of alarm to alert the rest of the building.

"Is this your sick way of living out some wicked, narcissistic fantasy?" asked Dave.

"Wow, you really do have gall, David. I'd thought for once you'd be just a little kinder to me, considering your life rests in my hands." Sims pulled up a chair and sat in front of his defenseless hostages.

"What are you waiting for, man? If you're going to kill us, then just do it," said Hunter.

"All in due time, Brainy—that is what they call you, right? It's too bad you got yourself caught up in this mess. You should have stuck to trying to cleanse the land. Politics is way too dirty a game."

"Maybe you just don't have it in you," Beverley taunted.

"Oh, since this is a key executive decision, I'm just letting the mind rule the heart for the time being, Secretary Gibson. You see, I'm waiting for our final guest to arrive, and according to this exquisite grandfather clock" —he nodded toward the antique timepiece on one wall— "she should be here in a few minutes. I know how punctual Nicole is."

"Is Nicole supposed to be joining us?" Dave whispered to Westgale.

“Unfortunately, I asked her to. She’s supposed to be here at eight,” Westgale murmured.

\* \* \*

“Tardiness is not accepted as part of Project Red Lens,” Mr. Ry snapped in the warehouse in Long Island. “Where is your general? Johnny? Colonel? Does anybody in here know where the hell General Sims is?”

“He told me he’d be here, sir,” replied Johnny T.

Ry noticed Colonel Peters had been fidgeting with the Statue of Liberty badge on his lapel. He whispered to one of his henchmen, “Bring me that damn badge.”

Mr. Ry’s henchman strode down the table and yanked the pin off Peters’s jacket. He brought it to Ry, who carefully examined it, then dropped the badge on the floor and crushed it with his heel. “Hmm... just as I thought. We have a traitor in our midst.” He looked at Peters. “From the first moment you walked into this warehouse, I wondered if I could trust you, and now I know you’re a complete fake,” said Ry.

Colonel Peters stood slowly, mindful of Ry’s henchmen, and confronted him. “Sims brought me into this without telling me all of the details of your sick plan—sabotaging Vexton-Tech and making those robots poisonous; murdering whoever you please, including a man who was like a brother to me. You should all burn in hell!”

“Enough, Colonel Peters,” Mr. Ry replied. “You’re a traitor, and traitors need to be eliminated.”

“It’s over, you deranged bastard. This building is surrounded by federal agents. Speaking of traitors, your trustworthy general must have somehow discovered this plan of yours was doomed, and he hung you out to dry,” Colonel Peters said defiantly.

Ry started strolling down the length of the table. “Normally I wouldn’t be so selfish, and I’d offer one of you fine gentlemen the opportunity to put the colonel out of his misery, but there are some things I just can’t resist taking care of myself. Let me see... I’m tired of this whole styngor thing. But we have all kinds of, as the general

would say, ‘instruments of freedom’ behind this door here. Oh boy, I feel like a child in a candy store,” Mr. Ry gushed as he slowly opened the latch.

\* \* \*

Agent Gallio cursed under his breath and leaned back from the surveillance monitor. “I’ve lost signal. There’s either a glitch with the device, or they discovered we’re listening in,” he said urgently into his flash-pad.

“Prepare to execute the plan,” responded Gil, monitoring the situation from Washington.

Leo Ry swung the door to the storage room open.

“Put your hands on your head and get on the ground!” shouted one of Gil’s agents, stepping from behind the door with his laser-gun pointed at Ry’s face.

A dozen agents stormed into the warehouse, apprehending Johnny T, Devan Bedlam, and Dao Sloan.

Colonel Peters rushed over and grabbed Agent Gallio’s flash-pad as he entered. “Agent Robichaud,” he shouted into it, “Sims had to have used a decoy to fool your men. I don’t think he ever intended to come here tonight. He must be onto us.”

“This is not good!” Gil shouted. “Where the hell can he be? Damn it—Westgale called a meeting tonight!”

\* \* \*

Finished adjusting Justice Malone’s event calendar, Garrett Porter decided to call it a day and head home. As he was exiting the Freedom Home, he saw Nicole entering.

“Garrett, great to see you,” Nicole said. “Burning the midnight oil, I see.”

“I’m just grateful to have the opportunity to assist Justice Malone however I can,” he replied. “What brings you here at this time of night?”

“To be honest with you, I don’t know. The president invited me to a meeting in the main conference room. He told me there’s some great news on the horizon, but that’s all—he said it will be a surprise to everyone, including himself. I told him I’d be late, but he insisted I still come by.”

“Great,” Garrett said. “It would be my pleasure, then, to escort you to the meeting.”

“No worries, Garrett. It’s late; I don’t want to keep you from going home.”

“Oh no, like I said, it would be my pleasure.”

As Garrett and Nicole approached the conference room, Garrett noticed the door was slightly ajar. *That’s strange*, he thought. “Hold on, Miss Kratz... the door, do you see how it’s open a crack?” Garrett murmured.

“Yes.” Nicole instinctively dropped her voice, too.

“As you’re well aware, that door is supposed to be fully secured during a meeting.”

“Maybe someone had to step out,” Nicole suggested. “I wouldn’t worry about it.”

“Hold on, ma’am.” Garrett edged closer to the door and squinted through the crack. He stepped back quickly. “Oh no... I can’t believe this—General Sims is holding the entire group hostage, with some kind of spray gun.”

Garrett contacted Gil and informed him of the situation.

“Are you certain that it’s Sims in there?” asked Gil, his voice high with shock.

“Without a doubt,” replied Garrett.

“Colonel Peters was correct. He used a decoy to fool us. Damn son of a bitch!” shouted Gil.

Nicole grabbed Garrett’s flash-pad. “I have to get in there, Gil. He must be waiting for me to arrive. If he begins to think I’m not showing up, he’ll realize we have him figured out, which means he’ll start unleashing that spray, and I’ll bet it’s helcin.”

“I can’t let you go in there, Nicole. I’d be putting your life at risk,” responded Gil.

“This entire situation is crazy, considering we’ve now discovered Dr. Ahar’s alive and in that room. We need to know what was taking place in there. I’m sure this is extremely important to the country. If everyone in that room is killed, we may never know. I’m our only hope, Gil,” pleaded Nicole.

“All right, but take Garrett’s mini laser-gun. When you get in there, find a way to get the gun to Dave. I briefly served with him; he’ll know how to deal with this,” said Gil.

Nicole drew a deep breath to steady herself and pushed open the large door with a trembling hand. She stepped inside and pushed the door shut behind her, making sure to still leave it ajar.

“Ah, Nicole, you’re just in time,” Sims said, looking back at her. “Come on in and join our friendly gathering.”

“What is going on here?” she said as she slowly walked toward the sofa where Dave Perry was sitting. She sat down beside him. “What are you doing?” she asked, not having to fake the alarm in her voice.

Sims rose and walked back toward the door to close it. Nicole slipped Dave the mini laser-gun.

Dave gave a quick, imperceptible nod when he saw what it was. “I’m going to aim for his hand, and knock the spray gun out of it,” he whispered. “If I shoot to kill he may still have a second or two to press that trigger.”

He slowly turned his head to address Hunter, on his other side. “I’m going to knock that bloody gun out of his hand, and I’m going to need you to get to it quickly when I do.”

Sims was walking back toward the group. “I’m so glad you were able to join us, Nicole,” he said. “This just wouldn’t have been the same without you. It’s so sad, how your demise in this administration came to be. For what it’s worth, I thought your performance in the Judicial Triangle was outstanding. You were so devoted to the cause—”

*Pew-pew-pew-pew.*

The sound from the mini laser-gun pierced the silent room. The spray gun was sent whirling out of Sims’s hand. Instantly, Hunter and



Sims both leaped for the gun. Dave fired two more shots and Sims slumped to the floor, unconscious. Hunter grabbed the spray gun.

Gil Robichaud and several of his agents had joined Garrett outside the door. They quickly moved in to secure the scene, all equipped with hazmat suits. They escorted the traumatized group out of the building as part of a complete evacuation.

## CHAPTER 24

Before Westgale planned to announce the LRS cure, he personally met with Gerald and Skip Levin at the Vexton-Tech head office to inform them of the news. “I just thought I would give you gentlemen a heads-up on the matter,” he said.

“That’s incredible. We appreciate your bringing this news to us. This has been a devastating experience for everyone involved with Vexton-Tech,” said Skip.

“I know I’ve been tough on you over the years, Mr. President, but I hope you understand, it’s never been personal. And as much as I don’t agree with your policies, I’ve come to appreciate your compassion and devotion towards this country and its people. For someone who’s so opposed to war, you sure are a true warrior,” said Gerald with a grin.

“I want to let you know that Attorney General Sutton is currently performing a thorough review of this entire case. There’s going to be quite a bit of red tape to cut through, and you will be under strict government supervision, but I believe, in time, your company may be permitted to produce robots again, if you so wish. Of course you will also be facing some form of civil action, which is something my administration has no control over, as you’re well aware,” said Westgale.

“Well, since I was the conductor, I guess I’ll have to face the music,” said Gerald. “There is one thing I do hope Vexton-Tech is able to tend to immediately.”

“What’s that?” asked Westgale.

“Assisting your people in whatever way we can to help get those teal-berries harvested here in America—land, manpower, money, whatever you need, Mr. President, whatever you need,” said Gerald. Skip looked at his father with pride in his eyes.

\* \* \*

It was nearly 8:30 p.m. Westgale’s press conference was moments away. We tuned into UCIT on the World Connect. Riley was fast asleep, while Sharon, Kayla, and I were gripped to our flash-screen. The lead headline read *MAA Forced to Appoint New Leader After Devan Bedlam Charged with Attempted Treason*.

“I guess their master plan really backfired on them,” said Kayla with a chuckle.

Finally, the moment arrived. “What do you think it is, Heath?” asked Sharon.

“Most people seem to think he’s going to announce his resignation,” I replied.

“After all he’s been through, I wouldn’t blame him,” said Sharon.

“I hope that’s not the case,” said Kayla. “We need a great man like him running this country.”

Westgale came to the podium with Dave Perry and Dr. Muller on either side of him. “Good evening, my fellow Americans. I would like to begin by introducing you to a national hero: Mr. Hunter Talbot.”

The three of us looked at each other in confusion as Hunter emerged from the wings. “Why in the world is Hunter there?” asked a puzzled Sharon.

“I will now turn things over to Mr. Talbot,” said Westgale, stepping aside.

“Thank you, Mr. President,” Hunter began. “It is my honor to announce to the people of America that, as an agent of nature and a member of Professor Trent Kinsley’s Forever Green, I have discovered the cure for LRS.”

When we heard those words, the three of us let out a cheer that echoed throughout the entire house.

Seconds later, we heard a knock on the door. It was Dr. Holt. That morning, we'd brought Riley to see the doctor so that he could perform the usual LRS-related tests. When I let him in he was completely surprised by our jubilation. "What's so exciting, folks?" he asked.

"You won't believe this!" I shouted in glee. "It was just announced that a cure for LRS has been found!"

Sharon threw her arms around me and jumped up and down. "Oh my God, Heath, Riley is going to be cured!" She looked at Dr. Holt. "Isn't that incredible, Doctor?"

"Actually, Mrs. Claremont, I have no clue as to where, when, or how this happened, but according to this morning's lab tests... Riley's already been cured," answered Dr. Holt.

"Riley's been cured... are you sure of this?" I asked, perplexed.

"Absolutely," Dr. Holt replied. "It's truly a miracle." He paused, then smiled. "I'm so thrilled our prayers have been answered."

"Thank you for all you've done, Doctor," said Sharon, blinking back tears.

I escorted Dr. Holt out to the front drive. "Doctor, is there not any explanation for how this happened?"

"Like I said back inside the house, this is truly a miracle. There is absolutely no way your son would have naturally overcome that illness." A smile tugged at Dr. Holt's lips. "Unless he was cured by some kind of *supernatural* force." He laughed. "After all, we do live in Vexton. You take care, Heath, and in a few days, I'll see you and Riley for a follow-up."

As he drove off, I sat down on the front porch, slowly tilted my head back, and gazed blissfully into the splendor of the Vexton sky.