

THE COMPLETE VEXTON TRILOGY

A STORY OF A FUTURE AMERICA

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MANUFACTURED

THE VEXTON SERIES
BOOK ONE

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.”

* * *

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.”

* * *

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 are 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 Ms. 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 Lauren. A week ago, my sister took Lauren to their local amusement park. As usual, Lauren 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 15th, 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.

Beverley 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. Beverley 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 disenchanted 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 has 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 Andre 5, but the Robo-Chef contains the accepted Andre 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 mantel. 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, Ms. 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.

MOON SHADE BLUFF

THE VEXTON SERIES
BOOK TWO

CHAPTER 1

Could it be? I kept asking myself as I gazed into the ether. For my entire life I'd refused to give credence to the notion that there was any truth to those old tales.

Foresee the night, the emergence of light. A trio of stars, glowing bright. Sanctuary from the spirits of doom. Healed by a gleam. Enlightened by truth. Reaching out to the angels above. Standing atop Moon Shade Bluff.

– *The Book of ZeZ*

“Heath, what happened to you?” Sharon asked as I reentered the house from the porch.

“Sorry, honey; I just needed a moment to digest the incredible news from Dr. Holt, and I guess I lost track of time,” I replied. “It sure is a beautiful evening... We’re truly blessed,” I added, pulling Sharon close to me.

“How do *you* think Riley was cured, Uncle Heath?” asked a curious Kayla.

“Why don’t you both sit down,” I replied, indicating the sofa. While they got comfortable, I thought about how I’d say what I wanted to say.

“I’m sure you’ll think I’m crazy,” I began, then paused as they focused on me intently. *Will they?* I wondered nervously. *No choice now but to continue.* “I believe Riley was cured the night Wyatt and I brought him to Moon Shade Bluff to witness

the Vexton Gleam.” They *now* looked at me as if I was from another world.

“Oh, come on, Heath, you don’t actually believe that... do you?” asked Sharon, though the hesitation in her voice suggested she may actually have been thinking the same thing.

“It’s always been said that that mountain has magical powers, Aunt Sharon,” said Kayla.

“Come to think of it... since that night, Riley hasn’t had a single LRS episode,” Sharon mused. “Well, I don’t care how he was cured, I’m just thrilled that our beautiful little boy will no longer have to suffer.” She looked at Riley’s picture sitting on the living room mantel and smiled.

“Are you going to tell Riley how you think he was cured?” Kayla asked me.

“I think that would be far too overwhelming and confusing for him. Heck, *I’m* still trying to figure out what happened,” I replied.

The following morning when Riley awoke, we all gathered in the living room. “Hey Riles, we have some really amazing news for you,” I said. I glanced over at Sharon and Kayla, who waited with eager expressions, anticipating how Riley would take the good news.

“Is Uncle Skip going to bring us to another Androids game?” Riley asked, his voice high with excitement.

“Actually, this is even better news than that,” I replied.

“Are we going back to the Freedom Home?” Riley shouted.

I nodded toward Sharon, allowing her the opportunity to take over. She opened her arms, and Riley came running to her. “You’ll have plenty of chances to go see the Androids play again, and maybe someday we’ll go back to the Freedom Home, but what we want to tell you means more to us than anything in the world.”

“What is it, Mommy?”

“Last night Dr. Holt gave us some amazing news.” Sharon blinked back the tears of joy that filled her eyes. I lifted a surreptitious finger

and wiped away the tears filling my own eyes. “He told us—you no longer have LRS!”

Grinning, Riley immediately gave Sharon a big hug. Kayla and I stepped forward and joined in.

“I knew the angels would make me feel better,” Riley exclaimed.

“Angels? What angels, Riley?” Kayla asked. We all looked at each other in amusement.

“The angels Mommy told me about. I pray to them every night,” he said, smiling. “I ask them to make sure they take care of Grandpa Dennis, and Jumper. I guess they care about me, too.”

“Hey Riley, since the weather’s really nice, how about we take your pony for a ride?” Kayla said, sensing the conversation was becoming a tad awkward.

“Okay, but I don’t want to call him General anymore.”

“Oh?” said Sharon.

“General Sims is a bad man. He tried to kill the president!” Riley exclaimed. “I want to call my pony Sunny, like the butterfly that followed me and Daddy.”

“Okay, let’s go take Sunny for a ride,” Kayla said as she took Riley by the hand.

Sharon chuckled. “Knowing Riley, he’s going to go around telling *everybody* he was cured by angels,” she said as they exited.

“Maybe he was, Sharon... maybe he was.” I gazed at the photo of Dad standing beside Riley’s picture on the fireplace mantel.

The next day, while Sharon and Kayla took Riley to buy him a cowboy outfit that had recently caught his eye, I tuned in to UCIT to watch Hunter Talbot being interviewed by Cryptic, at the Talbot farm.

“I must say you’ve been through quite an ordeal,” the robot said to Hunter. “You’ve battled LRS, discovered its cure, and then you were present in the Freedom Home on that dreadful night. How are you doing, Mr. Talbot?”

Hunter ran a hand over his hair. “It certainly has been a whirlwind of events, but I’m just glad a cure was found, and that no one was harmed at the Freedom Home,” Hunter replied. His eyes

looked heavy, I noted; new lines on either side of his mouth revealed his fatigue.

“You are quite the hero, Mr. Talbot.”

“I’m just glad to have done my part.”

“After these recent events, how do you feel toward the Westgale Administration?”

Hunter sighed. “There are several things about President Westgale that I sincerely admire.”

“Such as?”

“Being a farmer and an avid environmentalist, I admire how he recently came to the aid of America’s farming community by providing financial assistance. I also highly appreciate his dedication to environmental issues. But these recent events have made me question his leadership,” Hunter added, slowly shaking his head.

“How so?”

“I was very disheartened to learn how the Vexton-Tech scandal unfolded under his watch. I mean, the fact the director of an important governing body like the American Technology Safety Standards Association was open to being bribed—that’s just unacceptable. And then there was the Anya Ahar hearing—he should have been front and center, backing Nicole Kratz’s request, but he stayed in the background and placed politics over human well-being. On top of all that, his own defense director was plotting behind his back, and he was totally blind to the fact.” Hunter’s tone had grown heated.

“Do you think it’d be best for America if he were not reelected?”

“Yes, I do. That being said, an MAA government is definitely not the answer.”

Later that evening, I asked Hunter to come by for a visit. “There’s the hero,” I said as I opened the door to let him in. “You, my friend, are an expert at keeping secrets,” I added with a grin.

“I’m sorry, Heath. I really thought about telling you about the teal-berries, but with all the craziness going on at the time, I figured

it was vital to remain secretive, especially after what happened to Kurt,” Hunter said solemnly.

“What I can’t figure out is how in the world *you* ended up with LRS,” I said as I led Hunter into the living room.

“The Farmhand robot. I used one of those machines while working for Kinsley. He was totally against Forever Green purchasing it, but I nagged him so much that he gave in,” Hunter replied as he plopped down on the sofa.

“And what about Dr. Ahar?” I asked. “I guess you must have been rather shocked when he contacted you.”

Hunter rose to his feet, agitated. “I had no clue what I was supposed to do.” He paused. “But I needed his assistance, Heath, and thankfully, everything worked out. Now, have you registered to pick up the teal-berries for Riley?”

“No, I haven’t.”

Hunter gaped at me, eyes wide. “Are you crazy, Heath?” he shouted. “Your son’s life is at risk—that illness will kill him!”

After calming Hunter down, I explained the change in Riley’s condition.

“The Vexton Gleam?” he said with a snicker. “I’m glad to hear Riley’s doctor confirmed he’s been healed, but if you’re trying to tell me it’s because he stood atop that cliff with his arms raised in the air under some beam of light, well—” he slowly shook his head “—that’s just a little too far out, even for me.”

“Believe me, Hunter, it’s something I’ve been questioning in my own mind,” I said calmly. “But it has to be the reason. I can’t think of any other possible cure.”

Hunter shook his head again. “And here I thought Kinsley was the only one left who was all caught up in that myth.”

I lifted an eyebrow, interested. “Hmm... maybe I should have a word with the professor.”

“All I can tell you is that he’s a strong believer in the *Book of ZeZ*. I’m sure he’d be very fascinated by your claim. In fact, he’s going to be arriving in Vexton within a couple of days.”

“Oh? What’s bringing him back to Vexton?” I asked.

“Personal reasons. He’s also decided to set up a Forever Green operation, here in town.”

* * *

“Oh my goodness, look at him, reaching to the heavens... This little fellow is quite a performer; very enthusiastic indeed,” said the man Hector and Vincent referred to as Mr. Sylvain. Sylvain and his associates sat in an old, run-down theater in front of a large flash-screen. “Hector, what is the name of our friend?”

“Riley. Riley Claremont,” replied Hector.

“So, what do we know about our little mountain boy?” Sylvain asked Vincent, seated on his left.

“I sent a view-file to your flash-pad, sir. It contains everything you need to know,” Vincent replied.

Sylvain consulted his flash-pad. “Oh yes... here we are. Ah... Excellent work, Vincent.” He looked up. “Thank you, gentlemen.”

The two men rose to leave. “Oh, Hector,” Mr. Sylvain called, making both men stop and turn, “I’ll be personally handling the next shipment. The organization has informed me our work is nearing completion,” he added as he too stood and straightened the jacket of his white designer suit, chosen, no doubt, because it matched his neatly coiffed white hair.

* * *

A day after the professor arrived in Vexton, we met at my office. I’d already told him about the night the three brilliant stars had briefly appeared as a V over Moon Shade Bluff—and that I thought Riley being present during that rare, once-in-a-lifetime phenomenon was linked to his recovery from Lethargy Reaction Syndrome, or LRS. I’d been relieved when he agreed to meet with me, rather than dismissing my theory out of hand.

“I was so disappointed not to be here the night those stars cast their glow on this town,” Kinsley said. “I heard stories about it afterward, of course; descriptions like the one you related to me over

your flash-pad, but... you are so very privileged to have been a witness to such majesty. Please, play the view-file for me.”

I played the file on the flash-screen located in my office, and together we watched Riley atop Moon Shade Bluff.

“Hmm... wow... very fascinating.” Kinsley leaned closer to the screen. “Right there—that has to be the magical moment.” He froze and enlarged the image on the screen. A luminous streak of light had engulfed Riley.

“Is there any explanation for this, Professor?” I asked after we watched the view-file several more times.

Kinsley turned around and looked out my office window, his brows drawn down in thought. “That’s a very interesting question, Heath,” he said. “In a way, I’m actually glad I don’t have an answer. I personally find an element of beauty in mystery, in uncertainty.” He chuckled once. “And that’s coming from a man whom society refers to as a professor.” He continued to stare out the window.

“So, does that mean you think my conclusion might be wrong?” I pressed.

Kinsley turned around and looked me in the eyes. “Oh no, there’s no doubt in my mind that your son was healed by the Vexton Gleam,” he said firmly.

I sat back, at once validated and conflicted. “What do you think I should do about this?” I asked. “Do you think it’s wise to share our theory with the rest of the world?”

“That’s your call, Heath,” Kinsley replied. “Unfortunately, most who hear your theory will likely think you’re out of your mind, and it could have a negative impact on Riley. And with the phenomenon occurring only every 135 years, we’ll never be able to actually prove the theory.”

“I hear you, Professor. I don’t want our lives to turn into a circus.” Kinsley nodded in agreement. I thought for a moment. “There is one thing, though, I’d like your help with,” I said.

“That being?” Kinsley asked.

“Help me perform a thorough analysis of Moon Shade Bluff,” I replied. “As the man in charge of preserving the land in this town,

I'm usually not in favor of disturbing a single speck of it, but in this case, an exception must be made. If that beam of light cured Riley, then I think I'd be negligent not to learn what else is happening with that mountain."

"I'd be more than glad to help, Heath."

The following day, Kinsley and I set out in the VLP robo-copter, en route to the top of Moon Shade Bluff. "It must be difficult for you to come up here, knowing this was where your father met his end," Kinsley said gently as we flew above the picturesque forest surrounding the cliff.

As if his voice were a trigger, I felt my throat tighten. "Yeah... it's now been thirty years, but it's still heartbreaking," I replied after a moment, blinking back tears. "So much has happened since his passing. It especially saddens me that he never met Riley." The tears began to seep from the corners of my eyes. *Time to shift focus, or I'll be bawling next.* "On the other hand, I'm actually glad he wasn't around to witness the War Within. I know it would have crushed him to see this country torn apart the way it was."

"Among the many things I admired about your father was how proud he was to be an American." Kinsley frowned. "Sadly, that war has left so many of us pondering who and what we really are."

Moments later, we landed atop Moon Shade Bluff. "My goodness... It's been far too long—it seems to have become even more magnificent over time," said Kinsley as he stepped out of the copter. Personally, I felt as if I owed the cliff some form of gratitude.

Kinsley walked over to the edge of the cliff, a gentle breeze teasing his long, stringy hair. I followed behind. He rested his hands atop the cliff's protective rail and scanned the terrain below. Forest and farmland stretched to the horizon, with Vexton off to the right. "There's no doubt that this place is magical, Heath," he said as he fished an elastic from his pocket and gathered his hair into a ponytail. "Every time I read that book, I feel a sense of euphoria."

"*The Book of ZeZ?*"

"Yes. Have you read it?" Kinsley asked as he began to walk back toward the center of the cliff.

"I must admit, I haven't had the pleasure," I said, following behind.

"I've read the thing so many times that I can recite a large portion of it from memory," Kinsley said as he leaned forward and began examining the ground at our feet.

"I realize we're both here right now because we believe somehow that that beam of light miraculously healed my son, but do you seriously believe in all that other stuff about spirits of doom, angels, and cosmic gods?" I asked politely.

"Well, Heath, some questions simply cannot be answered, but it's vital we have an open mind." He straightened, and his eyes widened. "And when a mystery is solved, sometimes there's elation... or sometimes the discovery leads to fear or disappointment. I've always believed the important thing is the exploration: embracing the mystery."

Kinsley returned to the robo-copter and pulled out his equipment. Roaming over the top of the bluff, he began gathering samples from the ground. I followed him, waiting to lend a hand where necessary. As he began digging underneath the surface, we noticed something strange.

"Wow, what in the world are these?" I exclaimed as his trowel revealed layer after layer of glittery pebbles.

Kinsley shook his head, also staring at the glittering strata. "I've never seen anything like this before," he admitted. "Very interesting. I'll definitely have to perform some in-depth analysis back at my lab; hopefully that will determine what we're dealing with." He turned to the sack he'd been carrying with him and pulled out three cylinders. He held them up. "These are miniature versions of our recently developed electro-suction tubes. They do a great job of maintaining the surrounding earth during excavation. They're state of the art," he said with pride. "I want to make sure I obtain an adequate supply of samples for the testing I'm planning to perform."

"Do you need a hand with that?" I asked.

Kinsley was already positioning one of the tubes. "No, I can handle this," he said absently.

Deciding to give the professor some space to perform his work, I headed back to the robo-copter to call Sharon. "That is very

interesting news,” she said after I told her about our discovery. “Did Vexton Land Protection not have any record of this?”

“To my knowledge, the VLP has never performed any type of analysis on Moon Shade Bluff, other than some soil testing in and around the mountain’s base,” I replied.

“Does the professor know what kind of rocks they are?”

“No. He says he’s never seen anything like them before.”

From the corner of my eye, I noticed the professor frantically waving me over. “I have to go, Sharon; I’ll catch up with you back at the house.”

When I rejoined Kinsley, I immediately noticed his perplexed expression. “What is it, Professor?”

“Look at these, Heath!” He pointed to a series of large patches of displaced turf at the southwest corner of the cliff.

“Yeah, I see them—what are they?”

“It appears someone’s already been here doing exactly what I’m doing,” Kinsley responded. He pulled aside one of the patches of turf. “Give me a hand with this,” he said, and we pulled aside more patches and began brushing away the loose dirt. After several minutes we sat back on our heels and stared at several deep crevices; we weren’t even close to reaching the bottom.

“Let’s see if these others are the same,” Kinsley said, rising and moving to another area. We checked out several areas on the mountaintop.

“It can’t be,” I said, staring at the last area we’d cleared. “Let me check something.” I returned to the copter and called up the VLP database on my flash-pad. I rejoined Kinsley a few minutes later. “Just as I thought. I’ve thoroughly checked the VLP database, and there’s absolutely no history of any excavating being performed up here. In fact, the only thing on record that the VLP has ever done up here is construct the railing.” I waved vaguely toward the guardrail running around the perimeter of the bluff.

“Yeah, but your data would only account for VLP activity,” Kinsley said with a raised brow. I had no reply. Kinsley dusted his hands off and looked down at the samples in his bag. “Perfect; that

should do it. This will allow us to perform the proper testing.” He remotely sealed the suction tubes.

“I think it’d be wise to bring this to the attention of Secretary Gibson’s office,” I concluded. The professor nodded in agreement.

* * *

“I hope this is important, Hector,” said Mr. Sylvain.

“I wouldn’t have asked you to come here if it wasn’t, sir,” replied Hector. His Adam’s apple bobbed nervously. “Here, see for yourself—the tree-eyes just picked this up an hour ago.” He turned on the large flash-screen at the front of the room.

“What in the hell is going on here?” Mr. Sylvain shouted. “What are they doing up there? The organization will not tolerate this!” His anger continued to grow as he watched Professor Kinsley excavate portions of Moon Shade Bluff. He also watched as Kinsley and the director of the VLP studied the patches of displaced soil and turf. “This is what we’ve dreaded. Damn it!” he growled, his face flushed with rage. He threw his flash-pad against the wall; it shattered, the pieces clattering to the floor.

* * *

Since the night the Vexton Gleam cast its beauty over our county, many scientists had become fascinated by the mysterious phenomenon. One such man was Dirk Zarbo, an old acquaintance of Dr. Kinsley. The professor invited me to attend a seminar Zarbo was presenting at the Vexton town hall. “I think you’ll find him somewhat entertaining, Heath,” Kinsley said. “I know *I’ve* been viewed by many as being eccentric, but this guy, he’s straight out of another galaxy.”

“Yeah, I’ll check it out. Why not? What’s he going to be speaking about?” I asked.

“I couldn’t tell you because he probably doesn’t even know himself.” Kinsley laughed. “He’ll probably speak on a variety of topics, but I’m certain it’ll all be very interesting.”

When we arrived at the town hall, its tiny auditorium was crammed. We squeezed inside and took places against the back wall. A few minutes later, Dirk Zarbo trotted out to the stage. He had a spring in his step, and that and his wiry body kind of reminded me of a rubber-man toy I'd had as a child. He was dressed in a brown and white checkered shirt, brown corduroy pants, and a pair of black and green rubber boots; he obviously paid very little, if any, attention to fashion. *He probably can't see what he's putting on*, I thought, eyeing the silvery gray bangs that seemed to completely cover his eyes.

"Hello, everyone. It's wonderful to see you all," he said to the audience. "Your town is absolutely incredible—oh, and there's an old friend of mine, the one and only Professor Trent Kinsley." Kinsley stood up and acknowledged the audience as they gave him a warm reception. "I can't believe what I've been missing. I guess it took a large trio of glowing stars to finally bring me down here. Now, speaking of the Vexton Gleam, has anybody figured out how it came to be?" Dirk asked with a wide smile.

"Aliens... it's the work of aliens," a female voice called out from the audience.

"Whoa, I hope I get a chance to meet one of those guys," Dirk said with a straight face. The audience laughed. "I'm serious. It would be quite exhilarating—provided I lived to talk about it," he added as he began pacing the stage. He stopped suddenly and turned back toward the audience. "I often wonder what the aliens think of us. For example, they must really get a laugh out of how many types of shampoo we need. And I'm sure they find the whole bare-knuckle fighting thing to be quite peculiar," he joked.

At this point, I leaned over to Kinsley and whispered, "I thought he was a scientist, not a comedian."

"He's just warming up the audience. Trust me, he has a brilliant scientific mind," Kinsley whispered back.

He was correct. For the next hour, he dazzled us with several intriguing scientific observations. He spoke of issues relating to climate change, the environment, and medicine with a passion and level of excitement I'd never seen before.

In the final section of his presentation, he issued a warning. “The other day I brought my grandchild to the same park that my younger brother Basil and I used to frequent when we were kids. I hadn’t been there for more than forty years.” He laughed. “As little Nicky ran off to the playground area, I sat watching him from a bench. Suddenly, several birds landed on the large field in front of me. Shortly after, a second wave appeared, followed by a third. Eventually, there had to be close to three hundred birds on that field. The interesting thing was, they all milled around the field in their own little space, with no regard for one another, none whatsoever.” I laughed with most of the audience as he imitated a strutting bird.

He stopped and faced us, one forefinger raised, a thoughtful frown pulling his eyebrows down. “This really got me thinking. Basil and I used to watch what seemed to be the same small gaggle of geese parading around the very same field every time we were there. There was usually about fifteen, maybe twenty of them. We were fascinated by how closely they interacted, how they took care of each other.” He shook his head as if in awe, then began pacing slowly up and down the stage again. “That certainly wasn’t the case the other day, as I watched all those birds in such close quarters, sometimes even fighting for their own personal space. The problem was there were simply too many birds filling up a limited space. There was no real interaction, no looking out for each other as there’d been with that gaggle of geese of yesteryear.”

He stopped abruptly and turned to regard his audience. “And that, my friends, is what has happened to *us*. There are simply too many of *us*, in a large, but still limited space.” His expression turned grave. “There is no way this planet will be able to sustain the mass of humanity we have placed on its surface. If we do not seriously address this issue, our extinction will be inevitable, and it will be of our own making.” The auditorium was silent.

After a moment that somewhat annoying smile returned to his face. “God bless you,” he said in conclusion and, to the crowd’s amusement, he repeated his bird strut off of the stage.

Afterward, Kinsley introduced me to Dirk. “That was a very interesting presentation,” I said.

“Making science seem interesting isn’t always an easy task, but it’s extremely rewarding when you succeed,” Dirk replied with feeling. “I envy you, Heath,” he added with a smile, “for your good fortune in viewing that phenomenon from atop that mountain. It must have been a breathtaking experience, one I’m sure you’ll never forget.”

I nodded. “There really are no words to describe it.”

“Even the low quality view-files that I’ve seen have left me speechless, so I can only imagine the feeling you must have had,” Dirk said. He looked at Kinsley. “What do *you* think it was that brought such wonder to Vexton?”

“I don’t know, Dirk. Maybe that young lady in the audience was correct. I’ll tell you what: if I happen to come across one of those aliens, I’ll send him off to your lab,” Kinsley replied with a chuckle.

CHAPTER 2

As Dr. Jack Ahar waited for his daughter, Anya, to be brought into the visiting room of Washington's Federal Justice Prison, he studied a photo of her on his flash-pad. The photo had been taken the day she graduated from Summit University. He'd now come to realize that her academic achievements and innocent half-smile hid the fact that Anya lived in a world of utter gloom. He'd always known that she was extremely nonconforming and very rarely showed any type of emotion, especially of a joyous nature, but learning she'd reached such depths of anger that she'd manufactured the deadly toxin helcin, and helped to fund and form the extremist group AXE had come as a complete shock.

By the time Anya was born, Dr. Ahar had become the most celebrated scientist in the world. In order to maintain this incredible life he'd worked so hard to achieve, he had little available time to spend with Anya. Although Anya was cared for by highly paid nannies during her childhood years, and the numerous condos she and her father lived in all contained state-of-the-art amenities, there was one thing missing: true love between father and daughter.

The life of the world's premier scientist revolved around solving problems. But there was one problem that none of his science degrees or his advanced scientific textbooks could help with, and that was how to tell Anya how her mother had met her end. From the day of Anya's birth, he'd dreaded that, even

questioned whether he should tell her the truth. On Anya's thirteenth birthday, he'd decided to tell her. Until that day, Anya was led to believe her mother had died peacefully in her sleep, of natural causes.

"She's incredible! Can we watch it again?" thirteen-year-old Anya asked her father after they'd watched a view-file of Anya's mother at age twenty, competing in the World Gymnastics competition.

Jack smiled. "Your mother took great pride in everything she did, Anya," he said, and Anya turned back to stare at the screen with great reverence.

"How come they only gave her the bronze medal?" Anya asked.

"Actually, it's a good thing they didn't give her the gold," Jack replied.

Anya looked at him. "Why's that?"

"She wouldn't have accepted it. Just like she didn't accept that bronze medal," Jack replied.

"Why didn't she accept it? Was she angry at the organizers of the competition?"

"Oh no, your mother didn't have an angry bone in her body. You see, to your mother, gymnastics was her art. She didn't see it as a competition, so for her the whole idea of being judged and rewarded was irrelevant."

"Look how healthy she looks," Anya said as she watched her mother perform incredible physical feats on the still rings and the parallel bars. "I still can't believe how she just went to sleep and died." She frowned suddenly, and a moment later tears were streaming down her cheeks.

Seeing that, Jack knew it had to be done, that now was the time to tell her. He held her in his arms as he explained the true circumstances of her mother's death.

Intense anger transformed Anya's face. "Oh no—why are you telling me this now, after all these years?" she wailed, pushing herself away from him.

"I'm sorry, honey. I'd always planned to tell you, but I just didn't know when or how," Jack cried.

"How could they have done this? How could they have let my mother just die in the street? And you—you're supposed to be the best doctor in the world. How could you have let it happen?"

"Believe me, Anya. I did everything I could. That war ruined so many lives." He reached for her, but she drew away, confronting him. He dropped his arms in defeat. "I loved your mother with all my heart," he said, his throat tight with impending sobs. "And I'm so grateful she gave me such an incredible gift—you."

A continuous clanking in the hallway outside the visiting room jarred him from the painful memory. The sound sent chills down his spine. It grew louder by the second, and then the large door swung open, revealing two burly prison guards standing on either side of a shackled Anya, dwarfing her. They slowly led her to the seat across from her father. Every clank from the shackles felt like a knife jabbing into Jack's heart. The guards turned wordlessly to leave, and one of them looked back at Anya with a menacing grin before the door shut behind him.

Jack studied his daughter. Anya was wearing a bright lavender prison jumpsuit and her normally long, jet-black hair now barely reached her shoulders. The new hairdo made her oversized horn-rim glasses appear even larger. She sat with her head lowered, gazing into her lap.

"Hello, Anya," Jack said with a hesitant smile.

"Father," she replied, slowly raising her head.

"I'm glad you agreed to see me. How are you?" Jack asked gently. She lowered her head again. "I have some news for you. Arthur was able to get you a temporary stay of execution." Anya didn't respond. "I don't know if it'll be successful, but he's even going to attempt to file for a permanent one." Anya remained silent. It suddenly hit Jack that this was the first actual one-on-one conversation he and Anya had had in years. Sadness filled his entire being, and although he did his best to hide his true feelings,

he finally broke down. “I’m so sorry, Anya,” he sobbed. “I failed you; I didn’t provide you with the care and love a parent is supposed to provide. I’m sorry from the bottom of my heart.”

Anya raised her head and pushed her glasses up on her forehead. She stared blankly at Jack. Her eyes were big empty spaces. She didn’t utter a single word. She pressed the buzzer on the table between them, requesting the guards’ return to take her back to her cell.

Jack watched the guards march her away down the hallway, back to her segregated cell. He listened to the clank of her shackles fading with distance, and he cried.

* * *

A few blocks away, recently appointed US Attorney General Champ Sutton met with Agent Gil Robichaud to discuss the findings related to both the AXE case and the recently thwarted political uprising.

“I wish we didn’t have to go public with this, but we have no choice,” Champ said as he handed Gil the official National Investigation report on AXE.

“This matches exactly what Dwight Wagner told us,” Gil said, shaking his head.

“Unfortunately, we took Sims’s word over his,” Champ replied.

“I’m afraid now that the public has learned AXE was actually targeting six of our animal research labs, it’ll severely lessen the impact of their crimes. And sadly, they may actually receive support and sympathy,” Gil said.

“According to my staff, that’s already happening,” Champ replied.

“Now, with regards to the attempted uprising, what have you learned about Vexton-Tech?” Gil asked.

“I’ve spent quite some time reviewing all the info on Gerald and Skip Levin,” Champ said, “and I’ve yet to find a single thing linking them directly to anything criminal. Is there anything that has caught *your* attention?”

Gil shook his head. “My team is still sifting through several Vexton-Tech files, but to date, with the exception of the fact that

Gerald Levin politically supported Devan Bedlam, we have not found any evidence that would lead us to believe they were directly connected to the uprising.”

Champ blew out a sigh and looked down at his notes. “Yeah. I must admit, the goodwill they’ve shown toward the government by helping to harvest those teal-berries and reimbursing our LRS Compensation Program has been most impressive. Not to mention the compensation they’re preparing to pay the victims.” He paused and loosened his tie. “Unless something else comes up down the road, I think we can officially clear their names and release them from twenty-four hour surveillance. But if they decide to continue operating the business, I will request that the business be closely monitored for an entire year,” he added.

* * *

After receiving official clearance from the US government, Vexton-Tech held a meeting of its key players. Concerned major shareholders, the company’s board of directors, the executive committee, and a large faction of employees gathered in a spacious conference hall, waiting for Gerald and Skip to appear. Father and son looked nervous when they entered the room, their movements uncharacteristically agitated, their expressions solemn. A lukewarm reception as they made their way to the stage only heightened the tension.

Gerald took the podium with Skip at his side. After adjusting the sound-blast, more a ploy to gather his wits than a necessity, he looked quickly around the hall. “Thank you all for attending. Whoa... it’s difficult to know where to begin,” Gerald admitted, his voice subdued. He paused, and the stillness was overwhelming. He wiped the sweat from his brow and continued. “As I stand here in front of you, I want you to know that I accept full responsibility for this recent tragedy. I failed everybody in this room, including my son.” Gerald turned to his right and nodded toward Skip. “Although Vexton-Tech has been officially exonerated by US Federal Justice, I personally remain imprisoned by my own conscience. But the past

cannot be erased. The only option left is to embrace the future with optimism and purpose.”

His words were greeted with mild applause, but he still saw anxiety and concern on the faces in the audience. Gerald continued. “I want to take the time to address our Consumer Robot Victims Compensation Program. I know there is concern about the financial impact this will have on the company. Let me assure you, all the funds used to compensate the families and the government have come from my personal holdings. This will not have a direct impact on *you*—”

Before Gerald could finish a middle-aged lady shoved past security and approached the audience’s sound-blast set up in front of the stage. “Will you guarantee us that our wages won’t be lowered? Will you, Mr. Levin?” she asked, her tone tinged with panic. Security rushed in to escort her away, and the audience jeered angrily.

“It’s okay, gentlemen,” Gerald said, waving the security personnel away. “I’ll gladly answer the question.” The crowd fell silent. “Yes, as I stand here right now, I guarantee you that when we resume operations, your current wage rates will remain unchanged.” The room became a little less tense as frowns of concern turned to faint smiles of relief.

Gerald continued. “I also want to announce that although I will remain the company’s majority shareholder, I will be stepping down as chairman, effective immediately. As voted by the Vexton-Tech Board, the position of chairman will now belong to Skip. Replacing Skip as CEO will be our former CFO, Bruce Kingston.

“Before I turn over the sound-blast to Skip, I can see Mr. Fuller wishes to speak.”

Clyde Fuller headed toward the audience’s sound-blast. His company, CF Investments, had emerged as the largest shareholder of Vexton-Tech, behind only Gerald and Skip. Clyde was not the usual suit-and-tie banking mogul. He came from a farming family, and an extremely successful one, at that. In fact, Fuller Farms had emerged as America’s largest farming operation. With his sons and daughters

and their families all involved with managing the enormous operation, Clyde had retired from farming and set up CFI with the idea of assisting the financial management of fellow farmers across America.

With the rhythmic tapping of his gold cane preceding his every step, the burly Clyde took time to shake hands with several of those in the crowd on his way to the audience sound-blast.

“Wonderful to see you, Mr. Fuller,” said Gerald as Clyde methodically adjusted the microphone.

“Well, my friends, I’m going to get right down to it,” Clyde said solemnly. “Does your stepping down as chairman of Vexton-Tech have anything to do with the fact you’ve been speaking with the Militant Alliance of America about potentially becoming an executive member of the party—or perhaps its leader—in hopes of becoming president?”

The entire room grew eerily silent.

“Ah, you sure are a master at silencing a room, Clyde,” Gerald said with a mild chuckle. His tone quickly became serious. “Devan Bedlam and Dao Sloan’s recent criminal acts have left the MAA in a state of turmoil. And yes, at his request, I will be consulting with the party’s interim leader, Earl Pemberton. But to answer your question, it is *not* the reason I am stepping aside.”

“Do you really think it’s in Vexton-Tech’s best interest for you to be associating with the MAA after the party attempted to overthrow our government?” asked Clyde, his voice rising in anger.

“Mr. Bedlam and Mr. Sloan were not acting on behalf of the MAA. Just as General Sims was not acting on behalf of the PBA. The Outer Commission’s formal report on the matter has substantiated that,” Gerald replied confidently.

Clyde still looked uneasy. He pulled out his handkerchief and ran it across his forehead. “I don’t know about everybody else in this room, but I’ve yet to receive a business plan telling me how the company plans to move ahead. I mean, are we still going to be making consumer robots? What is this company going to be? We need to know!” The crowd cheered in approval.

“Perfect timing, Clyde,” Gerald responded as he nodded toward Skip. “Please give a warm welcome to Vexton-Tech’s new chairman, Skip Levin.” Once again, the crowd responded with only mild applause.

“Thank you, Gerald. And thank you, Mr. Fuller, for expressing your concerns. From the day my father and I became aware that our company had been sabotaged, we have given great thought to the future of Vexton-Tech. There was even a point where we wondered if we could rebound. However, we strongly believe the same determination that enabled the company to become this country’s leading technology firm will also drive us to further greatness, following this tragedy.” He paused to gauge the response. The crowd’s applause was still lukewarm, but seemed less forced. “As far as what we’re going to be? I guess the only way I can answer you, Mr. Fuller, is by telling you we are going to continue being Vexton-Tech. A company that prides itself on quality and innovation.

“Bruce Kingston and I were speaking just this morning about how difficult it will be to win back the trust of consumers, but our plan is to *earn* back that trust through complete resiliency and corporate transparency. And yes, we are planning to continue with our line of consumer robots, along with developing many other exciting products.” Again, he paused. The applause became stronger and seemed more genuine. Even Gerald couldn’t resist applauding from the wings, gazing at Skip with admiration.

After answering several more questions from others in attendance, Skip concluded with, “At your convenience, in the coming days, please refer to our corporate view-file for an outline of Vexton-Tech’s exciting plans for the immediate future. We will also be sending a formal flash-message to our board of directors and executive committee. Thank you all very much for attending, and please enjoy the delicious food and beverages being served at the back of the hall.”

The mood in the room had become far more relaxed and pleasant. As those in attendance indulged in food and beverages, Clyde Fuller

approached Skip. “You seem very confident that this tragedy will be forgotten. I wish I shared your optimism,” he said.

Clyde’s mood didn’t match the hall’s positive atmosphere; in fact, the large man’s gruff demeanor made him somewhat intimidating. Skip invited him for a drink in the hall’s lounge, where they could talk privately. “I don’t disagree with you, Mr. Fuller,” Skip said. “I realize this tragedy will never be forgotten, but Dad and I are not quitters. And believe me when I tell you that Goran Rackert being able to sabotage our business the way he did was humiliating to us.” He poured Clyde and himself a glass of wine, then took a deep breath. “I guess you could say we learned a difficult lesson in a very difficult way.”

“When I think of my good friend Neville Hollis... to know his son was murdered in the midst of that madness.” Clyde shook his head sadly. Through their farming connection, Neville was the person who’d first introduced Clyde to Gerald and Skip, many years ago. “To think Fuller Farms utilized hundreds of those Farmhand robots, and all my grandkids seemed to have had one of those robot dogs. Thankfully, they all ended up being immune to that damn poison.”

“Obviously, we wish we could erase the past, but all we can do is move forward, and we both hope you’ll remain with us on our journey,” Skip said in his most pleasant tone.

“I have to think about it, Skip. I’m very concerned by the fact your father is once again aligning himself with the MAA. I seriously don’t think it will bode well for the company, especially considering recent events,” Clyde said as he reached toward the basket the waiter had left for a piece of garlic toast.

“Though I don’t share his enthusiasm, politics have always been dear to Dad’s heart.”

“I used to share the same interest, until I lost an uncle and two cousins in that bloody war,” Clyde responded, lifting his glass. “A large group of Militant Alliance guys decided they were just going to take over their farm. Of course my uncle and my cousins told them to go to hell and resisted... well, it cost them their lives.” He guzzled the wine, then set the glass firmly down on the table, his hazel

eyes on Skip. “There was no victor in that war, young man, but there sure was a loser—and that loser was the United States of America.”

Rising, Clyde tapped Skip on the shoulder. “Stay well, son,” he said as he picked up his cane and slowly walked away.

As hard as Gerald and Skip tried to remain optimistic regarding Vexton-Tech’s future, reality was rolling in like dark clouds before a storm. A week following the meeting, while Skip was studying financial reports, Gerald called him to his office, saying it was urgent.

“What’s going on, Dad?” Skip asked uneasily as he closed the office door behind him.

“Here. Look at this,” Gerald replied, pushing a stack of letters across his desk toward Skip.

Skip’s eyes widened as he began to read the first one, then the next two. “Well, I had a feeling Clyde was going to back out... but I didn’t think eight of our board’s ten directors would go along with him.” He set down the resignation letters.

“That’s not all, Skip,” Gerald said before running his hands over his face in frustration. He showed Skip his flash-pad, which displayed the results from a recent survey in which seventy-three percent of Americans surveyed said they would never again buy a Vexton-Tech product.

“You know these surveys, you never know what to believe,” Skip said, passing the flash-pad back.

“It’s crazy, Skip; public opinion of Vexton-Tech is so negative, yet, in another recent survey, seventy-eight percent of those asked think I would make an excellent president.” Gerald snorted and shook his head. “Absurd.”

“I guess it’s really resonated with the public that you’ve gone to such lengths to compensate both the families of the victims and the government,” Skip said, feeling a surge of pride for his father.

“I simply did what needed to be done,” Gerald said.

Skip moved to one of the chairs in front of his father’s desk and sat down. “Tell me, Dad: was Clyde Fuller on the right track when he spoke of your political aspirations?”

“At this point I’ve accepted a request to meet Earl Pemberton, and that’s all. Right now my focus is on trying to save the company we’ve worked so hard to build.” Gerald shifted the subject. “Have you heard back from Step 1 Health regarding our proposal?”

“Yes—I’m glad you asked. Nora called me this morning; she’s asked us to meet with her and her father at their head office tomorrow,” Skip replied.

“Good. Let’s hope they respond favorably. It might be our only hope to salvage this thing.”

CHAPTER 3

Even a company as powerful as Vexton-Tech considered it a true privilege to be afforded the opportunity to do business with Step 1 Health. The company's chairman, Lawson Pierce, and his CEO, daughter Nora Pierce Davidson, took great pride in the fact that the company had earned several business and medical achievement awards over the years.

Thirty-five years ago, an American entrepreneur named Kenneth Pierce created a pharmaceutical company called Step 1 Medicine. After developing several highly innovative medications, the company was emerging as a legitimate player in the industry. This initial success attracted the interest of the Fryman Group, an American investment firm, and Kenneth was thrilled to receive the financing necessary to bring Step 1 Medicine to the forefront of the pharmaceutical industry. But Kenneth died suddenly a short time afterward, leaving his son, Lawson, who served as the company's VP of Business Affairs, in sole control of the company.

Eventually Lawson decided to mold the company into a unique multifaceted medical operation called Step 1 Health, or S1H. He intended that S1H would assist individuals with all their health care needs, via a personal contract. The business plan called for the company to manufacture and sell medications, make available all types of licensed practitioners and technicians, arrange for medical testing and hospitalization, provide transportation to those in need,

and assist with health care insurance programs. To do all this, his plan required the creation of a series of one-stop medical clinics.

Once his business plan had been fully developed, a young and ambitious Lawson met with Edgar Fryman, chairman of the Fryman Group, at the firm's Chicago headquarters, hoping to obtain the necessary funding for his plan.

Fryman was speaking on his flash-pad as his secretary opened the door and led Lawson into his spacious office. He waved for Lawson to have a seat. Lawson sat stiffly on the edge of the proffered chair, trying not to fidget while he waited for Fryman to finish his call.

"To think those imbeciles were winning two to nothing with twelve minutes left and they still managed to lose that game," Fryman said to the person on the other end of the call, punctuating his words with wild gestures of his other arm. "I could see it coming. That's what happens when you fall into a defensive shell." Fryman continued his rant as if Lawson wasn't even in the room. "They literally let that Sorensen kid take the game over. Well, like they say, better luck next time, my friend."

Fryman finished the call and spent the next minute or two inputting data into his flash-pad. Finally Fryman looked up and asked, "So, how you keeping, Lawson?"

"I'm doing well, sir; working hard to build on my father's legacy. I'm looking forward to executing my new game plan for Step 1 and making Dad proud," Lawson said with confidence.

"I expect I'll be the one 'executing' your plan." Fryman paused, looking at Lawson expectantly, then exclaimed, "It's a bloody joke!" He guffawed, then grew serious. "When your father died and left you in charge of his company, I hope he never imagined that you would destroy it."

"With all due respect, sir, I'm planning to take this company to the top, and I'm confident my plan will work. Since the day my father asked me to join him at Step 1, this has been my vision for the company," Lawson replied unwavering in his certainty.

Fryman leaned over his desk and said bluntly, “Your plan has not received the required approval from the AMO; it will destroy your company and get you arrested at the same time. That’s what it’ll do.”

“That’s probably true, and the publicity will be of great value.”

Fryman’s eyebrows rose. “Tell me, Lawson, have you been dipping into your company’s giant vats of pills?” he sneered, then laughed.

Though Lawson pressed on with his pitch, Fryman remained vehemently opposed. “When I gave your father all that money, it was meant to help turn the company into a formidable pharmaceutical company, and he did that,” Fryman said sharply. “And now you’re going to destroy all of that by thinking you can change the entire health care industry.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way, Mr. Fryman, but I’m going forward with my plan, with or without your support. I guess I’ll just have to look elsewhere for the funding.” Lawson rose.

Fryman placed his hands behind his head and leaned back in his chair. Surprisingly, he laughed. “Very impressive, my friend,” he finally said. “You’ve passed.”

“Passed?”

“Yeah. I was testing you, Lawson, and you passed with flying colors. Entrepreneurs of all ages come in here looking for funding and more often than not, they don’t even have faith in their own business plan, and expect *me* to get all warm and fuzzy about it. You’re the kind of person I want to invest in—I *need* to invest in.”

Fryman grinned. “Since you sent me this plan of yours, I’ve been reviewing it day and night. It’s brilliant—a tad risky, but nonetheless brilliant. I’ve had my top people reviewing it as well, and they’re all in agreement.”

Lawson slowly exhaled. “Phew... I seriously thought you were going to pull your support from the company.”

“If you’d succumbed to my badgering, I most definitely would’ve. I’ve always believed three-quarters of success in life is based on believing in oneself; the final quarter is usually based on a combination of luck and fate,” Fryman said matter-of-factly. “Now, I think it’s safe to say you’ll be shut down rather quickly when you

open that first clinic which, as you've suggested, will create all kinds of attention. And that's what we need—to be heard by the American public.” He lifted his flash-pad, saying, “Let me see my calendar...” He nodded, tapped its screen, and looked back up at Lawson. “I'll have the financing in place to at least help you get the ball rolling within the next few weeks. And if and when we receive the government's approval to move forward with the venture, I'll get you the rest of the money.”

Lawson couldn't wait to give the news to his younger brother. “Hey Cam, can you meet me at the Last Frontier in a half hour?” Lawson asked when Cameron answered his call.

“I'm just finishing up here at the office. Give me an hour, and I'll be there.”

When Cameron arrived at the chic New York City steakhouse, Lawson anxiously waved him over to his table. “Bring us a bottle of your best champagne,” Lawson said when the waiter approached.

“What's the occasion, Laws?” asked Cameron.

“It looks like he's fully on board.”

“Fryman?”

“Yessir, the Money Man himself,” Lawson answered with a smile.

“That's fantastic news!” Cameron exclaimed.

“That's not all we're celebrating.”

“Oh?”

“I'm so proud of the work you've done at L&B,” Lawson said. Cameron nodded but waited, unsure where this was going. “And now Judith Lilly has moved up the corporate ladder,” Lawson added. Again Cam nodded carefully. “So—” He paused to draw a deep breath. Cam lifted an eyebrow, waiting. “—I'm granting you your wish: you're the division's new managing director.”

Cameron gripped the edge of the table as if about to leap to his feet. “No way! Is this for real?”

“It sure is, Cam.” Lawson raised his glass. “Like I said, I'm so proud of what you've accomplished at L&B, and I'm even more proud of how well you've done with the program.”

“It hasn’t been easy,” Cameron sighed. “But with the help of my family, especially you, I’m certain I’ll get through this.”

“Dad would be so proud of you,” Lawson said softly as they tapped glasses.

“Yeah ... when I think of how I let him down—”

“Forget it, Cam. It’s all in the past.”

“You know, Lawson, as angry as I was at the time to discover he left the company solely in your hands, I now look at it as a blessing in disguise. It really helped me see the light.”

During the next meeting with Edgar Fryman, the initial financing was officially put in place, and soon after, Step 1 Health opened its first clinic in New York City. As expected, within a few days, the American Medical Organization shut the clinic down, and Lawson Pierce was charged with operating an unlicensed medical facility.

Pierce and his associates at S1H immediately began a massive campaign on the World Connect, educating the American public on the company’s game plan, and making a mockery of Lawson’s arrest. Over the next few months, the formulated hype enabled the idea to gain popularity with the American public, finally forcing the president to establish a commission to study the pros and cons of S1H’s concept.

After spending weeks examining the merits of the plan, the commission decided the matter should be presented before Congress. As expected, the hearing was filled with high drama. Those members opposing the concept argued vehemently that it was definitely not in the best interest of the American public. The rich would be served and the poor cast aside.

“This is nothing but an attempt to monopolize the medical industry,” went another protest, “and we all know the harm that’ll cause! If this concept is adopted, it’ll lead to rampant corruptive business practices, and American citizens will suffer like never before!”

Advocates countered, “The health care system in this country has been broken forever. If something doesn’t work, you fix it. This model is a solution.”

Strengthening the argument for the concept's acceptance were several of the country's esteemed business professors and doctors, who claimed it was structured in a manner that would provide proper and adequate health care to all Americans, regardless of whether they were rich or poor.

After four months of rigorous argument, rumors circulated that Congress would not be voting in favor. But after a final fifteen-hour meeting, the tide turned and the bill passed, permitting Step 1 Health—or any other enterprise, for that matter—to function as a “multifaceted medical company” in the manner proposed by SIH. This groundbreaking ruling drastically changed American health care forever.

Over the next few years, other businesses established similar “one-stop medical clinics,” but by being the innovators, SIH remained the frontrunner in the industry, with three-quarters of the market. Although suggestions that SIH had established a monopoly led to legal challenges, there was never any direct evidence proving this to be the case. In fact, more than three decades later, the American public and the medical community continued to embrace Step 1 Health and its eminence in the field.

* * *

Since Step 1 Health's headquarters was only a couple of blocks away from Vexton-Tech's, Skip and Gerald decided to walk to the meeting. “Hey, there's Andy and Bryant up ahead,” Skip said, pointing out the two young men who had worked at Vexton-Tech during the past summer.

“Oh yeah, the Summit marketing interims,” Gerald replied. “Very impressive young men.”

“Hey guys, how's it going?” Skip asked as he and his father passed the young men.

“Okay,” they murmured simultaneously, then briskly walked away.

Skip watched them go with a sour expression on his face. “Three months ago, both of them were literally begging Brandy's assistant for a job, just so they could experience what it'd be like to work at Vexton-Tech. And now it's as if we have the plague.”

“Don’t let it get to you, Skipper. You know we’ve always had detractors, and now we just have a few more,” Gerald said, though he looked uneasy as he watched the young men moving into the distance.

When they reached the SIH building, Nora Pierce Davidson’s assistant intercepted Gerald and Skip and put them through a thorough security check. “I’m sorry, gentlemen, but it’s mandatory. Please, allow me to lead the way,” she said when it was done. She led them to the elevator, then escorted them directly to the company boardroom. “They’ll be with you shortly.”

“I didn’t think I’d ever be sitting in a more exquisite boardroom than ours, but this is really something to behold,” Skip said as he admired his surroundings. “Look at that wall carving; the detail is incredible.” He nodded toward the back wall, which displayed a carving of the company’s insignia: a phoenix rising, outlined in gold.

Gerald nodded in approval. “Great craftsmanship. Very impressive, indeed.”

Minutes later, the double doors opened and Nora’s assistant entered with a shiny silver tray containing pastries. She exited and returned seconds later with four cups of coffee. Nora and Lawson then entered the room together.

“Gentlemen, it’s been far too long. If my memory serves me correctly, I think one of the first major business deals I ever made was purchasing those mobility assistance machines from you and the professor, back in the day,” Lawson said with a smile. “Please, help yourself to some pastries—Nora made these. She’s not only a remarkable businesswoman, but she also happens to be a passionate pastry chef,” Lawson added.

“Your father’s right on the money; these are absolutely delicious,” Gerald said after taking a bite of a lemon danish. He smiled politely at his hosts.

“Sometimes I wonder if I made the correct career choice,” Nora quipped, gazing at her father. The comment brought mild laughter.

“All right, let’s get down to business,” said Lawson as he turned on the flash-screen at the front of the room. “First of all, I must commend both of you for the professional manner in which you’ve dealt with your most recent tragedy.”

“Well, I’ve always told Skip the same thing my father always used to tell me: the true colors of a man show through in his darkest hour,” Gerald said.

Nora rose and approached the flash-screen on the left wall. “We like to play this view-file for all our prospective business partners. It’ll help to give you a full understanding of what Step 1 Health is all about. Please, sit back and enjoy.”

The view-file began with the image of a gold phoenix slowly rising from the ashes, followed by the company slogan, We’re here because we care. Next came a chronological history of the company, including highlights from S1H’s Supreme Court victory. Also included in this segment was a description of S1H’s most groundbreaking medications and an impressive list of esteemed medical doctors and scientists who had been involved with S1H in the past, including US Medical Chief Dr. Charles Muller.

The final segment of the view-file showed the inner workings of S1H’s medical clinics. With their spacious concourse areas, warm and friendly observation rooms, state-of-the-art medical equipment, and elaborate medical stores and pharmacies, the clinics were comprehensive entities.

When the view-file ended, Lawson rose, drawing the eyes of Gerald and Skip. His associates referred to him as Perfect Pierce, and indeed, his stylish clothes, his charming smile, his gift of gab, and even his posture naturally commanded attention. “As you just witnessed,” Lawson said with a wry smile, “it’s been quite the journey. Although the view-file provides an overview, it doesn’t acknowledge all of our many business partners who have contributed to our success.” Lawson paused. “We’re truly hoping to once again do business with Vexton-Tech.”

“So, I’m thrilled to learn our medical robots have piqued your interest,” Gerald interjected.

“Yes, I think the time has come for those robots. We prospered from many of your medical machines in the past, so why not now?” Lawson replied with a smile. “I was also quite an admirer of your consumer robots. It’s a shame they met such an untimely demise. Those Home Servants really came in handy, especially at our many corporate galas.”

Getting right down to business, Skip asked, “Would your interest lie in a licensing agreement, or are you more interested in directly purchasing the robots?”

“We were thinking of making a *very* large purchase,” replied Lawson.

Gerald leaned back on the sofa and slowly exhaled. *This is exactly what we need*, he thought.

“Considering the scope of your operation, it will be a real challenge to meet your demand, but it’s something I’ll be more than glad to *personally* oversee,” Skip replied.

“If there’s one thing about Skip, when he sets his mind to something, he displays the determination of a bulldog. I guarantee you that when Step 1 is in need of those machines, he’ll deliver—and on time,” added Gerald, patting Skip on the shoulder.

“Yeah, but it’s not just your robots we’re interested in purchasing,” said Lawson.

“Oh?” Gerald said.

“What we really want is... Vexton-Tech,” Lawson announced.

Gerald and Skip looked at each other. *What’s this about?* Gerald thought. “And what would make you think the company’s for sale?”

“Just like your father used to pass on his words of wisdom, so did mine,” Lawson said calmly. “Mine used to tell me, ‘In the business world, everything is for sale—if the price is right.’ And I trust you’ll find our offer of \$30 billion to be more than fair.”

Gerald stood up, his face flushing with rage. “You ignorant jackass. How dare you make such a ludicrous offer? We are

the leading technology company in this entire country; we're worth at least six or seven times that amount, and you know we are."

"Now, I don't mean to offend you, but the reality is, you *were* the leading technology company in America," Lawson replied calmly. "And yes, if we were sitting here before your consumer robots poisoned over 400,000 young Americans and killed ten of them, then our offer would be substantially higher. But sadly, the past is what it is, and it sure isn't going away." Lawson looked smug.

Skip interrupted what looked like a building standoff. "Would you kindly allow Dad and I a few minutes alone?"

"Most certainly. Take all the time you require. Please press this panel when you're ready." Lawson pointed to a gold panel on the wall beside the large doors.

Once Lawson and Nora left the room, Skip leaned toward Gerald and said, "Dad, please, I think we should at least try to negotiate. After all, we're dealing with the largest and most powerful corporation in the entire country. And unfortunately, we're currently sinking like a stone into an endless pit."

"Wait a second... you knew this meeting had nothing to do with them wanting to purchase those robots," Gerald said, his hushed tone making his anger come out as a hiss. "You knew this piranha was going to try and ravage our business with some ridiculous lowball offer!"

"Hold on, that's not the case! I had no idea," Skip replied, stunned by his father's accusation.

"Goodbye. I'm getting the hell out of here," Gerald sneered as he grabbed his briefcase and exited the room. "Tell him he can take his offer and shove it."

Skip remained. Nora returned to find him sitting at the table, staring into space. She approached him. "I'm sorry, Skip, this was not fair to you and your father," she said gently.

"Then why in the world did you do it? Why did you lie?" His voice was calm, but stern. He frowned up at her. "You told me this meeting was going to be about your company's interest in our medical robots."

“That’s truly what I thought. At no time did my father mention to me that it was his wish to actually buy Vexton-Tech. You must believe me, Skip. I was totally in the dark.”

Skip studied her for a moment. Nora’s face was red with embarrassment. “I believe you, Nora.” He rose. “Have a nice day,” he murmured as he exited.

Later that afternoon, while Skip was sitting at his desk reviewing documents, Bruce Kingston knocked on his office door. “Come on in,” Skip said, and directed the company’s newly appointed CEO to the chair in front of his desk. Bruce looked as fit and energetic as ever, a far cry from the way Skip felt at this moment. He smiled and shook his head. “How do you do it, Bruce?”

Settling himself in the leather armchair, Bruce froze and looked up in surprise. “Do what?”

“Security has informed me you arrive at six every morning. And I know for a fact that most evenings you’re not out of here until eight at night.”

Bruce relaxed and shrugged with a shy smile. “As far as my early arrival goes, when you play professional soccer for as many years as I did, it becomes second nature to maintain a high level of fitness—and I enjoy having the gym to myself.” Bruce had been a star player for the Washington Androids professional soccer club. “Besides,” he added, “with all the stress around here lately, that hour of vigorous exercise helps me clear my head.”

Skip nodded his agreement. “I hear you,” he said wryly. “Speaking of stress, how did the sales meeting go?”

Bruce sighed deeply and leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees. “I have to be honest with you, Skip; in all my years with Vexton-Tech, I’ve never seen things appear so grim.” He straightened long enough to loosen his tie and sighed again, slowly shaking his head. “The numbers are a disaster. Even our bread-and-butter items—the flash-screens, the flash-pads, the data-chips—are taking such a massive hit, I don’t think even one of Brandy’s clever marketing plans will pull us out of this mess.”

Frustrated, Skip leaned back and ran his hands through his hair. “I guess that survey was dead on,” he said unhappily. “What about the World Connect retailers? Are they abandoning us as well?”

“Unfortunately, they are.”

“Even Starcrest?”

“Yes. They informed us yesterday that they only plan to continue ordering our data-chips.”

“Wow, it’s obvious the market has lost all faith in us.” Bruce nodded, his expression glum. Skip looked at Bruce and said bluntly, “Step 1 Health made a lowball offer to buy the entire company for \$30 billion.”

Bruce sat back. “Whoa. A year ago the market had the company worth over \$200 billion. I can only imagine how your dad responded to that offer.”

Needing time to formulate what he had to say next, Skip rose and walked to the window to stare outside. Several seconds later, he turned and said, “As you’re well aware, my father’s a proud man, and this has been difficult for him, but we need to accept that offer, Bruce. If we don’t, no matter how large this company is, I’m certain it will fall to pieces.” He paused. “I need to find a way to convince my father, before it’s too late.”

“Whatever you and your dad decide, you can count on my unwavering support,” Bruce replied.

Back in Vexton, Gerald was meeting with Earl Pemberton, the MAA’s interim leader, at the palatial Levin estate. “Time just flies, doesn’t it, Gerald. I mean, it seems like this was only a couple of years ago.” Earl nodded toward several wall photos of him and Gerald on a hunting trip fifteen years previous.

Gerald smiled and nodded. “I’ll never forget that trip. That’s when this big guy was hunted down.” He turned toward a moose head mounted on the opposite wall.

Earl stepped beside him, also looking at the trophy. “When I think about the last hunting trip I took—with that son of a bitch, Bedlam—it really sickens me, Gerald.”

“I know how you feel. I praised the idiot right here at our last Vexton-Tech gala.”

“He set the MAA back so much. He ended up being nothing but a lowlife thug who only talked a good game,” Earl said as he removed a laser-rifle from the wall to examine it.

“And to think the Strategic Council so one-sidedly voted him over *you*—it’s mind-boggling,” Gerald said.

Earl looked up and shrugged. “I wasn’t surprised. His celebrity status as the world’s former premier bare-knuckle fighter seemed to give him a big advantage.” He carefully set the gun back in its place and walked toward the moose head. Looking at it intently, he said, “I remember you told me you were going to get this big fella, and sure enough, seconds later, bam! Down he went.” He smiled as if reliving the moment.

Gerald grinned, then beckoned for Earl to follow him into the living room, where he poured them both a glass of red wine.

“I also remember you telling me years ago that you were going to build Vexton-Tech into the largest tech company in this country, and sure enough, you pulled it off!” Earl looked directly at Gerald as he handed him his glass of wine. “We need you, Gerald,” he said firmly. “The Alliance needs you. This country needs you.”

Gerald stared down at his glass. “You’re correct, Earl; my goal was to turn the company into a giant, and that I did. But then I got stupid and gave way too much control to one man, who destroyed my company.”

“None of that was your fault—you were totally blindsided, Gerald. Besides, what you’ve done in the aftermath to rectify the matter has been remarkable, and the people of America are well aware of that,” Earl replied. “This is our chance to finally take back America, put it in the hands of those who will make this country supreme once again.” Gerald was listening closely. Earl continued. “Westgale and his cronies have met the end of their road. They can create all the spin they want, but the reality is, they’re finished. This amazing country that used to shine so bright has become nothing but a tiny flicker in the wind!”

Gerald took a deep breath and said solemnly, “Well, I guess it’s time to reignite that flame. I’m in.”

The next morning Gerald flew to New York to meet with Skip at the Vexton-Tech headquarters. For the first time, a feeling of emptiness settled over him when he entered the building. The specialized robots that used to greet visitors at the entrance were now a thing of the past. The main concourse seemed hollow, his footsteps echoing off the marble floor to bounce around the cavernous space.

As Gerald headed toward the elevators, he noticed an image of himself being displayed on the flash-screen on one wall. Vexton-Tech’s VP of Marketing, Brandy Noble, approached. She waved one hand at the screen. “How come you didn’t tell us about this, Mr. Levin?” she asked.

“About what?” he asked, staring at the screen but drawing a blank.

“The UCIT network just finished airing a feature on you. It was quite the story of a remarkable man.” She beamed at him. “You should be very proud of all you’ve accomplished.”

“Thank you, my dear. Actually, I didn’t know anything about the feature. But from what you’re telling me, at least they decided to display my good side.” Gerald chuckled. “Oh, while I’m here with you, I guess I should inform you of this afternoon’s meeting of our executive committee. Two o’clock. It’s a very important meeting.”

“Two o’clock,” Brandy repeated. She gave a sharp nod, and moved away. Gerald continued on to the elevators.

Skip’s office door was slightly ajar, so Gerald peeked in and knocked simultaneously.

“Come on in, Dad,” Skip said, looking up from a report he’d been reading on his desktop flash-screen. Gerald moved to a chair across from Skip’s desk and sat down, then stared into space, deep in thought. The silence was powerful. Skip shut down the report and moved the screen aside, saying, “That’s enough bad news for one day.”

Gerald looked at Skip and blinked back tears. “I’m sorry, son. I was absolutely wrong to suggest you were going behind my back with SIH. I hope you’ll forgive me.”

“I know you don’t see it this way, Dad, but you’re only human,” Skip replied. “And yes, human beings are permitted to make mistakes. I’m disappointed that you accused me of such a terrible thing, but I understand how stressful things have been for you lately.”

Gerald leaned forward in his chair and asked, “Does this mean all is well between us?”

“Of course! But when it comes to this business...” Skip glanced meaningfully at the flash-screen and sighed.

“Well, I think what I’m about to tell you is definitely going to improve your mood, son.”

“Unless you tell me you’re willing to accept Lawson Pierce’s offer, I don’t think there’s anything that will improve my mood.”

With a sly grin, Gerald said, “Should I make the call, or would you like the honor?”

Skip leaned back in his seat and let out a loud holler of relief. “I’ll be darned! Why the change of heart?” he asked, barely able to contain his joy.

“Sometimes I guess you just need to face reality,” Gerald answered, rising and pacing away from his chair. “As much as I truly wanted to keep the business going, it’s become very clear that there is no way we can totally rebound from this disaster.” He stopped and poured himself a glass of water. “The crazy thing is, as much as the people in this country are turning away from Vexton-Tech, it’s like *I’ve* now become some kind of hero in the aftermath of the tragedy, simply because I’ve tried to make amends.”

“It just goes to show this is a very fickle society, Dad,” Skip replied. “Now, I must ask: does this sudden change of heart have anything to do with your political aspirations?”

Gerald turned toward Skip and looked him in the eyes. “As will be made official in the coming days, upon approval from its council, I will be the new leader of the MAA. But no, my final decision to sell the company is simply a business decision,” he added.

“You’ve made the correct decision,” Skip said.

“There is one caveat that goes along with the sale. And I will not budge,” Gerald warned.

“Oh? And what might that be?” Skip asked.

“If Lawson Pierce wants this company, he also keeps its new chairman in place,” Gerald answered firmly.

Skip came out from behind his desk and slowly walked toward the side window. “Sometimes, I look down there,” he said in reference to the hustle and bustle below, “and I ask myself what this all means... The other day my kids were in a school play, and I gave them my word I’d be there to watch them.” He paused and undid his tie. “But of course I got caught up in some R&D meeting and totally forgot about the play. My kids were devastated—and so was I.”

“What are you trying to tell me, Skip?”

“What I’m trying to tell you is that I want out. I made this decision directly following our meeting with Step 1 Health. I’m afraid I’m losing Dora and the kids,” Skip said, “and if I continue on this path I know for a fact I *will* lose them.”

“Come on, Skip, you’re being way too hard on yourself. You’re a wonderful husband and father, as well as a wonderful provider. Besides, you’re way too young to be put out to pasture,” Gerald quipped.

“I guess when you’re one of the wealthiest people in the entire country it’s not very difficult to be a ‘wonderful provider,’ but by no means have I been a wonderful husband and father... and I desperately need to change that,” Skip said softly.

“Well, considering how things went awry between your mother and me, I guess I can understand your concern,” Gerald said solemnly. “So, what do you plan to do, son?”

“For the time being, I’m going to take Dora and the kids, and spend some time with Mom in California. Actually, although I don’t plan to let it consume the bulk of my time, this’ll also give me a chance to address some pending matters relating to our real estate operation,” Skip said.

“Very well, but what about the children’s schooling?” Gerald asked.

“I’ve already made arrangements with a highly acclaimed private school. They’ll be just fine,” Skip replied. “So, once the Vexton-Tech sale is completed, we’ll be off.”

* * *

“Keep your head up, Riles. When you’re passing the ball, make sure you have your head up so you can see where you’re passing it to,” I called out to Riley as he and Skip’s son, Matthew, worked on their soccer skills at the Levin estate.

“Doesn’t this remind you of two other little guys from years ago?” Skip asked.

“It sure does—and on this very field. I remember we sometimes stayed out here until it became so dark we couldn’t see a darn thing,” I replied with a chuckle.

Skip laughed, then looked down at his flash-pad. “Oh great, they’ve arrived,” he said with a wide smile. “Hey boys,” he called out, “turn around!”

Riley and Matthew dutifully turned around—to look directly at four of their favorite Washington Androids. The boys screamed with excitement.

“Now, this *really* reminds me of our past,” I said, recalling the day Skip and I’d been fortunate enough to have the same experience. “This is one day the boys will never forget,” I said, smiling. As Riley and Matthew ran over to the four athletes, I said, “So, I heard about the sale of Vexton-Tech to Step 1 Health. How are you feeling?”

Skip kept his eyes on the field, even though it was empty now. He sighed. “It’s been difficult to accept, but it had to be done. We could never have fully rebounded after the robot tragedy.”

“How long before you’re off to California?” I asked.

Skip turned toward me and we slowly walked over to the boys and their heroes. “The sale should be finalized in a few days. That will give me time to tighten up some loose ends before we leave.”

“Well, I hope you still plan to come back and visit your home town once in a while,” I said, feeling a whisper of sadness.

“Oh, I’ll be back. I could never forget this place,” Skip said with pride.

CHAPTER 4

Several weeks had passed since Nicole Kratz's heroism had helped to thwart the attack planned by General Sims. President Westgale and his people were trying their best to restore order within the Freedom Home. But the stress of everything that had happened had taken its toll on Dr. Muller. "I'm so glad it was only a mild heart attack and that with some rest you're going to be fine, Charles," Westgale said during a visit to his hospital room.

"Yeah, but I'm the country's number one doctor; I'm not supposed to get sick," he replied, and they both chuckled.

"I'm just saddened that you'll be stepping down," Westgale said. "You've done such a wonderful job representing this country, Charles."

"Thank you, Mr. President. I'm glad that you and your executive committee recommended Jack to replace me. He's the best there is," Muller said with enthusiasm.

Three days later, after the Strategic Council officially voted in his favor, Dr. Jack Ahar was announced as America's inaugural Chief of Medicine and Science.

"I'm so honored, Mr. President," Jack said during a one-on-one meeting with Westgale following the announcement. The fact that you and your executive committee would consider me after I lied about the cause of LRS, not to mention after my daughter's indiscretions came to light... well, it really touches me," Ahar said.

“You lied because the life of your daughter was being threatened. I understand that, Jack. And as far as Anya herself is concerned, I think her story touched a lot of people, even with those indiscretions,” Westgale replied. “While I have you here, there’s a matter I need to discuss with you.”

“I’m all ears, Mr. President,” Ahar replied.

“Agricultural and Environmental Safety recently received a report from Professor Kinsley,” Westgale began.

“Brilliant man. I think it was a very wise move on Beverley’s part to bring on Kinsley as a consultant,” Ahar said.

“Yes, I totally agree. Now, this has to do with some kind of mineral he and Heath Claremont recently discovered in Vexton County,” Westgale said as he handed Ahar the report.

“Hmm... very interesting—and very mysterious,” Ahar said as he perused the report. He looked up. “I’ll perform an analysis immediately.”

Colonel Mitchell Peters was also announced as the country’s new interim defense director, replacing the soon-to-be-executed General Sims. “This is without doubt the greatest honor that has ever been bestowed upon me,” Peters announced to the American people over the World Connect. “I pledge to honor, protect, and defend this country with my heart and soul.”

Peters had his work cut out for him. Westgale and the rest of his Administration were on edge over news of recent political upheavals in Pinia, a country rich in natural resources. Of great interest to Westgale and his associates was Pinia’s highly coveted fera-bean. Westgale expressed this during his first meeting with Colonel Peters in his new role. “The timing of this uprising could be disastrous. If Cobra Pix and his Iron Lotus take over Pinia, we’ll never see those fera-beans,” Westgale declared, scowling. He pounded his desk with a fist. “If this deal doesn’t come to fruition there’s no chance we’ll meet the commission’s deadline. And you know what that means, Mitchell.”

The colonel wiped the sweat from his brow. “I’m sure Cobra Pix has calculated this entire thing. You can bet that long before we

began talking to the Pinian government about fera-bean biofuel, he and his militia were preparing a complete takeover.”

“All our reports indicate that that biofuel is the real deal. It’s a game changer. There’s never been anything like this here in America—or anywhere else, for that matter. We need to make this happen,” Westgale said firmly.

“If Pix’s uprising is successful—and by all accounts it appears it will be—I highly doubt we’ll be doing business with Pinia,” Peters warned.

“Damn it, Mitchell! Is the rest of the world just going to stand by while this demented maniac takes over that entire country?” Westgale shouted, throwing his hands up in frustration that the Outer Commission was not permitting America to intervene. “And what about his ties to the HKM?” he exclaimed. “If they join forces, they’ll do whatever they can to crush us.”

“Military Intelligence is continuously monitoring the situation, sir,” Peters said. “We’re also attempting to get our American aid workers out of there. I realize how anxious you must feel, with your daughter leading one of those teams.”

Thinking of Jessica, Westgale sighed. “Stay on it, Mitchell,” he ordered, his tone more subdued.

* * *

April Westgale was preparing for bed when she noticed a flickering of lights through the blinds of her bedroom window. She walked over to the window and peeked through the slats. “William, look at this,” she called, her voice high with shock. The president joined her at the window.

People were assembling along the perimeter of the Freedom Home. The whole crowd wore balaclavas and all black clothing, and carried torches.

“Oh my Lord,” Westgale groaned. “What in the world is going on here?”

Seconds later, his flash-pad buzzed. “Yes, Gil.”

“Sir, there’s a large group of—”

“I know. I can see them outside my window,” Westgale said.

“I’ve ordered security to begin securing the property,” Gil responded. “I’m sending my agents to escort you and the Lady of Honor to the basement bunker.”

Until the detail arrived, Westgale and his wife kept their eyes on the group, which had now formed a large circle, three rows deep, outside the gates. Torches held high, they stood quietly.

When the security detail arrived, Westgale put his arm around his wife’s waist, holding her close, as they turned wordlessly from the window. “Keep me informed,” he said to Gil before tucking his flash-pad into his pocket and exiting the room with the guards.

With the president and his wife safely tucked away, Gil met with Executive Director Dave Perry and Colonel Peters. They regarded the crowd through a second-floor window. “There has to be at least a thousand of them out there. Are we just going to let them do this?” Perry asked.

“I’m not interested in initiating a riot, David, but if they do anything that warrants it, they’ll be dealt with,” Gil assured him.

“I have our riot unit on standby,” added Peters.

Ten minutes passed as the tension mounted. The group stood their ground, completely silent, until suddenly one member thrust his torch three times into the air, prompting the group to shout out in unison, “Free Anya! Free America!” Then, in what seemed like a choreographed move, the entire group peacefully turned away.

A day later, out in Los Angeles, Cryptic had the opportunity to interview a man who claimed to be the new leader of AXE. The young man referred to himself as Blackheart. He requested that he be interviewed at dawn, on a remote beach. When Cryptic and the UCIT crew arrived they saw a figure sitting on a boulder in the near distance. Cryptic led the way over the cool sand, the rising sun glistening off its metallic body.

“Hello, Mr. Blackheart. I am Cryptic. Thank you for agreeing to this interview,” the robot said as a way of introduction.

"I hope to enlighten the country," Blackheart replied, still sitting on the boulder. To protect his identity he wore a black balaclava. He was shirtless, and AXE was tattooed in black across his scrawny chest. He wore camouflage pants and a pair of battered army boots.

"Is it AXE's goal to bring an end to America's current political structure, by bringing down both the PBA and MAA?" Cryptic asked.

"All I can tell you is that our immediate goal is to continue gaining strength in numbers and following the course set out by the AXE doctrine. As we do so, those establishments will eventually cease to exist, and true freedom will reign supreme."

"An America governed by AXE?"

"We think of it as an America that'll be governed by the people. A land of equality. No rich. No poor. No beautiful. No ugly. No judgment," Blackheart said with feeling.

"Do you seriously think this is attainable?" Cryptic asked, its eyes flashing back and forth from red to blue.

"It's very attainable, Mr. Robot," Blackheart replied. "Just listen to what people are saying. They're fed up. It is time for the country's youth to take control."

"Dwight Wagner and Anya Ahar had planned to blow up government buildings in order to establish a footing for AXE," Cryptic said. "Can we expect violence from your current group?"

"Sadly, war is violent," Blackheart replied calmly.

"War? Will your group be declaring some kind of war on your own country?"

"Our government is not our country. Free Anya! Free America!" Blackheart said, pushing himself off the boulder, effectively ending the interview.

"What do you make of this, Gil?" Westgale asked as the interview ended and he turned off the flash-screen.

"We must take this seriously, Mr. President," Gil said.

Westgale put his head in his hands and shook his head, then looked back up. "Are you fearing they'll try to pick up where Dwight Wagner and his group left off?"

“Well, as history has shown us, we can never be certain of anything,” Gil answered. “But our Homeland Anti-Terror group believes their focus at this time is solely on recruitment.”

“And then what? Are we just going to stand by and watch a group of anarchists come together and pose a threat to the country?” Westgale growled.

“Under Section 33.9 of the New Order Treaty, there isn’t anything we *can* do to prevent them from actually forming an alliance,” Gil said. “Now, if and when we gain intelligence indicating something sinister is in the works, we’ll do whatever it takes to eliminate the threat.”

“I just hope it won’t be too late,” Westgale muttered.

“I’m very concerned with this report, sir,” Gil said as he handed Westgale the results of a political survey that had been conducted at universities across the country.

Westgale studied it a moment. “Wow... I figured recent events would have set us back quite a bit, but this is crazy.” He looked up. “It’s one thing to feel the heat from a throng of anarchistic thugs, but seeing *these* youngsters feeling so jaded about life in this country...” He looked back down at the report. “This is extremely disconcerting,” he said solemnly.

CHAPTER 5

The next day a ceremony had been planned to honor the courage of Nicole Kratz for the key role she played in helping to thwart General Sims's attack at the Freedom Home. Nicole's excitement however was slightly tempered by the fact it was also the day her father's cohorts were celebrating his retirement at New York City's Fair Justice Courthouse. Nicole felt terrible about having to disappoint her father. "Dad, I can't believe the timing. Tomorrow is the one day I wish I could be in two places at once," she'd said as her and her mother helped the judge pick out his suit the day before.

"Don't fret, honey. You're being honored by your country for your incredible bravery. Go and enjoy yourself. You deserve it," her father had said as he hugged her. "Besides, *my* celebration is going to be filled with a bunch of grumpy old judges and boring attorneys. Soon we'll celebrate my retirement in real style!"

As a massive group, which included the entire Westgale Administration, many dignitaries, and more than two thousand past and current military personnel began to assemble on the Field of Honor grounds, Nicole was overcome by a whirlwind of emotions. She felt immense pride in being an American, yet at the same time memories of that horrific evening still haunted her.

The ceremony opened with the American national anthem, played by an honorary military band composed of former soldiers. Following the anthem, several dignitaries were introduced and

honored. Executive Director Dave Perry then took to the podium. The crowd cheered loudly.

“Thank you very much,” he said. “This is an incredibly special ceremony, and it’s wonderful to see everybody here today. When this event was being planned, I made a special request. That request was to be the person who would introduce this afternoon’s special honoree, Nicole Kratz.” Perry stepped back from the sound-blast and began to clap along with the crowd, then ducked forward to add, “I’ve been privileged to have worked alongside so many outstanding people during my time with the Peace-Bringers Association of America, with former Director Kratz being right at the top of that list.

“Nicole’s bravery on that dreadful evening is something that will continue to resonate within my heart for the rest of my life. I, like everyone else who was in that conference room, owe you a debt we can never repay. Honoring you at this event allows us to show you our deep appreciation for the courage you displayed by risking your life. Ladies and gentlemen, it is my honor to present, as a token of that courage, this beautiful gold eagle statue to an amazing former PBA executive director and my dear friend, Nicole Kratz.” Again he took a step away from the podium and clapped along with the crowd.

On her way to the stage, Nicole stopped to acknowledge many of those in the crowd. The cheering reached a fever pitch as she approached the podium and accepted the gift from Perry. Slowly dabbing her tears with a tissue, she began to speak. “It’s with immense pride that I stand here today accepting this honor. I want to thank everybody in the Administration who contributed to this event, especially Director Perry and President Westgale.” She looked in their direction and clapped.

“In my opinion, the word *hero* is often overused. To define my actions on that awful night as *heroic* is a perfect example of that overuse. I simply did what I had to do. The real heroes are sitting over there,” she said, pointing toward the military faction of the crowd. She addressed them with heartfelt emotion. “You are

incredible people. You are a major part of what makes this the greatest country in the world. Your dedication and sacrifice are beyond words.” The crowd roared with applause.

“Unfortunately, many of you have also paid a terrible price for your patriotism. You did what you did and do what you do for your country; for our children, and our children’s children. Hopefully a day will come soon when peace will—”

A military man rose and stepped into the aisle. “Today, truth will be judge and jury!” he shouted into a sound-blast attached to his collar. “In honor of Anya Ahar, I will lead your father to eternal damnation!” He started pouring a liquid over his body; before anyone could stop him, he flicked open a lighter and set himself ablaze.

Total pandemonium broke out. Those nearest the man charged away from him in a wave of panicked humanity; everyone else scurried away to stand in a circle at a distance as event security and paramedics rushed to dampen the flames engulfing the man. What remained of the man was instantly declared dead.

A terrifying thought had entered Nicole’s mind the second she heard the words *In honor of Anya Ahar*. She immediately thought of the three young men in New York whom her father had tried in his final court case. Recalling how one of them used that very term in praise of Anya Ahar on his view-file conjured a very recent conversation she’d had with her father.

“Hey Dad, do the authorities have any leads on the fourth person believed to be involved in the attempted school bombing?” Nicole asked.

“Nothing solid, but they’re certain that he’s several years older than the others, and they also believe he has extensive military experience. The explosives they had planned to use were very sophisticated.”

What that conjured next threw Nicole into a near panic. She turned to Gil Robichaud, who happened to be standing by her side, and said urgently, “Gil, contact the Fair Justice Courthouse

in New York and tell them to immediately evacuate the building! I fear my father and everybody in that building could be in danger!”

Minutes later, after quickly informing a concerned Westgale that she was okay but the emergency wasn't over, she and the president joined Robichaud in his office.

Robichaud looked up at Nicole as they entered. “I couldn't get through to the courthouse, Nicole, but I made a call to the nearest Justice Center, and they're on it.”

“Damn it!” Nicole blurted in frustration, then her thoughts turned to the extremist. “Who was that guy?”

“I have my people trying to identify him as we speak,” Gil said as he took off his jacket, tossed it aside, and rolled up his sleeves.

Looking at Nicole shaking in terror, Westgale asked, “What is going on, Nicole?”

“We need to get hold of that courthouse!” she ordered, ignoring him.

“Nicole, tell me what is going on,” Westgale insisted, his voice anxious.

“How come the damn courthouse isn't responding?” Nicole shouted.

“We've got the guy's name,” Gil said, eyes on his flash-pad. “Sergeant JD Wren, twenty-three years of age. He served in Unit X8. He was an artillery analyst specializing in explosive devices.” Gil paused, then he looked up, his eyes wide with alarm. “Oh no! There's been a massive explosion at the Fair Justice Courthouse!”

Fighting panic, Nicole grabbed her flash-pad and attempted to reach her father. She trembled uncontrollably as the signal flashed. Six flashes, no response. Tears welled in her eyes and spilled down her face as she continued to let her flash-pad buzz. And then she heard a familiar female voice on the other end, and her knees nearly buckled: “Nicole, is that you?”

“Mom! Are you okay?”

“Yes, why do you ask?”

“How come you’re answering Dad’s flash-pad?”

“Your father’s outside with the grandkids.”

“With the grandkids? What about the retirement party at the courthouse?”

“Sadly, it was canceled. Apparently there was some kind of plumbing issue.”

“Oh, thank God!” Nicole said, gripping the desk for support. She exhaled and wiped the tears from her cheeks, then informed her mother of the explosion.

“My goodness! We would have been killed! Who did this?” Her mother started sobbing.

“Mom, listen to me. Stay calm. Get Dad and the kids in the house and tell him what I’ve told you. I’m going to have New York Justice send a group of agents over immediately,” Nicole said, now able to speak calmly.

“Nicole, what in the world is happening? Is someone trying to kill your father?”

“Please, Mom, just do what I say. The agents will be there in a few minutes. I’ll be in touch.”

Nicole then turned her attention to Gil. “Was anybody in that courthouse?”

“I’ve been told the building was empty. A crew was on its way to repair the plumbing problem and got there five minutes or so after the blast.” Gil stopped and shook his head. “My God! This could have been so tragic.”

Still shaken, but comforted by the knowledge that her parents were safe and no one was hurt, Nicole suddenly felt drained. She sat down and put her hands over her face.

“Thank God nobody was hurt, Nicole,” Westgale said gently as he handed her a tissue. He looked up as Dave Perry entered the room. “David, please take things from here. I’m going to address this matter with Colonel Peters.”

“We have to find out everything we possibly can about this guy, as well as anybody or any group he may have been associated with,” Perry said firmly to Nicole and Gil.

“This has to be linked to those three punks in New York who tried to blow up their school. Dad’s the judge who sentenced them,” Nicole said. “When that sick bastard uttered the words ‘In honor of Anya Ahar,’ it really hit me. Those words were found on the flash-pad of one of those kids. Plus, Dad told me they were still searching for the actual mastermind behind the planned bombing.”

Gil quickly pulled up a view-file on the thwarted school bombing. “Hmm... the investigators who interrogated these punks believe there is no way they were capable of creating the bombs that were discovered,” he said. He switched the flash-screen over to Sergeant Wren’s military bio. “And since this Wren character was an explosives expert, your intuition may be right on, Nicole. I’ve sent my top agents along with our bomb squad to check out his apartment here in Washington. Maybe they’ll turn up a link.”

“Do either of you think there’s a chance that Anya Ahar may be holding back some valuable information concerning these guys?” asked Nicole.

Gil switched the flash-screen back to the case file. “Well, it says here, in the midst of all this appeal stuff going on with her, she’s been questioned several times about the case and claims to have no knowledge of anything related to it. The report concludes these kids were AXE sympathizers, and became highly influenced by the doctrine.”

Gil went back to studying Sergeant JD Wren’s military file. “Wren’s record was very impressive, to say the least. His educational background and military performance ratings are both stellar, and several of his superiors stated he was always well-mannered and respectful, especially toward his fellow soldiers. One of his superiors described him as being quiet and reserved, yet displaying leadership through example.”

“What in the world could possibly have set him off to be involved in such heinous acts?” Nicole wondered.

Gil just shook his head, deep in thought as he continued reading the file. “I may have found the answer,” he said. “The report says that Sergeant Wren’s twenty-year-old sister, Tammy, recently died.

It stated the cause of death as heart failure, caused by Lethargy Reaction Syndrome, also known as LRS.”

Nicole’s eyes met his. She nodded.

Meanwhile, Gil’s specialized bomb squad unit entered the low-rise apartment building where Wren had been living and ordered an immediate evacuation. After carefully inspecting every inch of the rest of the building, Agents Gallio and Herta were given clearance to enter Wren’s apartment. They gathered whatever evidence they could and immediately headed to Gil’s office.

“Come on in,” Gil said at the knock on his office door. Agent Gallio and his assistant entered. “Please, place the box on the desk at the back of the room.”

“Thank you, Madison. That’ll be all,” Gallio said to his assistant as she placed the box of evidence on the desk.

Pulling on a pair of gloves, Gil joined Gallio and began examining the box’s contents. “Was this flash-pad checked by the bomb squad?” he asked, pointing to it.

“Yes it was, sir.”

Gil contacted Shamir and asked him to perform a thorough analysis on the flash-pad. He continued searching the box. “It looks like our friend was quite the swimmer... and quite the soldier,” Gil said as he removed several trophies and military badges from the box.

“It appears he also liked to ski.” Snickering, Gallio pointed to a black balaclava.

Gil thought back to a few days prior, when a view-file reached his desk. It was made during a UCIT feature called *Pulse of the Nation*, recorded directly outside of Washington’s famous Brave Land Shopping Center.

Cryptic appeared with its eyes flashing blue and white, its chest displaying a bright red beating heart. “Excuse me, ma’am,” it said as it approached a young woman. “With an election around the corner, I’d like to know how you feel about the state of the country, after the events of this past year.”

“Wow... I’m going to be on UCIT,” she gushed as she pushed strands of lime-colored hair away from her face. “The country’s okay, I guess. I really don’t follow politics. I mean, I was a War Within baby, so I’m pretty jaded when it comes to all this political stuff. I just don’t know why we can’t all just live as one.” She threw a kiss and walked away.

The robot then approached a middle-aged man wearing a business suit, and asked the same question. “I’m concerned, I’m very concerned. I’ve always been a PBA supporter, but after what’s happened this year, Westgale’s lost my support. There’s just been way too much mayhem within the PBA,” the man said harshly.

“Does that mean you’ll be supporting the MAA in the next election?” Cryptic asked, its eyes now matching the red of the beating heart on its chest.

“Well, with the current turmoil in both Pinia and the HKM, I’m afraid we’ll need a government that will be able to—”

A man dressed all in black, wearing a balaclava, jumped in front of Cryptic. “Damnation awaits he who brings injustice!” the man shouted into the camera. He then jumped on the back of a robo-cycle and was gone.

Gil gave his head a quick shake. “My Lord, I could’ve been responsible for the deaths of so many innocent people,” he said to Gallio, and sighed heavily.

“What the heck are you talking about?” Gallio asked.

“JD Wren. There’s no doubt that’s him in this view-file,” Gil replied, and played the clip for Gallio.

“That’s definitely his voice,” Gallio agreed.

“Even though my staff brought it to my attention, I just let it go, like a damn fool.” Gil slammed his fist onto his desk.

“What are you supposed to do? Bring in every one of these extremist nutcases?” Gallio said.

Shamir came back into Gil’s office. “I think you might like to see this,” he said, holding Wren’s flash-pad out to Gil. It displayed a floorplan of the Fair Justice Courthouse.

Gil looked up from the flash-pad and nodded once. “Nicole was correct. We have our man,” he said. “Let me see what else we have here...” He returned to looking through the contents of the box. “Do you have any idea what these are?” Gil asked Gallio as he held up a container of heart-shaped green pills.

“I have no idea,” Gallio replied, taking the bottle to study the pills.

Gil tapped his flash-pad and contacted Dr. Ahar’s secretary. “I’ll let him know, Agent Robichaud,” she replied.

Moments later, Ahar entered Gil’s office. Gallio handed him the pill bottle. “Any idea what these are?” Gil asked.

“Hmm... I’ll have to perform an analysis,” he said, looking curiously at the pills. “Heart-shaped? That’s interesting,” he added before exiting Gil’s office.

Two days later, Dr. Ahar called for an emergency meeting with Gil and Champ Sutton regarding the pills. When Ahar walked into Sutton’s office, his expression was glum. “In all my years performing scientific analysis, I’ve never come across a more bizarre predicament,” he said, sounding and looking bewildered.

He held up a container of tiny, glittery stones. “These are the minerals discovered at Moon Shade Bluff.” Gil and Champ looked at each other, confused. “I was asked to perform an analysis on them soon after they were discovered.” He then reached into his pocket and pulled out the container of heart-shaped green pills. “Now, these green pills are a combination of those minerals mixed with a low-grade painkiller,” he said, “creating the most potent narcotic I’ve ever come across.”

Sutton abruptly rose from his seat. “Whoa—are you certain of this?” he asked Ahar.

Ahar nodded. “One hundred percent.”

Gil rose and began to pace. “Were you able to determine the brand of painkiller being used?” he asked.

“It would help us a great deal if I could, but the extract from the mineral completely masked the pill,” Ahar replied.

“This is crazy.” Gil ran his hands through his hair in frustration. “Secretary Gibson’s report notes that Professor Kinsley said that several areas of that mountain have been excavated.” He pulled out his flash-pad and summoned Agent Gallio to Champ’s office.

“I need you to contact Narcotic Policing to see if they have any matches to these pills in their database,” Gil said to him as he scanned a copy of Ahar’s report.

Twenty-four hours later, Gil received a call on his flash-pad.

“Agent Robichaud, this is Federal Narcotic Policing’s lab manager, Vanessa Childress.”

“Yes. I’ve been waiting for your call. Were you and your people able to find a match?” Gil asked.

“Sir, we have no record of anything even close to resembling the makeup of those pills.”

CHAPTER 6

The thing I loved about my job was the opportunity it gave me to enjoy the beauty and tranquility of the Vexton farmlands. If there was one thing I didn't enjoy about my job, it was the annual autumn report filing. My assistant Wyatt and I set aside an entire week to tackle this tedious, but highly necessary task. Our plan was to begin the process at 7:30 a.m. so that we'd still be able to work on outdoor assignments later in the day. By 9:30 of the first day, boredom had already settled in. Wyatt was feeling it. "You know, Heath, there has to be some kind of machine out there that could do this for us," he said with a sigh.

"There probably is, but I don't think Custodian Tolliver is going to be opening up the money vault to get us one anytime soon," I answered. "Like every fall, we'll just have to work our way through it."

"Well, I guess—"

A powerful thud interrupted Wyatt. It almost knocked me out of my chair. The VLP office door crashed to the floor. When I turned around all I could see was a blur of helmets charging toward me. "We're the Federal Narcotic Police; put your arms in the air—now!" their leader growled.

I stared along the barrels of five laser-rifles pointing at my head. Five more were pointing at Wyatt.

I finally found my voice. "Wha—what is going on here?" I asked. I got no reply. Wyatt and I were handcuffed and whisked away to a van, where we were ordered to provide the codes to all the VLP

flash-screens, and our flash-pads were confiscated. Two agents guarded us while the others left to search the VLP building. The team leader and a driver sat in the front of the van. At a nod from the leader, the driver started the van and guided it away from the VLP building.

The van took us to the Vexton Justice Center, where we were taken to separate interrogation rooms. As I was being led into the room, I crossed paths with Sharon. We exchanged wide-eyed looks.

“Heath! What in the world is going on?” she asked. My guards gave us no opportunity to talk; the one behind me nudged me in the back and I stumbled forward.

Moments later, while I sat in the dreary interrogation room, waiting to learn why I was there, I heard the door slowly open. I looked up and saw Sharon. She pulled up a chair and sat in front of me. “It’s going to be all right, honey,” she said in a hushed voice, trying to calm me down.

“What is going on? What am I doing here? Can they do this?” I asked, my heart pounding.

Sharon looked at me with concern. “Under the New Order Treaty, the Federal Narcotic Police have immense power. It seems crazy, but they’re allowed to search any premises, even without a warrant,” Sharon said.

“Why in the hell are they searching the VLP office?”

Sharon bit her lower lip. “They’re not just searching your office; they’re also searching our home.”

“Our home?” I exclaimed. “What in the world is going on?”

Sharon sighed. It sounded shaky, belying her calm façade. “Poor Kayla; they scared the hell out of her. They just came charging into the house. Thank God Riley’s at school.”

“But why? Why is this happening?”

“Those glittery minerals you and Kinsley found at Moon Shade Bluff—well, the authorities believe they’re being used to create a very potent narcotic. Apparently they found the drugs in the apartment of the extremist who set himself on fire at the event honoring Nicole Kratz.”

“What? And they think I have something to do with this? That’s insane. I’m the one who had Kinsley send the report on those minerals in the first place.”

Sharon glanced back toward the door. “Heath, I have to get out of here. I’m not supposed to be in here speaking with you. Just answer their questions. We’ll get this straightened out.” She reached across the table and gave my hand a squeeze, then hurried out of the room.

Minutes later, I looked up and saw Gil Robichaud standing in the doorway. When I was testifying in the Anya Ahar hearing, I’d briefly met Agent Robichaud and realized very quickly just how passionate he was about his job. When he entered the room he removed his jacket and hung it on the wall. He was physically powerful, with arms the size of most people’s legs. I remember Beverley once telling me that he used to compete as a bodybuilder. Considered tough but fair, he was far more emotive than analytical.

“Good morning, Mr. Claremont. Now, I’m hoping you’ll be cooperative and answer my questions. Of course, I must inform you of your right to have an attorney present, if you so wish.”

“I won’t need an attorney, Agent Robichaud,” I replied. “I’ve nothing to hide. In fact, I have no clue why I’m even here.”

“Very well. Let’s begin,” he said. “Please tell me, Mr. Claremont, what it was that led you and Professor Kinsley to perform the recent excavation at Moon Shade Bluff?”

As much as I wanted to keep my theory that Riley was cured by the Vexton Gleam a secret, I knew I had to be honest, so I explained.

“You believe a beam of light above that mountain cured your son of LRS?” Robichaud responded, his voice carefully neutral.

“That’s correct, sir. I know it’s hard to believe, but I’m convinced, and so is the professor. There is absolutely no other way my son could have been cured of that horrible, life-threatening illness,” I replied.

“Has this *theory* of yours been reported to the authorities, or at least to the office of your town’s custodian?” Robichaud asked.

“No, I didn’t want my son’s life to become some kind of freak show,” I replied.

Robichaud thought for a moment before responding. He sighed and chuckled lightly. “Over the years, I’ve been involved with many mysterious events. I’ve had witnesses and even my own men claim to have had encounters with flying saucers. I even had one agent tell me he once encountered a three-headed monster with purple eyes. I’ll have to add this one to the list.”

“I’m being honest with you, Agent Robichaud. The other day when I was with the professor was the first time I ever saw those minerals. And right away, we both agreed it’d be best to bring the discovery to the attention of Secretary Gibson. If I was involved in something criminal, why would I have done that?”

“That was a wise thing to do. Now, your assistant, Wyatt Murphy: what can you tell me about that young man?”

“He’s dedicated to the VLP, a diligent worker, always respectful, gets along well with the residents of Vexton. I’ve never had a single problem with him.”

“Does he have autonomy within the VLP?”

“No, he reports to me.”

“What can you tell me about his personal life?”

“Not a heck of a lot. He’s twenty-four years old and he’s single. Let me think... I know he occasionally helps out at his family’s candy company, Vexton Sweet World Candy, and he has a strong interest in magic. My son always gets a kick out of these magic tricks he performs.”

“Are you aware that he has a brother out in Florida who’s had past arrests for drug trafficking?” Robichaud asked, his brows pinched with concern.

“Yeah... a brother he hasn’t spoken with for the last eight years,” I replied. “Is that what this is about? Is this why the Narcotic Police came charging into my office and my home?” I tried to remain calm, but my anger was starting to get the best of me.

“Please understand, Mr. Claremont, this is not a personal action against you. This has to be done. The Federal Narcotic Police, as

they do in all cases, will not leave a stone unturned,” Robichaud said solemnly. “Once the raids are completed we’ll examine all banking records pertaining to the VLP, and belonging to you and Mr. Murphy, and we’ll know where things stand. And if you and your assistant have nothing to hide, as you claim is the case, then you’ll be fine.”

For the next couple of days, while the raids were being conducted, Neville Hollis let us stay in one of his guesthouses. “To put you guys through this is absolutely insane,” Neville said as we spent the afternoon strolling about the sprawling farmland. “I can’t believe they actually suspended you, Sharon.”

“Well, I could’ve appealed, but since it’ll only be for two days, I didn’t feel it was worth it,” Sharon said matter-of-factly.

Nathan Hollis caught up with us. “Wow, I was just by Moon Shade Bluff, and you should see what’s happening,” he exclaimed. “They have soldiers surrounding it, and it looks like they’ve brought in the entire Department of Agriculture and Environmental Safety. Secretary Gibson was even there.”

Two days later, I was permitted to return to work. The sergeant in charge of the case was waiting for me when I arrived. “Thank you for your cooperation, Mr. Claremont. I apologize for the inconvenience, but I hope you can appreciate the fact we had a job to do,” he said. “You and your assistant have been cleared, and are permitted to carry on business as usual, with the exception of the area atop and in and around Moon Shade Bluff. It is currently under the jurisdiction of the federal government. Actually, Secretary Gibson has requested that you and DA Claremont meet her at the base of the mountain at noon.”

When we arrived, Sharon and I were astounded at what we saw. Rank upon rank of soldiers guarded the mountain, and under Beverley Gibson’s direction, several areas of the mountain were being thoroughly inspected. To see such a glorious area of Vexton, synonymous with freedom and innocence, being

engulfed by paranoia and bureaucracy was unsettling, to say the least.

When Beverley came down to the base of the mountain to meet us, I immediately noticed how worn out she looked. “Sharon, Heath, wonderful to see you. I heard you went through quite an ordeal,” she said as if apologizing.

“Yeah, let’s just say I’m glad it’s over,” I sighed.

“We’ve been at it like mad out here. My people have been trying to gauge when those holes were made,” Beverley said, sounding frustrated. “Whoever did this, sure did an amazing job at covering them up.”

“Any progress?” Sharon asked.

“So far, all anybody can conclude, including Professor Kinsley, is that the excavations had to have taken place within the last fifty years or so,” Beverley replied.

“Whoever did it certainly was a professional,” I said, gazing up at the mountain. “It took Kinsley’s trained eye to notice something wasn’t right.”

“The other question that’s been pounding in my head is, why in the world Moon Shade Bluff? Did they come to the mountain knowing that specific type of mineral lay below the surface?” Beverley said, perplexed.

* * *

“You know, Hector, this old, run-down theater is actually considered a historical landmark,” Mr. Sylvain said. He sat on an old wooden chair, front and center on the Regal Show Room’s stage, addressing Hector and Vincent, who sat in the first row. “Personally, I’ve never had any interest in the arts. I’ve heard it said that *true art* is a personal expression of angst. Now, why would I, why should I, care about the musings of tortured souls who want the world to share in their misery?” He looked directly down at Vincent and asked, “How about you, Vincent; do you enjoy the arts?”

“I must admit, I do enjoy a good movie, sir,” Vincent replied with a subtle smile.

“And what is it you look for in a movie?” Sylvain asked.

“Uh... a good plot with lots of suspense, and really good acting,” Vincent replied.

“Ah... and what is it you feel makes a good actor?”

Vincent pinched his eyebrows together, wondering where this was leading. “Hmm... I guess it’s simply about convincing people you’re somebody other than who you really are.”

“Is that what you are, Vincent, an actor? A two-bit fake?” Sylvain shouted, rising.

“I don’t know what you mean, sir,” Vincent blurted.

Sylvain pointed to the wooden chair he’d been sitting on. “Do you see this chair?” he shouted. He threw off his suit jacket. With a roaring growl, he lifted the chair and began slamming it against the floorboards, again and again, until its mortise and tenon joints loosened, skewing the chair’s form. He threw it to the floor and stomped on it until it lay in pieces on the stage. He stood glaring at the remnants, breathing heavily.

Vincent and Hector sat frozen in their seats.

Sylvain pulled a container of green, heart-shaped pills from his pocket and held it up. “Why did you sell them to that soldier?” he demanded of Vincent. “Who else have you sold them to?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, sir—honestly,” Vincent said. He began to tremble.

“If you continue selling these pills here in America—” Sylvain paused and pointed to the pile of wood “—that’ll be you!”

Sylvain stepped down off the stage to stand in front of Vincent. “Get up!” he roared. As Vincent rose from his seat, he grabbed him tightly by his shirt collar and yanked him forward. “Do you understand?!”

Vincent quivered like a leaf in a tornado. “Yes, sir,” he mumbled. “I understand.”

“Now get the hell out of here, and wait for future instructions,” Sylvain growled.

As Vincent left, Sylvain sat down in the seat beside Hector. He took another deep breath, and sneered. “If I were permitted to,

I would've killed that little ingrate, right here and now. God help us. Those we serve will not stand for this foolishness. That'll be all, Hector. I'm waiting to meet with our employer."

Hector nodded once, and left quickly.

The meetings with his "employer" were always conducted in the same manner. Mr. Sylvain, whose real name was Evan Sylvester, would step into the back of a grand-electro and be driven to the meeting. At no time would he see the driver. When the vehicle reached the building, directions would be sent to Mr. Sylvain's flash-pad, directing him to a waiting room where he would sometimes sit for over an hour.

Another message on his flash-pad would order him to enter the room on the far side of the only other door in the waiting room. When he entered the room, he'd sit in front of a large plastic partition. He could not see his employer through the partition, but his employer could see him. The employer's voice was altered; Sylvain always felt as if he were speaking to a young child. An opening at the bottom of the partition allowed for an exchange of items.

The mysterious nature of the arrangement made Sylvain uneasy, but he wasn't complaining—the pay was beyond his wildest dreams. Plus he thrived on the excitement and challenge of managing the organization's lucrative drug-trafficking operation.

As Sylvain waited for the grand-electro in the theater's backstage area, he received a flash-message informing him that the car had arrived, and that he should exit through the back door. As he opened the door latch, he heard footsteps, and froze. Something was not right. The door was yanked open, revealing two large men, brandishing, of all things, shining swords. He turned to run, only to find another man behind him. Sylvain did the only thing left for him to do: he pleaded for his life.

Hector was sitting in his apartment, watching a feature on grizzly bears, when he received a message on his flash-pad: his employer wished to meet with him. Minutes later, he left his apartment and entered a royal blue grand-electro.

After sitting nervously in the waiting room of a luxurious office suite for thirty minutes, he received another message ordering him to enter the office in front of him. He paused as he entered the room, both afraid and confused. A partition divided the room in half, and he found the result oppressive.

“Welcome, Mr. Carlos... Hector. Have a seat,” a child-like voice said from behind the partition. “You look very nervous; there’s no need to be.”

“Can you see me?” Hector asked, feeling very uneasy.

“Yes, as clear as day,” replied the voice. “Please, accept this.” A gloved hand slid an envelope through an opening at the bottom of the partition. “Go ahead, open it,” the voice instructed.

Hector gaped at the contents of the envelope then looked up at the partition. “Whoa... is this for me?”

“Yes, and it’s made from pure gold. Please accept it as a token of our appreciation,” the voice replied.

“I thank you very much, but I don’t understand... Where’s Sylvain? How come I’m here and he isn’t?” asked Hector.

“Well, Hector, there’s been a change within the organization. Evan Sylvester, or Mr. Sylvain as you know him, will no longer be with us,” the voice answered.

Suddenly a view-file of Sylvain berating Vincent began playing on the side wall. “Absolutely disgusting. Behaving like a rabid animal—this is a perfect example of how *not* to behave,” the voice said as the view-file played. Hector again watched Sylvain stomping on the wooden chair, then threatening Vincent. “The organization expects far better from our people, and we’re certain you’ll replace that *wild dog* behavior with the dignity we’re looking for. We’ve been watching you, Mr. Carlos, and have been very pleased with what we’ve seen,” the voice added as the view-file ended.

“Please be assured, I will continue to serve the organization in a most professional manner,” Hector said.

The gloved hand slid a flash-pad under the partition. “This device will now act as your brain, your conscience, and your heartbeat,” the voice said, strangely high with excitement. “It will

contain all the essential information you require to fulfill your duties to the organization, updated regularly. You will be expected to input your weekly reports into the device. Take some time over the next couple of days to become familiar with the data contained within.” Hector stared at the pad, as he listened. “Every byte of data entered into this machine will be encrypted with an impenetrable code, and from afar, the organization will maintain control of the device at all times. If anyone other than you touches this flash-pad, it will automatically fade to black.”

“And if I have questions?” asked Hector.

“Hopefully, all will be in order, but if you are ever uncertain of something, you’d be best advised to send us a flash-message. Whatever you do, Mr. Carlos, don’t make the same mistake Mr. Sylvain consistently made,” said the voice solemnly.

“And that was?”

“He forgot that his duty was to *serve* this organization, and not try to *control* it. If you remember this one simple yet ever so important piece of advice, you’ll do absolutely fine.

“Thank you, Hector. Your car is waiting outside.”

When he arrived home, Hector was too wound up to sleep. Instead, he decided to connect his newly acquired flash-pad to the large flash-screen in his living room. As Sylvain’s underling, he’d come to understand the basic framework of the organization, but more often than not, Sylvain had kept him in the dark on most issues.

The information contained in the flash-pad was highly detailed and very organized. Within minutes of studying the data, a message appeared on the screen: *Welcome Hector, congratulations on your appointment. You should be very proud of yourself.* A series of beeps followed. And then the words: *Alert! Tomorrow morning, you will discover several boxes in the backstage area of the theater. Twelve are for you and the other box is for Vincent. Further instructions will follow. Good night.*

The next morning, as directed, Hector made his way to the vacant theater. When he entered the backstage area, he immediately

noticed the boxes piled up in the corner. He lifted the topmost box—it was heavier than he'd thought it would be—and placed it on a nearby table to open with a laser-stick. He looked inside. It contained several bags filled with heart-shaped green pills. The contents of the next eleven boxes were exactly the same.

A few minutes after he'd finished weighing the contents of the bags, he received a flash-message from his employer.

Vincent entered as he was reading the message. "Whoa, that's a lot of sweet candy!" he said with a grin as he gazed at the pills.

"There's a box for you. Over there in the corner," Hector said, gesturing toward the box.

"For me?" Vincent replied, surprised. "My own batch of sweet candy," he almost crooned, walking toward the box. "Where's the Polar Bear?" he asked as he opened the box, referring to Sylvain by another of his monikers.

"Your guess is as good as mine," Hector answered.

Vincent looked inside the box, and abruptly grimaced in disgust. "What in the world—oh my Lord!" he whimpered, closing the box and turning away. "I guess that answers my question," he murmured as he headed into the theater. Hector followed. Vincent plopped himself down on a Victorian-era sofa and sat with his head in his hands, trembling. Hector stood before him. Vincent dropped his hands and looked up at Hector. "What in the hell is going on?" Vincent cried. "How could you let me open that box, knowing what I'd find inside?"

"Honestly, I had no idea—you have to believe me," Hector said sincerely.

"Do you know who killed him, and why?" Vincent asked.

"Yes, I do... Let's go grab a coffee at the diner," Hector replied.

After making certain the pills were safely stored, they exited the theater and headed to the nearby diner. Vincent was a bundle of nerves, every stride tentative, eyes surveying the area around him. As a police robo-cycle soared past with its siren wailing, he shivered with fear. Hector was mildly surprised at this reaction from the streetwise and hardened Vincenzo Bruno; although quiet and reserved, his record was the main reason the organization had brought him on board.

When the two men entered the diner they headed toward a private booth in the corner. Still anxious, even with his back to a wall, Vincent leaned forward. “So, who killed Sylvain, and why?” he whispered.

“The organization,” Hector murmured.

Vincent surveyed the surrounding tables to ensure there were no patrons within earshot. “You’re telling me our employer killed the Polar Bear,” he said, his brows pinched with concern. “Why would they do that?”

“They caught him, Vince. *He* was the one who sold the green-hearts to the soldier, here in the US. And the shipment you saw at the theater—that was the next load he was planning to move,” Hector explained.

“Here in the US?”

“Yes, and by selling those pills on American soil, Sylvain broke the organization’s number one rule.”

“And to think that jackass was trying to place the blame on me,” Vincent sneered.

“I don’t know, Vincent... something tells me this entire thing could implode at any time.” Hector frowned. “I’m very concerned,” he admitted.

Vincent leaned forward and looked him directly in the eyes. “You’re not thinking of abandoning ship, are you? Because if you think—”

Hector interrupted. “No, no, don’t get me wrong; the day I entered into this operation I was well aware there was no turning back. Sometimes I just wish I actually knew who I was working for. It would also be helpful to know where in the hell those damn pills are actually being shipped.” He paused. “But it’s all so financially lucrative... well, I guess that outweighs the negatives.”

“Good, because we’re stuck in this together,” Vincent said.

* * *

“Good morning, Ms. Wren,” Attorney General Champ Sutton said gently. “I really appreciate you meeting with me during such a difficult

time.” After reviewing the file sent to him by Gil, Champ had decided interviewing JD Wren’s mother was the logical next step.

Patricia Wren sat in front of Champ, but her eyes were empty, her expression bleak. Having lost her daughter and son in such a short period of time, and both in such horrific manners, it was no surprise she was distraught. Champ placed a glass of water in front of her, and she finally leaned back in her chair and sighed. “I really messed up, Mr. Sutton. I should have seen the signs,” she said. Tears welled in her eyes.

“Such as?”

“His anger. The day his sister was diagnosed with LRS, JD became filled with resentment. Then when I accepted that money... well, I guess that was the point of no return.”

“What money are you referring to?”

“The \$12 million Gerald Levin paid as compensation for Tammy’s death. JD was furious with me for accepting that payment. He said I made ‘a deal with the devil,’” Patricia replied with feeling. “I would trade every cent of that damn money to once again see the smiling faces of my beautiful son and daughter.” She broke down in sobs.

“If you would like to continue this at another time, I understand,” Champ said gently, moving a tissue box closer to her elbow.

Patricia Wren shook her head, blew her nose, and regained her composure. “I’m so sorry, Mr. Sutton. Please continue.”

“So you were saying JD’s anger started when your daughter got sick...”

“Yes, after Tammy was diagnosed with LRS. You see, JD blamed her illness on her Home Servant robot right from the beginning—well before it was proven that those bloody machines were actually making young Americans sick.”

“Did he have some kind of inside knowledge about the machines?”

Patricia quickly shook her head. “Oh no. But when he heard the robots were being made in the HKM, he became very suspicious. So suspicious, in fact, that he personally contacted your ATSS Director, Rosemary Crisp, with his concerns,” Patricia answered.

“Did she turn him away?” asked Champ.

“Oh no, she was actually very obliging. She invited him to her office, where she even went as far as showing him the supposed specs for the robots. Unlike most people, JD understood all that technical jargon—and of course, being the crook she was, what Rosemary Crisp showed my son were fake specs. JD didn’t know the specs were fake, but his intuition told him something was not right, so he pursued it further,” Patricia said solemnly.

“How so?”

“He sent a flash-message expressing his ongoing concerns directly to the president’s office.”

“Did he receive a response?”

“Yes, he did. The response came from Nicole Kratz’s office and stated that his concerns had already been addressed by the ATSS, and that there would be no further review.”

Champ sighed. “It still pains me to think that Rosemary Crisp acted in such a heinous manner, and was part of such a sinister scheme.”

“I realize it’s no excuse for my son to have done what he did, but I know he felt betrayed by a government he was so dedicated to. I guess he lost control of his emotions.”

Champ broached the next subject carefully. “Now, we discovered a container of highly potent drugs in JD’s apartment,” he said gently. “Were you aware of your son being involved with narcotics?”

Patricia shook her head in disbelief. “Not at all. JD was as wholesome a young man as you’d ever meet. He was a champion swimmer, and a very dedicated soldier. These awful things he did... they were definitely not a reflection of my son’s true character.”

“I believe you, ma’am, and I appreciate the fact you’ve enlightened me as to *why* your son spiraled into a world of darkness, but to help ensure the ongoing safety of the country, my associates and I must learn everything we can about your son, and those he was involved with,” Champ said. “So, if anything—and I mean anything—comes to mind, I ask you to please contact my office.”

Patricia Wren nodded, looking down at the tissue wadded in her hand. “Of course,” she said.

CHAPTER 7

Over the years, the highly educated Cobra Pix had remained a polarizing figure. Said to be ruthless, and extremely wealthy, he treasured his homeland and disdained America, which he'd demonstrated by threatening to build his own terror group within the country. When his father's longtime reign as Pinia's leader came to an end, he'd hoped to follow in his footsteps. Many praised him for his personal achievements and believed he was the man to lead Pinia into the future. However, accusations that he'd used intimidation tactics and violence to gain political attention quickly dashed that dream. He maintained that these accusations were unjustified, and that he had had to fight fire with fire when it came to dealing with what he claimed was a highly corrupt Pinian government.

The Battle of Oria was the key event that established Pix's hatred toward America, and his obsession with taking over Pinia. Oria was a small country just outside of Pinia. Due to geographic proximity, a majority of Pinians believed Oria should be a region of Pinia. When Pix's father received inside information that the western region of Oria was rich in metal ores, his government brought the matter to the World Coalition in an attempt to merge the two countries. His request was denied, and he was warned that if his government attempted to take over Oria, it would have to answer to the rest of the world. He retreated.

Years later, a friendlier Pinian government made a goodwill gesture by donating state-of-the-art mining equipment and manpower

to Oria's Land Development Program. To the previously poor country's delight, enormous quantities of highly valued metal ores were discovered in the western part of the region.

When Cobra received word of this, he was outraged. He believed it was his father's regime that had discovered this mine, and that the information had been stolen. He decided to plan a surprise attack on Oria, but little did he know, the Orian government had struck a deal with a large American broker. American Intelligence got word of Pix's planned attack and felt it was vital to intervene.

After receiving permission from the Outer Commission, Westgale ordered his own surprise attack on Cobra Pix and his army, the Iron Lotus. The Lotus refused to retreat, and in the ensuing battle, six of Cobra Pix's seven sons were killed by US forces. Pix's aspirations to become president were crushed, while his hatred of America reached an all-time high.

Pix believed those who opposed his quest for power were engaging in a form of "hideous propaganda"—he was being punished by those who despised his tyrannical father, he claimed. However, over the years, Pix continued building up his military and through his own propaganda, established a powerful opposition to the more diplomatically minded Pinian government, while at the same time, vowing to seek revenge against America.

The Iron Lotus sent a notice to the UCIT network indicating that Cobra Pix had an urgent message for America, and that a view-file of that message would be relayed within the next hour. The Freedom Home was informed immediately, and the Administration's key players assembled in the main conference room to view the message.

As it began, the view-file, which had been recorded three days prior, showed giggling youngsters, boys and girls, picking fruit from a tree, while four uniformed men watched over them. The scene suddenly switched to a powerfully built man dressed in a red and black uniform, sitting cross-legged on a large red blanket in the heart of a dense forest. On either side of him stood flags bearing the Iron Lotus insignia: a red and black dragon emerging from silver flowers.

“Good day,” he said. The camera moved in closer. His head was cleanly shaven and his eyebrows plucked away, replaced by thinly penciled red lines. “I am Cobra Pix. I’m here representing the Iron Lotus, and the treasured people of Pinia.

“Soon Pinia will again be a land of greatness. A warning to America: do not attempt to impede the awakening of the Pinian spirit; this will not be tolerated. If we have even the slightest suspicion that you are interfering with our quest to resurrect our sacred country from the depths of indignity, we will have no choice but to begin executing the dozen Pinian government officials we are currently holding captive.”

The scene shifted back to the children, still joyfully picking fruit, and the view-file ended, to gasps of disbelief in the Freedom Home conference room. The tension was palpable. “That rotten bastard. He just told us he’s prepared to kill his own people—his own people!” Dave Perry blurted.

Westgale stood to address the group. “It sickens me that in this day and age, people like *that* are still walking the Earth.” He sighed heavily, then looked across the room, trying to calm his escalating anger. In a more relaxed tone he added, “The sad reality is, I don’t believe he’s bluffing. We’ll definitely need to keep all eyes on this maniac.”

* * *

After receiving overwhelming approval from the MAA Strategic Council, Gerald Levin was now the official leader of the Militant Alliance of America. Considering Cobra Pix’s recent takeover of Pinia, the MAA believed the timing was perfect for Gerald to stand before the American public, and he did so in the groomed front yard of the MAA’s newly renovated headquarters. Dressed in a navy blue designer suit, Gerald stood on the stage backed by the MAA’s Strategic Council.

“What an honor,” he began. “There are no words to define how I am feeling at this moment. It’s time to reignite the flame of America! The American people deserve far better than they’re getting!” he

exclaimed. "I think we've all had enough of the Westgale circus, haven't we? I think it's time the Freedom Home welcomes a new tenant.

"I'm proud and honored to lead the Military Alliance of America, and I'll be even more honored when I'm leading the United States of America!" he added. The council gave him a standing ovation.

He then spoke of his past accomplishments, and relayed his vision for America. "Once again, we will lead the world! I'm tired of this great country having to answer to some international commission. Under my presidency, this will no longer be the case. Sure, we owe a massive debt to the Outer Commission, but unlike the inept Westgale, I will have that debt paid off by that ever so crucial deadline. I guarantee you, I will not sit idly by and watch this country fall into the hands of the outside world. I will restore America's treasured independence!"

With red flashing eyes and its chest displaying a neon Mount Rushmore, Cryptic made its way toward the podium. "Are you concerned about your lack of political experience?" the robot asked.

"Well, to answer your question, all one has to do is consider President Westgale. Here's a man who's been a career politician—and look at the mess he's made," Levin said, his tone deprecating.

"How do you answer those who may be concerned you'll turn the Freedom Home into another Vexton-Tech?" Cryptic's eyes suddenly stopped flashing.

Gerald remained relaxed. "First of all, leadership is about accepting responsibility in both good times and bad. My son and I built Vexton-Tech into the largest tech company in the country," he said, his tone confident. "Unfortunately we fell victim to an elaborate and sinister plot masterminded by President Westgale's very own defense director. And yes, I do accept responsibility for the pain and sadness it caused, but in the aftermath, I believe I'm doing everything humanly possible to sincerely address the matter."

Cryptic then displayed an image of the Iron Lotus insignia, and asked, "Do you believe America should be concerned about Cobra Pix?"

Gerald thought for a moment and then leaned toward the sound-blast. "It's really not my intention to address specific issues today, but I realize this particular matter is of great importance," he said, raising his voice. "Yes, America should be highly concerned. The fact is, the Westgale Administration should have eliminated Cobra Pix and the Iron Lotus back when the Outer Commission gave the approval to do so."

"If you become president, how will you deal with Cobra Pix and the Iron Lotus?" Cryptic asked.

"I guess you'll have to wait and see," Gerald replied with a grin. His entourage swept in, whisking him away from further questions.

* * *

"Ha... leave it to Gerald Levin to end things in such a dramatic fashion," Dave Perry said to Westgale as they watched the press conference come to a conclusion. Then he sighed and rubbed his eyes before he looked up and said seriously, "Do you see this all leading to a war, sir?"

Westgale laced his hands together behind his head and sat back in his chair, exhaling slowly. "That'll all depend on whether Levin and the MAA win this election. If they do, it'll be a certainty."

Perry stood up and stared at the American flag behind Westgale's desk. "And with the HKM supporting Pix's Pinia... well, we'd probably be talking about the war to end all wars."

Westgale suddenly leaned forward and peered earnestly up at Perry. "We need to win this damn election," he said firmly.

"We're counting on *you* to do that very thing, sir."

Westgale stood and began to slowly pace. "Thanks, David." He stopped and looked at Perry. "But... I've been giving it some deep thought, and I fear my time is done. After all that's happened over the last year, I've lost the one thing every leader requires: the confidence of his followers." He stopped and stared out his office window. "I have to step aside. It's the only chance the PBA will have."

Perry was speechless for a moment. "Wow, that comes as a shock, sir," he finally said.

“Well, there’s no time for lamenting. We must move forward with renewed energy. And *you*, my friend, are the perfect person to bring us that energy!” Westgale insisted. “I’d gladly give you my endorsement.”

“Thank you, sir; I’m honored,” Perry replied. “I must admit, there was a time I dreamt of being president, but now that dream turns into a nightmare thanks to my past troubles,” he said quietly. “And I’ve come to accept the fact that my past will always be a part of me. I’ve also come to realize I’ll never live that dream because of it.”

Westgale nodded. “I understand, David. I don’t think constantly having those past indiscretions thrown in your face and those of your family would be fair to anyone,” he agreed reluctantly.

It was Perry’s turn to pace, deep in thought. “I believe the person best suited to run this party and this country is Nicole,” he said with conviction.

A smile spread across Westgale’s face as he thought that over. “I couldn’t agree more,” he replied.

“Well, since we’ve both been invited to her father’s retirement party, that’ll give us an opportunity to address the matter then,” Perry suggested.

* * *

Nicole and the rest of the Kratz family were thrilled to finally have the opportunity to properly celebrate the judge’s retirement. The celebration took place at the luxurious New York City Prestige Hotel. The praise Judge Kratz received came primarily from those he convicted, for the compassion and care he showed them. He always made certain those who deserved to be punished were punished adequately, but he also made a point to make sure the punishment fit both the crime and the person who committed the crime.

After his family and several colleagues had finished telling their favorite Judge Kratz stories, a lady named Kendra Jenkins took the podium. “As many of you in this room are aware, my son Darius was recently in the news when he and his friends planned to blow up their high school here in New York City,” she said, holding a tissue ready between her fingers. “I’m the mother of three boys. Darius is my

oldest. Two years ago, my husband lost his life in Oria. He was a soldier. The loss of his father sent Darius into a dreadful tailspin which resulted in his delinquent behavior.” She dabbed her tears with the tissue and continued.

“Sadly, having to work two jobs, I wasn’t able to be there for him like I needed to be. After Judge Kratz penalized Darius for his crime, he reached out to him. He spent hours speaking with him, trying to understand his pain, helping him to find a light from within his world of darkness.” Tears now flowed down her cheeks. “This incredible man then made a point of visiting me and my sons, providing us with a shoulder to lean on... to cry on. He even went so far as to help pay the soccer registration fee, out of his own pocket, for my two other sons, which I couldn’t afford.” Smiling, she looked directly at Judge Kratz. “I thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

During the event, Westgale and Dave Perry, both surrounded by security personnel, did their best to maintain a low profile. And after, Nicole secured a private conference room in the hotel for the Kratz family and invited guests to spend time with the country’s two most powerful men. When Nicole and Judge Kratz entered the room, they headed over to exchange pleasantries with Westgale and Perry.

Tears filled Dave’s eyes. “It’s been far too long, sir. The legal world is losing a great man,” he said, reaching out to embrace the judge.

“David, I’m so glad you and the president were able to attend, especially considering what’s been happening recently back in Washington,” the judge said. He gestured toward the buffet table in invitation, and he and Perry moved toward it. “I’m sure you gentlemen barely find time to breathe.”

“I wouldn’t have missed this event for the world. If it wasn’t for your faith in me back in my addiction days, the only chance I would have had of getting into the Freedom Home would’ve been taking one of those boring tours—and even then, they probably would have denied me access,” Perry quipped.

He and the judge rejoined Nicole and Westgale for some food, drink, and conversation before the judge excused himself to return to the main party room.

“So, Mr. President, I thought by now you would’ve officially announced your candidacy for the upcoming election,” Nicole said with a raised brow.

“There’s a very good reason why I haven’t,” Westgale said with a sheepish grin.

“Yeah, I guess that whole Vexton crime thing has left everything in limbo,” Nicole responded.

“It certainly made life at the Freedom Home a little crazy, but that’s not the reason,” Westgale said.

“Oh?” Nicole prompted.

“The reason I haven’t made an announcement is because I’m not running for reelection,” Westgale said.

Nicole turned to Perry. “Is he serious, David?”

“Regrettably, he is,” Perry answered.

“Well, President Perry sure has a nice ring to it,” she said, smiling.

“Not going to happen,” Perry deadpanned, exchanging a glance with Westgale. She instantly realized what they had in mind. “Oh my Lord. Are you gentlemen serious?”

Westgale took her by the hand and led her to a sofa, where they both sat down. Perry remained standing in front of them. “The PBA needs you, my dear,” Westgale said firmly. “This country needs you. As I told David the other day, after what has transpired within this Administration over the last year, it’s obvious I’ve lost the confidence of the American public.” Nicole looked up at Perry, who was nodding in agreement. “With Gerald Levin now being seen as some kind of hero for handling his company’s tragedy the way he has... well, unless a drastic change is made within the PBA, there’s no doubt in my mind that the Militant Alliance of America will be taking over the Freedom Home.”

Looking both serious and confused, Nicole rose. “You’ll have to forgive my puzzlement, but have you forgotten I resigned as your executive director, sir?” she said calmly.

“Forgotten? It’s a day I’ll never forget. It was one of the most honorable and courageous things I’ve ever seen a person do. And that’s what this Administration needs: honor, and courage,” Westgale said.

She looked at Perry. “And David—are you forgetting our battle in the Judicial Triangle?” she said sheepishly.

“Ah... It’s very difficult for me to forget a battle I clearly lost,” Perry replied.

“Lost?” Nicole retorted.

“Oh yeah; based on the arguments you made in that courtroom, there is absolutely no way your request should have been denied. In all honesty, I was completely shocked it was. But then again, at the time, just as it is now, the entire PBA was in a very fragile state. We need to change that, Nicole, and I agree with the president—you’re our only hope!” Perry said.

“But what about Justice Malone, Gloria Lee, and the three other candidates?” Nicole asked.

“Oh, they’re all good people, intelligent and hardworking, but there’s one problem. They’re not presidential material,” Westgale said with conviction.

Nicole took a deep breath. “Wow. I honestly didn’t see this coming.” She exhaled. “Please give me a few days to think this over. I’ll need to address this with my family. I just don’t know...”

“Okay, but please understand, time is of the essence,” Westgale replied.

A few days later, Nicole requested a meeting with Westgale, who ordered the presidential jet to pick her up and bring her to the Freedom Home. It was a fabulous autumn afternoon, so they decided to hold the meeting in the Field of Honor.

“I must say, your father’s gala was an impressive event,” Westgale said as they walked through the field.

“Yes, and he was honored to have you and David join in the celebration,” Nicole replied with a smile.

“So, what’s he going to do with his time, now that he’s hung up the gavel?”

“Oh, knowing my father, he won’t be sitting around the house watching time slip away. I know he’s planning to become more

involved with his charities. As a matter of fact, he's in the process of setting up a new foundation to assist ex-cons and those with substance abuse problems."

They reached an area of the field that paid tribute to American politics and paused to watch a view-file depicting the history of the PBA. As anxious as Westgale was to hear Nicole's answer, he didn't want to pressure her.

"Are we ever going to get it right?" Nicole lamented. "We're supposed to learn from the past, yet we're always so caught up in the present that we forget the valuable lessons of history."

"Yeah, and it's amazing how poorly we sometimes treat each other. We become so self-absorbed that we lose proper perspective. And boy, have I been guilty of that lately," Westgale said.

Nicole chuckled, but said, "That's not true. You've done an outstanding job, under very difficult circumstances. I'm certain there'll be quite a lengthy view-file playing in this field, displaying your achievements. I just hope I'll be able to continue where you left off."

"Whoa—does that mean what I think it does?"

Nicole nodded. "I'll do it. But under one condition."

"That being?"

"You give Anya Ahar the opportunity to be granted a permanent stay of execution."

Westgale ran his hands over his face. "My Lord, Nicole. Do you realize what you're asking?"

"Yes. I'm asking for the chance to help redeem the life of a very special young lady."

"A young lady who has inspired hatred toward everything this country stands for."

"And do you think executing her will solve the problem?"

"No, but it will send a message to those who think it's okay to go around creating anarchy, and living through that bloody doctrine."

"We can send all the messages we want, but if we don't attack the root of the problem, we'll forever be chasing the solution."

"That being?"

"We need to begin listening to our youth. If we continue to

suppress their right to be heard, this country will never progress.”

“Where’s the line, Nicole? Are you suggesting we should also free Dwight Wagner, and just sit back and let anarchy rule the day?”

Nicole shook her head. “Anya’s case is different. I believe that underneath all that anger and sorrow, there’s a bright light waiting to shine. She’s proven herself to be someone who could contribute so much to this world.”

“And what leads you to believe she’s capable of coming out of that darkness?” Westgale asked. “We’ve sent Dr. Durant to attempt to speak with her on several occasions and she’s been totally despondent. And he’s the best in the business. For God’s sake, she barely spoke to her own father before she asked the guards to bring her back to her cell.”

“I won’t deny she’s troubled, but she was a victim of a dreadful tragedy. Her mother’s death was a horrific event, brought about by the turmoil of political divide,” Nicole said.

“And sadly, there’s nothing we can do to go back and change that,” Westgale stated.

“You’re correct. We can’t change the past. When my father visited the many criminals he’d sent to prison, he told me he could always figure out who could be reformed and who was past the point of no return by looking into their eyes—the windows to the soul. When I looked into Anya’s eyes I saw deep remorse for what she’d done.”

“Is it possible that you’re just seeing something you want to see?”

Nicole took out her flash-pad. “I’ve been doing my research on Anya, sir. Are you aware of how many awards she won during her time at Summit University?”

“Considering her academic brilliance, I’m sure she won many.”

Nicole pulled up a view-file on her flash-pad and showed it to Westgale. “Many of the awards she won were financial. Here’s what she did with her money before turning herself in. She tried to be anonymous, but I was able to find out the truth.”

Westgale looked at the view-file Nicole had created. It showed an extensive list of donations Anya had made to charitable causes

across the country. He looked at Nicole and smiled. "Okay," he said. "I'll set forth the motion in the coming days."

When Justice Malone, esteemed civil attorney Gloria Lee, and the three other potential PBA leadership candidates became aware Nicole was vying for the position, they instantly dropped out of the race. "Why would I even think of running against someone who is far more qualified and capable?" said Lee.

"I've known Ms. Kratz for a number of years, and given her intelligence, political experience, and character, this country couldn't ask for a better commander in chief," Justice Malone added.

With unanimous approval from the PBA's Strategic Council, it became official: Nicole Kratz would be up against the MAA's Gerald Levin in the upcoming federal election, ushering in a new American president.

Cryptic caught up with Levin in front of the MAA's headquarters, for reaction to the news. "Are you surprised to learn President Westgale will not be running for reelection?"

"After what transpired over the past year, I'm not at all surprised. He made the correct decision, and I wish him well in his retirement," Levin answered.

"How do you think he'll be remembered as president?" Cryptic asked.

"President Westgale is a good, decent man, with sincere intentions. Unfortunately, he's been an awful president," Levin replied. "Consider the fact his own defense director plotted to have him thrown out of office. Then there was the Anya Ahar debacle, which put the entire Westgale Administration's ineptness on display. We Americans must count our blessings that our country is still in one piece, considering Westgale has so severely diminished our military."

"What are your feelings regarding Nicole Kratz?"

"She's a quitter, and quitters aren't leaders," Levin said dismissively. "She turned her back on her country, all because she believed in Anya Ahar—a domestic terrorist."

“What about the fact that she recently placed her life on the line to save the president and others inside the Freedom Home? Is that not a sign of commitment and leadership?”

“I commend her for that heroic act, but it doesn’t make up for the blatant disrespect she showed this country when she so abruptly resigned from being executive director,” Levin replied.

The following day, Nicole had her chance to respond to Levin’s comments as Cryptic interviewed her, amidst a high security contingent, outside Summit University. “It was Gerald Levin’s sheer negligence that was responsible for causing close to half a million young Americans to become ill, and sadly, caused the death of ten. Is this somebody we can trust to be in charge of America? I think not!” Nicole exclaimed.

“Are you surprised so many Americans have praised him for his efforts in providing assistance to the families of the victims, and to the government?” Cryptic asked. The Summit University crest, an eagle over a mountaintop, flashed on its chest.

“I’m not surprised at all. Forgiveness is a great American trait.”

“How do you feel about Mr. Levin calling you a quitter?”

“If being a quitter means standing up for one’s beliefs, then I guess I’m a quitter.”

“Does it bother you that many people believe your support of Anya Ahar has led to the AXE doctrine’s massive popularity, and fueled the fire of youth extremism?”

“I supported Anya Ahar in that hearing because it was the right thing to do,” Nicole said firmly. “I was willing to do *whatever* it took to help bring healing to those suffering from LRS.”

“How concerned are you about the growing number of young extremists across the country? And what will you do to solve this problem if you are elected president?”

“I’m very concerned. It’s my wish to see *all* Americans live in harmony. As politicians we often spend way too much time dictating and preaching, rather than listening and trying to understand the concerns of those we’ve been entrusted to serve. This has to change.

I guarantee you, this will be a priority within my Administration. That being said, I will not tolerate the actions of those who wish to create mayhem by acting out against the government or the citizens of this great country. Whether you are a lone wolf or part of a collective, you will face the full penalty of the law.”

CHAPTER 8

On a splendid autumn Saturday afternoon, Kayla and her boyfriend, Aaron, offered to take Riley riding on the open land just outside of Hislep Farms. “Be sure to keep your eye on him,” Sharon said to Kayla and Aaron as Riley jumped up on Aaron for a piggyback.

“Have fun, guys,” I called as we saw them off. Then I turned to Sharon. “We’d better get going. Mom wants us at the home by four o’clock.”

“Did she tell you who the new resident is?”

“No; she wants to surprise me. All I know is, it’s not only their first day at the retirement home, but it’s also their birthday.”

When we arrived at the home, Sharon began helping Mom with some last-minute preparations while I sat on the patio with Uncle Zack. “You’re looking rather dapper today,” I said in praise of Zack’s powder blue tuxedo and red bow tie. “I just hope you don’t burst out of it,” I added with a chuckle, noticing the jacket sleeves barely made it past his elbows.

“There’s a comedian in every crowd,” Zack drawled, grinning.

“You’ve always told me that to you, fashion is comfort. Now, you surely don’t look comfortable,” I said.

Zack laughed. “A few months ago, this thing actually fit me perfectly.” He tugged at the sleeves. “But since I’ve started devouring your mom’s caramel rice pudding, it seems my whole wardrobe has started to shrink.” We both laughed.

“On a serious note, thanks again for helping with the dismantling of the robots,” I said sincerely.

“I’m glad I could assist. I just can’t believe how Gerald Levin came away so unscathed. But then again, he’s a master of deception,” Zack sneered.

“Well, at least we know the authorities thoroughly investigated him and cleared him of any wrongdoing,” I said.

“Trust me; Gerald Levin getting out of bed in the morning is a crime in itself. What I can’t believe is there’s now a chance he’ll be the next president of this incredible country.”

“I guess it’s safe to say he won’t be getting your vote,” I said with a grin.

“I’d vote for a one-eyed donkey before I’d vote for that pompous imbecile,” Zack grumbled.

Seconds later, Mom called us into the common area. The lights were turned off; Mom stood silhouetted at the front entrance. “Okay, don’t forget to yell Happy Birthday as soon as I hit the lights,” she said in a stage whisper. A minute later, tears filled my eyes as Dad’s former VLP secretary, Linda Washburn, entered the building to a roaring cheer. It’d been thirty years since I’d seen her.

After Linda spent time meeting and mingling with the residents, Zack announced that dinner would soon be served—a dinner that featured his very own special roasted red pepper pasta. After dinner, Mom delivered an eloquent speech, welcoming Linda to the home. It was fantastic to see everyone enjoying the evening. Later on, Mom finally had an opportunity to bring Linda to our table.

“Oh my Lord, there you are!” she exclaimed with joy. “Wow! He’s the spitting image of his father,” she added, turning to Mom. I rose and invited Linda to sit in a chair beside Sharon. “To think it’s been thirty years since I’ve seen you guys,” Linda said as she sat down. “Time surely does fly. I’m so glad to learn you’ve followed in your father’s footsteps, Heath. I guess all those occasions he brought you to the VLP headquarters ended up having an impact on you.”

“I did enjoy those visits, especially when you brought those amazing chocolate cupcakes to the office,” I said with a chuckle. “In

all seriousness, when I think about it, watching my father perform his duties really inspired me.”

Linda nodded. “He was an incredible man,” she said. “His tragic death touched so many people. I remained at the VLP for a few more weeks after his death, but it was never the same. And shortly after, my husband and I left for Paris.”

“I’m sure you’ll enjoy it here at the home. Between Zack’s gourmet dishes and Mom’s delicious desserts, you’ll certainly be well-fed,” I quipped.

“It’s amazing and appropriate that they named this place in honor of Dennis. I don’t think any of us will ever meet a more caring person,” Linda said sincerely.

“Yeah, that’s for sure. He was always there to lend a helping hand to those in need,” Mom said, dabbing her eyes with a tissue.

“I just wish I’d had the chance to meet him,” Sharon said, gently rubbing Mom’s back.

“I can never forget the care he showed to poor old Sally. It really touched my heart,” added Linda with a wistful smile.

“Sally? Who was Sally?” I asked.

“Wait a second, wasn’t Sally a dog that you guys were taking care of at the headquarters?” Mom asked. “I actually remember that coming up in the last conversation I ever had with Dennis.”

“That’s correct, Grace,” Linda replied. “Sally was an old stray Alaskan Malamute. She was very ill when Dennis found her.”

“Knowing Dad, he must’ve made it his mission to take care of her,” I said.

“That he did. And that dog, let me tell you, she ended up being a miracle dog,” Linda said, shaking her head.

* * *

Thirty years ago, Vexton Land Protection Headquarters

“Dr. Langford made it very clear that Sally here doesn’t have much time left,” Dennis Claremont said as he gently stroked the large gray and white Alaskan Malamute.

“Do you think that’s why her owner abandoned her?” asked his assistant Fergus Macintosh, who was also the Vexton Land Protection medic.

“It could be, Fergy. All I know is that I’m going to make sure this big girl’s comfortable for whatever time she has left,” said Dennis as the dog began to rub her head against his leg.

“What about your son, Heath; isn’t he allergic to dogs?”

“He sure is; that’s why I spoke with Custodian Millen, and he’s agreed to allow Sally to stay right here,” replied Dennis. “We’ll give you a nice home, Sally,” he said to the dog as he caressed the top of her head. She closed her eyes in pleasure, then drifted off to sleep.

“What time are we on for tomorrow, Dennis?”

“Tomorrow?”

“Yeah, Moon Shade Bluff—to inspect the new railing.”

“Well, I have a few things to tend to in the morning for my upcoming trip, so be prepared to head out just after lunch. Hey, I’ve got an idea, let’s bring Sally. Maybe it’ll do her some good.”

“When was the railing actually installed?” Fergus asked as they exited the robo-copter and began their inspection.

“It’s only been about a week,” Dennis replied, turning to throw a ball for Sally to fetch. The large dog didn’t budge. She just wandered about the bluff, eating grass and whatever else happened to appeal to her. “At least her appetite seems to have come back,” Dennis observed with a chuckle.

“You’re not kidding,” Fergus answered, shaking his head in amusement as they watched the dog munching greenery.

As they inspected the railing, Fergus asked, “What do you make of all the folklore surrounding this place?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never really given it much thought,” Dennis replied, “but I do know one person who swears this place holds some kind of magical power.”

“Oh, who would that be?”

“The professor, Trent Kinsley.”

“Trent Kinsley? Isn’t he the guy who co-owns Vexton-Tech?” asked Fergus.

“That’s him. With the long blonde hair,” replied Dennis.

When they returned to the VLP headquarters, Dennis tied up some loose ends and left instructions for Fergus. “I’ll only be gone a few days, so I don’t expect you to complete the entire list, but at least this will give us a good head start.”

“Don’t worry about a thing; just go and make sure you and little Heath have a good time. I’ll keep things in line, and I’ll make sure Sally here is fully taken care of,” Fergus said, gently stroking Sally’s head.

“Good morning, Fergy,” Linda said the following morning as Fergus strode into VLP headquarters at 8:00 a.m. “I think you might want to take a look at Sally. She doesn’t seem like her usual self. In a good way,” she rushed to add, at Fergus’s look of alarm.

“How so?” asked Fergus.

“Well, since I arrive before everybody else does, I’ve been making it a point to check on her,” replied Linda. “Usually, I find her just lying around, uninspired about the prospect of a new day. But today—” Linda rose and led Fergus to Sally’s kennel. “As you can see, she appears ready to take on the world. It’s like she’s discovered the fountain of youth.”

“Wow, you’re not kidding!” Fergus watched in disbelief as an energized Sally frolicked with the same toys that, in prior days, she’d only ignored.

Linda’s flash-pad went off. She gave Fergus a finger wave and headed back into the building. Fergus opened the kennel door and Sally burst out to charge off into the adjacent field. *What in the world has happened to this dog?* Fergus wondered. “Come here, Sally,” he called.

Sally got in a few more darts and dashes, then returned to her kennel, practically bouncing with energy. Baffled, Fergus walked to his office, thinking back to yesterday’s visit to Moon Shade Bluff. *Could it be? Dennis and I both saw her feasting on the vegetation on that cliff. What in the world could be in that mountain?*

For the next couple of days, while Dennis was away, Fergus continued to observe Sally. Here was an animal that had appeared to be on her last legs, now displaying a level of vigor beyond comprehension. When Linda let her out for her morning run, she bounded effortlessly through the field, sometimes chasing after squirrels, birds, and any other of Mother Nature's creatures that crossed her path.

Dennis could hear Sally barking when he returned to the office. He went to take a look and saw her jumping up on the kennel gate, filled with excitement.

Fergus followed him around the corner. "Hey, when did you get back?" he asked.

"Late last night," Dennis replied. "What's up with the old girl?"

Fergus scratched his head. "Yeah... I guess I should fill you in."

His curiosity piqued, Dennis followed his assistant into his office, where Fergus related all that had transpired with Sally, including his theory regarding Moon Shade Bluff.

Dennis raised an eyebrow, and thought for a moment. "Hmm... that's very interesting, Fergy. I think it would be wise to take her to Dr. Langford for another visit. We should also check out that big old mountain as well," Dennis added.

"Are you certain this is the same dog?" Dr. Langford said with a chuckle, watching Sally prancing around the room. "This is truly remarkable."

"I hear you, Doctor. I'm still in shock myself," replied Dennis. "My assistant and I took her up to Moon Shade Bluff with us, and the next thing you know, it was like she was born again. I don't know what's in those plants up there, but whatever it was, it's given her a new life."

Dr. Langford continued to observe the dog. "Amazing... truly amazing," he said as he tossed Sally a treat. "You won't mind staying here for the next little while, will you, Sally?" he said as he lifted her onto his examining table. "We'll do some observation and

analysis and run some new tests, then compare them with the prior tests. Now, I have to head out to the AMO medical conference in a couple of days, so once we get things started I'll be leaving Sally in the very capable hands of my assistant, Maria. Then when I return I'll complete the review and call you with the results."

"I guess you're looking forward to the conference. I was reading about it the other day. It sounds like it'll be quite an event," Dennis said.

"Yeah, it will be a massive gathering of the medical community. I'm just thrilled they've finally acknowledged us veterinarians."

Two weeks later

"Did you see how thrilled he was when you told him he could go, Dennis?" said his wife, Grace.

"Oh yeah, I'm certain Heath's been counting the days," replied Dennis. "And I'm sure the Android players will be giving him loads of attention, since he'll be with Skip."

"Go figure on our Vexton weather. Just when it looks like it's clearing, the sky's overcast again," Grace said as she looked out the window.

"Well, at least they're now only calling for some light showers," Dennis replied. "Anyway, I should be getting to the office. I've fallen way behind on my latest batch of farming reports—mostly due to the attention we've been directing toward the VLP's new canine friend, Sally," he added with a chuckle.

"Sally? You never said anything about a dog."

"I'll tell you all about her when I get home."

"Wow, it's looking more ominous out there by the second," Dennis said to Linda as he arrived at the VLP headquarters.

"In case you're looking for Fergus, he told me to tell you he had to step out and that he'd be back in five minutes or so," said Linda.

"Have you heard back from Langford's office regarding Sally?" Dennis asked.

"Not yet," replied Linda.

Moments later, while tending to his stack of farming reports, Dennis heard distant thunder. He gazed out his window and saw two rapid flashes of lightning. He could hear Sally's empty kennel being rattled by the gusting winds.

"Oh my Lord, it looks like this is going to be a wicked one!" exclaimed Fergus as he entered.

"Yeah, and unfortunately, since Emergency Rescue is dealing with that crazy strike, all emergencies will fall into our hands. I just hope it doesn't get too nasty out there," said Linda, her brows pinched in concern.

Minutes later, Linda's worries came true. The VLP's central flash-screen let out a piercing siren sound. Fergus rushed over to the screen, then whirled around. "Oh no!" he said urgently. "We're receiving a distress message from the forest surrounding Moon Shade Bluff. Someone out there is claiming their brother is trapped under a fallen tree!"

Dennis hurried out of his office, Fergus on his heels, and headed to the VLP robo-copter. Lightning arced across the sky to the east, followed almost immediately by booms of thunder. The robo-copter trembled on its helipad. Dennis and Fergus looked at each other in fear. "I just hope the main thrust of this storm holds off a little longer. At least so we can get over there," said Dennis as they took off.

The sky grew darker by the second, only to be lit up by frequent flashes of lightning. The thunder roared. Dennis gripped the controls as the wind shook the copter like an angry child with a toy. Although the robo-copter was specifically built to withstand the effects of potent storms, this storm was at a level neither Dennis nor Fergus had ever witnessed. "I think we'd better contact headquarters for backup—just in case," Dennis said in a tight voice.

The blackened clouds suddenly opened up, unleashing a torrential downpour along with hailstones the size of golf balls. Visibility dropped to near zero. They reached the area where the distress signal had come from, and started desperately scanning the ground below, hoping against hope that they'd see something.

“There—look!” Dennis suddenly shouted, pointing through his side window. On the ground below, a boy was frantically waving his arms. The force of the wind was so strong, the boy was struggling to maintain his balance.

“If you can hear me, wave your right hand only!” Dennis shouted, turning the copter’s powerful sound-blast to full volume.

The boy fell over. After a couple of failed attempts to stand up, he finally got to his feet and began waving his right hand.

“I see his brother—there, to his left, under that fallen tree!” Squinting, Fergus pointed through the same side window.

The copter descended to about thirty feet above the boy. “We’ve gotta get you down there to help this kid,” Dennis said to Fergus. He called out through the sound-blast, “I’m going to lower this rope. Take one end of the rope and tie it tightly around that tree trunk pinning your brother, then move away, toward the cliff.”

Just as Dennis finished giving the instructions, a powerful gust brought down three more trees, not far from where the boy’s brother was pinned. “God help us!” cried Fergus.

After being knocked to the ground a couple more times, the boy was finally able to secure the rope. “Good. Now move toward the cliff,” Dennis shouted. The copter rose slowly, lifting the tree from atop the boy. “Okay... I see a perfect spot where we can drop it...” Dennis said, guiding the copter carefully away from the injured boy. “We’ve gotta get you down there,” he said to Fergus. “I pray to God the kid’s still alive. All right, when I tell you to, release the rope. On three—one, two, three, now!”

Seconds later, Dennis sagged back in the pilot’s seat. “Phew. Good work, Fergy.” Even better, the storm had begun to abate.

But then—all of a sudden—the robo-copter began flying out of control. Dennis grimly fought the controls, to no avail.

Moments later, when the backup team arrived, one of the two responders headed for the boys, while the other went in search of Dennis and Fergus in the wreckage of the robo-copter.

The boy who had called for help was found safe and sound. His brother lay unconscious, severely injured but still alive. When all was said and done, Vexton County Custodian Walter Millen pronounced Dennis Claremont and Ferguson Macintosh dead.

* * *

After Linda related the story of Sally, Sharon and I looked at each other in sudden revelation. “So, Dad and Fergus actually believed this dog found life again after chomping away on the vegetation at Moon Shade Bluff?” I said, wanting to make sure I’d heard that correctly.

“I must admit I thought they were both crazy. Even they had a difficult time believing it themselves,” Linda replied. “But now, after learning about that mineral coming out of the mountain...”

“Do you know what they learned about Moon Shade Bluff when they went back up there?” I asked.

“I don’t even know if they had the chance before they died. If they did, they never told me about it,” Linda replied.

Again, Sharon and I locked eyes. “And do you know where Sally ended up?” Sharon asked.

“I think, if I remember correctly, Dr. Langford’s assistant... ah, her name escapes me.” Linda paused in thought. “Maria, that’s it. Yeah, she ended up taking Sally home. I have no idea what happened from there.”

Sharon and I both admitted to an uneasy feeling by the time we got home. As Sharon plopped down on the sofa, I paced the living room. “You heard that story; what do you make of it?” I asked. Sharon didn’t respond. I could see she was thinking. “Is it possible my father and his assistant had discovered the minerals in that mountain?” I wondered out loud, trying to sort out my own thoughts.

Sharon sat up, deep concern etched on her face. “When you think about it, what do we really know about the crash that killed your father?” she asked.

“Well, besides the fact it happened while he and his assistant were coming to the aid of two young boys during what is considered one of the worst storms this town has ever seen... not a heck of a lot,” I admitted. I’d been told the facts, and my imagination had filled in the rest. What else could the surviving family do?

Then it dawned on me. “Hold on a second, are you thinking that maybe it *wasn’t* an accident? My Lord, Sharon... Do you think my father may have been targeted—murdered?” Dread seeped through my body like ice water.

“I don’t know, Heath, and I don’t want to be hasty, but based on the timing of that supposed accident, and what we learned today, I think it is something worth exploring. Your father and his assistant may have known something extremely valuable, and may have lost their lives because of it,” Sharon said. She rose and I followed her into the kitchen, where she prepared us some tea. I sat down at the kitchen table.

“Do you think it’s worth bringing this to the attention of Gil Robichaud?” I asked.

“Before I’d go that far, I think it’s best to perform our own due diligence.”

As much as I tried to sleep that night, I found it impossible. What I’d learned earlier in the evening had left me feeling shell-shocked. Finally I gave up on sleep and headed to the kitchen to make a quick sandwich. Settled in an easy chair in the living room, sandwich waiting on the side table at my elbow, I opened up my flash-pad and looked up the *Book of ZeZ*.

The book was generally regarded as one giant fairy tale about a civilization nobody could prove existed. However, there were also those who strongly believed the ZeZ were the first civilization to call what we now knew as Vexton home.

The book explained that the ZeZ were divided into two groups. Translated into modern English, the first group was called the “Sun Children” and the second, their leaders, the “Moon Lords.” In a daily ritual, the Sun Children would climb the trees around Moon Shade Bluff to absorb the cosmic energy from the Vexton sky.

They believed this would bring healing and protect them from all forms of illness and evil.

As I continued to read, I noticed a glimmer of light shining through the door from the patio. The door was closed, but unlocked. When I looked out, to my utter surprise, I saw Riley sitting at the patio table beside his extremely bright night-light.

I opened the door and stepped outside. "Riley, what in the world are you doing out here?" I asked in a hushed voice, hoping not to wake Sharon and Kayla.

"I was just finishing my drawing. I didn't want to turn my night-light on upstairs," he replied.

"You know you're not supposed to be out here alone at night," I said firmly, accidentally raising my voice.

"I'm sorry, Daddy. I just wanted to finish my drawing. I wanted to surprise you with it tomorrow morning," he said excitedly.

"Okay, Riley. Now, promise me you won't do this again."

"I promise."

"So, what is it you're drawing?" I asked as I moved closer.

"It's Gordon, your old angelfish," Riley replied with a smile.

I was stunned. How in the world did he know about Gordon? Dad had given me that fish for my seventh birthday. I knew for a fact I'd never mentioned that fish to Riley.

"That's a very good drawing, Riley," I said as he showed me the gold and blue colored fish he'd drawn. "How did you know I had a fish named Gordon? Did Grandma Grace tell you about it?"

"I know Grandpa Dennis bought it for you and—"

Sharon and Kayla came charging outside. "What's the racket out here?" Sharon almost shouted. "My Lord... what's going on?" she asked when she saw Riley and I sitting at the patio table.

"All right, back to bed you go, Riles," I said. "Remember, you promised you won't ever do this again... okay?"

"I know. I promise I won't," he replied. He rose and stopped before Sharon and Kayla on his way to the patio door. "I'm sorry for waking everybody up," he said. Sharon smiled at him, took his hand, and led him back into the house.

“Do you know anything about this?” I asked Kayla as I held up Riley’s drawing.

She chuckled. “Oh yeah, Mr. Shelby told him all about the angelfish your father gave you all those years ago. Riley was really taken by the story of your saltwater aquarium.”

“Who’s Mr. Shelby?” I asked.

“Apparently he’s the person who actually helped your father pick out the angelfish and the aquarium,” Kayla replied.

“Shelby? I don’t remember that name,” I said.

“We met him at Hollis Farms. He told us how he used to work for Mr. Hollis back when your father used to perform inspections. He happened to be visiting today when Aaron and I took Riley to get some of those amazing honey-dipped strawberries and bananas,” Kayla explained.

“And what got this Shelby fellow talking about my childhood fish?” I asked.

“Riley was telling him all about Jumper, and how he couldn’t have a real dog because of your allergies. And that’s when Mr. Shelby told us about your father having to buy you an aquarium instead of the dog you wanted,” Kayla replied.

I laughed. “Yeah—at first I said I didn’t want a bunch of stupid fish, but then I came to really find those little guys fascinating. Especially Gordon. I loved the way his colorful stripes kind of glowed in the dark,” I said on reflection. I looked at the drawing again. “Whoa, Riley did a really good job with this. It actually looks like Gordon.”

“When Riley told Aaron and me he wanted to draw the fish for you, we showed him some actual angelfish photos,” Kayla said.

“I want to thank you so much for the care you show to Riley,” I said sincerely. “You mean the world to him... and to us.”

“He’s an amazing little boy,” Kayla said. “I’ll always be there for him.”

CHAPTER 9

Early the next morning, Sharon was eager to begin investigating the matter of Dad's death, and still reeling from the information Linda Washburn had relayed to us, I tried to find some solace by visiting Dad's monument at Vexton Memorial Garden, only a few miles from where he'd met his end. With the idea that he may have been murdered running wildly through my mind, I felt tears begin streaming down my cheeks. Nothing seemed the same. My footsteps were now heavy, my heart anguished, and even the clouds conjured images of, as Riley referred to them, monsters.

As I approached the monument, a strong gust of wind sent waves of leaves in my direction. Some stuck to my jacket, and others formed a pile at the base of the monument. I began to peel them from my jacket and clear the others away from the monument, while I thought back to the conversation I'd had with Dad the night before he died.

"So, Heath, what are you working on, buddy?"

"Our teacher wants us to write about what we want to be when we're older."

"Oh, and I bet you're writing all about how you want to play for the Androids, win the NSL Championship, and be the most valuable player!"

"Not really."

"No? I thought you wanted to be like Brent Shale."

"That was when I was younger."

"Younger? You're only ten, Heath. What, now that you're an old man you don't like Brent Shale and the Androids anymore?"

"No way. I love the Androids, and Brent Shale's my favorite player. I'm going to meet him at school tomorrow! But I don't wanna be like him."

"Okay, then. Let me see... I know how much you and Skip like to play tennis."

"No, I don't want to do that, either."

"Well, I give up."

"I want to be like you. I want to take care of Vexton and help all the farmers."

"Is that so? Well I'm certain you'd do a tremendous job... I'm so proud of you, son, and I love you more than you can imagine. And tomorrow after school we'll take one of our long walks, and you can tell me all about your day with the Androids."

I reflected for several minutes, sitting in the shade of an old oak that stood just yards away from the monument. Then I felt a powerful surge of adrenalin run through my body. If my father *was* killed, I was going to do everything in my power to find out who killed him, and why. I was ready to find out what Sharon had learned. I paid my final respects, and after leaving the grounds, I contacted Sharon.

"I'm glad you called, Heath. I was just going to call you." She sounded eager.

"What is it, honey?"

"Can you meet me at the location where your father's copter went down?"

"Of course," I replied, my curiosity piqued.

When I arrived at the scene, Sharon waved me over. She was speaking with one of the soldiers on site. As they talked, they were looking curiously at the tree directly in front of them.

"Heath, this is Sergeant Evans," Sharon said, turning toward me. "Sergeant, this is my husband, Heath Claremont. Sergeant

Evans's men discovered something very interesting yesterday morning."

"Oh?"

Evans hesitated, appearing concerned about relaying official information. Sharon interjected. "It's okay, Sergeant, my husband's the director of Vexton Land Protection."

The sergeant relaxed. "Yes, we did make a very unusual discovery," he said, holding a device toward the tree. "Now, when I place this scanner in front of the tree, you'll see a pattern... right in the center of the tree." He guided my eyes toward what looked like an oval-shaped carving.

"Oh yeah... I see it. Is this the work of some kids horsing around?" I asked.

"Actually, Mr. Claremont, this is the remnants of a laser blast," Sergeant Evans responded, his tone serious.

"A laser blast?" I said, stunned.

Sharon pointed toward two soldiers about one hundred yards away. One was up in a tree, and the other was standing beside it. Both appeared to be inspecting it. "That's where Sergeant Evans and his men believe the laser beam came from," she said.

"I don't understand," I said. "Did this happen recently?"

"Oh no, the scanner indicates we're looking at somewhere in the area of twenty-five to thirty-five years ago."

I froze. For a moment my world came to a halt. "Uh... could this have been some type of military exercise or weapons testing?" I asked, struggling to find my words, wanting to believe that was actually the case.

"At this stage, I can't answer that question, Mr. Claremont. I highly doubt it, but in order to understand what we're dealing with here, the first thing we need to do is determine the type of laser weapon that was used. I'm going to be submitting a formal report to—"

Another soldier who was inspecting a tree about twenty yards away called out, "Sergeant Evans, check this out."

We followed Evans over to him. "My scanner shows this tree used to have eyes," the soldier said.

Sergeant Evans took the scanner from the soldier and aimed it at the tree himself. “Hmm... very interesting... tree-eyes.” He turned to Sharon and me. “They were recently deactivated.”

“Please forgive my ignorance, but what in the world are tree-eyes?” Sharon asked.

“They’re simply miniature, yet immensely powerful, data-chip cameras that are placed in concealment on the outside of a tree. They’re typically used in battle. From this tree, these eyes would be able to capture images from the mountain,” Evans replied. “They’re an extremely effective spy tool.”

“But if they’re no longer there, how could you detect them?” I asked.

“A faint signal always remains for a short period after they’ve been deactivated. As with the laser beam, it would be wise to determine their origin as we move forward. I’ll be submitting a full report to Agent Robichaud and our weapons experts. Agent Robichaud is scheduled to arrive in Vexton the day after tomorrow,” Evans added.

“It’s been nice meeting the both of you, but you’ll have to excuse me,” he said. “It looks like we have a lot more work to do around here.” He headed in the direction of the camp at the base of Moon Shade Bluff.

Sharon and I stood there, astounded by what we’d just learned. “Wow, what do you make of all this, honey?” I asked.

“Truthfully, none of this surprises me, Heath,” she replied. “It’s obvious something covert has been going on around here.”

“And you think the murder of my father and his assistant is part of that... don’t you?” I said, my heart pounding.

“I’m sorry, Heath... but a rather disturbing scenario is beginning to develop in my mind,” Sharon replied, frowning. “This needs to be addressed with Robichaud.” Sharon spent the next day and a half studying every nuance she could discover regarding Dad’s death.

* * *

When Gil and his team of agents arrived in Vexton, they set up their headquarters for what was now being referred to as Project Vexton in

the Vexton Justice Center's main conference room. Sharon invited Gil to her office for a meeting, and relayed the information Linda Washburn had provided. Her theory that Dennis Claremont had been murdered roused Gil's interest. "Were you able to obtain the accident report and the weather report for that date?" he asked.

"Yes, I was," Sharon replied as she sent the two reports to his flash-pad. "As you can see, it cites inclement weather as the reason for the crash. But if you look at part three of the accident report, you'll see a note and a photo of an oval-shaped burn mark on a piece of the copter's fuselage."

"Hmm... that is very interesting, considering it looks identical to the pattern burnt into the tree. I'll forward the file to our experts," Gil said, still perusing the accident report.

"To this day it's still considered the most powerful storm in Vexton history, but when you compare the time chart of the weather report with the established time of the copter crashing, you'll notice something very interesting," Sharon said.

Gil switched to the weather report. "Ah, I see... if I'm reading this correctly, it's telling me the storm had subsided prior to the copter actually crashing, which is another interesting aspect to consider."

Sharon rubbed her hand across her chin. "The more I go over this whole thing, the more convinced I become that these men were murdered."

"This vet who cared for the dog... Dr. Langford—is he still around?" Gil asked as he studied another formal report Sharon had presented after relating Linda Washburn's story. "Oh... I see your report indicates he's currently serving time. Hmm... for using unapproved medications."

"Yeah, I had no choice but to prosecute him. Most of the farmers here in Vexton were furious with me." Sharon sighed. "He's highly revered, and not for a moment did I ever think he would intentionally do anything to harm the animals he treated, but I felt it was incumbent upon me to uphold the law."

Gil continued to read the report. "I'm thinking it'd be worthwhile to visit him and see what he can recall about the Alaskan Malamute.

You could be correct. The story surrounding that dog could very well be at the core of this entire case. Then again, it could also mean not a single darn thing, but it's worth looking into," Gil said, turning away from the flash-screen. "Being the astute DA you are, I'm sure you've considered the possibility that we may end up learning something about your late father-in-law that we might wish we hadn't," he added carefully.

Sharon nodded. "Believe me, I've played out all the scenarios in my head—and I pray to God that the treasured memories Heath has of his father aren't swept away by some deep, dark secret. If he *was* murdered, I'm hoping he and his associate were just incidental victims."

"In a couple of days, I'm expecting our weapons and high-tech devices experts to have answers regarding the laser beam and the tree-eyes," Gil said as he politely led Sharon out of the room.

"I look forward to hearing what they've discovered," Sharon said upon exiting.

The next morning, Gil paid a visit to Dr. Langford. When the prison guard brought Langford into the interrogation room, he was whistling happily.

"Hello, Doctor, I'm Special Agent Gil Robichaud, Chief of Security for the Peace-Bringers Association of America," Gil said, removing his jacket and placing it on the back of his chair.

"Wow, the PBA's number one cop. I guess my criminal profile has gained momentum," Langford said with a grin.

"I hope you do understand it is within your rights to have legal representation with you during this interview," Gil said as he sat down across from Langford.

Langford laughed. "Legal representation—ha! The idiot I hired to represent me during my trial ended up getting me three years in prison," he sneered. "Oh, he knew all the fancy legal jargon, and he wore the best suits, but what he lacked was *heart*—the will to fight." Langford's ire became more intense. "If he'd spent less time picking out his fancy ties, and more time arguing my case with true

determination—well, I wouldn't be here today.” He paused as if willing himself calm. “So, what brings you to my current residence?”

“I'd like to ask you a few questions.”

“Well, it's a good thing you got me on one of my better days. I'm always much happier on Fried Chicken Fridays. It's such a relief after the mush we're served the other six days of the week. Okay, enough of my rambling. How can I help you?” asked Langford.

Gil offered a reminder of Sally. “What can you tell me about that dog?” he asked.

“Whoa, you're talking about something that happened many, many years ago,” Langford said. He thought for a moment. “That dog was on death's door when Dennis Claremont brought her to me. He was adamant that the vegetation on Moon Shade Bluff was what brought her back to life. I actually found it quite amusing.” He paused again, then with raised brows, added, “But come to think of it, now that it's been established that that mountain contains some kind of mystery mineral, he may very well have been correct.”

“That's exactly why I'm here right now,” Gil responded.

“I don't understand. What does this have to do with me?” Langford asked.

“Our Administration is very concerned that the mineral discovered in that mountain has been made into a potent narcotic for the last thirty years,” Gil said. “We think there's a strong possibility that the story of Sally is at the root of this. Are you aware of anyone else who may have known about this?”

“My former assistant, Maria, was definitely aware of the situation,” Langford replied. “In fact, she ended up caring for Sally along with another nine or ten dogs that lived on her farm. Very sweet lady. Very caring toward the animals. Definitely not the drug-trafficking type.” He laughed.

“Is there anyone else you can think of?”

“Hmm... if I recall correctly, I think that was right around the time I attended my very first AMO conference.”

“I realize it’s quite some time ago, but I need to know if you recall telling anyone at the conference, or anywhere else for that matter, about that dog,” Gil said. “Even if it was just in passing.”

Langford leaned his head back and thought. He sat forward. “Actually, there was one guy sitting at my table that I recall speaking with regarding that dog. I remember him being very intrigued by the story. Far more than I actually was.” He thought harder. “The only reason I recall this is because, as the night went on, the guy kept bringing it up. And he kept speaking of the wonder of Mother Earth. It started to become rather annoying.”

“Can you remember any specifics?” Gil asked.

“Well, he kept asking me to clarify that I’d given the dog a very poor prognosis at first—a few weeks or so to live—and that it found a whole new life after eating a bunch of plants off of some mountain in Vexton—he kept asking what the name of the mountain was.”

“Anything else?”

“Just going on about Mother Earth and her special healing powers—and that he was fascinated by alternative medicine. He sounded like he was going to look into it.”

“Do you remember this fellow’s name?” Gil asked.

“Hmm... I remember his first name: Jeremy,” Langford replied.

“Can you recall if he was at the conference representing a company or a government association?”

“He claimed to be in the business of alternative medicine, but I don’t recall him mentioning the company name; nor do I recall asking.”

Gil nodded and rose. “Thank you for your help. If there’s anything else that comes to mind, please have a prison official contact me on your behalf. It might be of great benefit to you.”

Langford lifted an eyebrow at that.

That afternoon, Gil ordered Agent Gallio to visit the AMO headquarters in Washington, to determine whether or not they still had records related to the conference Langford had attended. When he met with the AMO’s Secretary of Business Affairs, she

was surprised by his request, but cooperative. She led him into her office. “The AMO is very meticulous when it comes to keeping records on file,” she said with pride as she searched her flash-screen. Gallio waited patiently for her to retrieve the data. “You’re in luck, Agent Gallio,” she said with a smile. “We not only have the conference’s attendee list for the last forty years, we also have the accompanying seating charts.”

Gallio scanned the seating chart onto his flash-pad. “Thank you, ma’am, and please remember this is a very sensitive matter. Your discretion is expected and much appreciated,” Gallio said.

“Come on in, DA Claremont,” Gil said, and directed Sharon to the seat in front of him. He let out a sigh, part fatigue, part relief. “I just received the report from our weapons experts this morning, which tells me both the tree-eyes and the laser weapon are from the HKM. At least now we know none of this had anything to do with some kind of American military exercise. That laser beam was definitely fired at someone or something,” he said. “We also have a match with the oval burn mark found on the tree and on the copter.”

Sharon slowly exhaled. “I knew it. Somebody had that copter shot down. Somebody wanted Dennis Claremont and his associate dead, because they had discovered there’s more to Moon Shade Bluff than meets the eye.”

“If your theory’s correct, then who the hell’s been behind this all this time? After all, we’re talking close to thirty years ago,” Gil said.

“Well, considering the lengths they’ve gone to, to get what they want, we must be looking at an extremely powerful entity, wouldn’t you concur?” Sharon asked.

It was Gil’s turn to take a deep breath and exhale. “Yes. Whoever it is has gone to great measures to monitor that mountain—those tree-eyes are highly advanced pieces of technology, and prohibitively expensive. Whoever is behind this has to be not only sophisticated, but extremely wealthy. And if *your* theory is correct, they’re also more than willing to commit murder.” Gil rubbed his tired eyes.

As they concluded the meeting, Agent Gallio, who had returned from Washington, joined them. “Good work, Nick,” Gil said to Gallio as he began reviewing the conference data.

Gil immediately looked up what table Dr. Langford had been seated at: table seventeen. He then searched the list of those seated at table seventeen for anyone whose first name was Jeremy. “Here we are. This has to be our man—Jeremy Reasoner, owner of a company called Earthly Remedies. Let’s see what Shamir can dig up on him.”

The next morning, Gil requested Sharon meet him at the base of Moon Shade Bluff.

Sharon surveyed the area. “How long do you think it’s going to take before things get back to normal around here?”

“I wish I could answer that, Sharon, but until we start getting some answers, it’s impossible to say. Keeping this mountain secure is a directive coming right from President Westgale himself,” Gil explained.

“So, how did your assistant make out with his research?” Sharon asked.

“Apparently Earthly Remedies was some fly-by-night seller of alternative medical products. Here today, gone tomorrow. The company was only around for just over two years. The only reason this Reasoner guy was at that conference was because he bought his way in. Actually, not long after the conference, he dissolved the business,” Gil said.

“From what we’ve learned so far about the guy, there doesn’t appear to be anything linking him to this madness. It seems he and his wife are living a quiet life in Oklahoma.” Gil’s flash-pad began to buzz. He read the flash-message, growing increasingly intrigued. “I’m being called back to Washington. It appears Dr. Ahar has called an urgent meeting with regards to this very case,” he said.

“Before you leave, I’d like to ask a favor of you,” Sharon said.

“Well, I’ll do my best.”

“Please allow me the opportunity to go to Oklahoma and speak with Reasoner. Something tells me he may know more than we think he does.”

Gil thought for a moment. “As you’re well aware, this is a federal investigation. I realize this case is close to your heart, as it should be. So, if I or one of my agents ends up paying a visit to Reasoner, you’ll be welcome to come along. First, though, I want to hear what Dr. Ahar has to say before I make any further decisions.”

Later that evening, Gil returned to the Freedom Home, where Dr. Ahar was to speak in front of Westgale and his executive committee.

Ahar entered the main conference room looking like he hadn’t slept for days. Silence filled the room as he made his way to the podium. He stood there a moment, then exhaled. “Good evening, everyone,” he said, exhaling once again. He pulled a small bottle holding the glittery minerals that were found at Moon Shade Bluff from his pocket, and held it up. “Upon completing my initial analysis of these minerals, I’ve determined that not only can they be utilized to help create a powerful narcotic, but due to their makeup, they have potential applications as a specialized medicine, or perhaps a groundbreaking vaccine. In the coming days, I will begin initiating a program to study this in detail.”

“How long will it take to get some answers?” Westgale asked.

“By the time all the clinical testing has been completed, I’d say we’re looking at eighteen months to two years,” Ahar replied.

Gil listened attentively, like everyone else in the room, though now the investigator inside of him felt overwhelmed. *Did the same party who’s been using the mineral to create a potent narcotic also know that it could be used in a positive manner?* he wondered. *If so, have they been keeping this a secret?*

After Ahar exited the conference room, Gil approached his superiors and expressed his concerns.

“I guess the mystery surrounding this mountain just became that much more compelling,” Westgale said.

“Come on, Gil, do you actually think somebody else knew about this and has been keeping it a secret for thirty years?” Attorney General Sutton said. “Using the rocks for the purpose of narcotics I can see, but what you’re suggesting is almost impossible to fathom.”

"I think I have to side with Champ on this one," Perry added.

"I beg to differ. I think somebody knew about this. In fact, I'm certain of it," Gil retorted.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen... even though the focus must be on moving forward," Westgale said, "I agree with Gil. This needs to be fully addressed. As this Administration has learned over the last little while, complete transparency is vital to our good standing with the American public. I won't have it any other way," he added with conviction.

Later, Westgale met with Beverley Gibson and ordered her to begin putting in place a fully coordinated plan to study Moon Shade Bluff.

"This is wonderful news, Mr. President. I'll get on it right away," she said with enthusiasm. Noticing Westgale's uneasiness, Beverley asked, "Is something wrong, sir?"

He stood and moved from behind his desk to begin pacing. "As great as this news is, we could also discover it's bittersweet," he said.

"How so?"

"Gil's of the mindset that somebody, or more likely some group, has known about this for thirty years. We've confirmed the mineral's been used to create a powerful narcotic, but to think somebody also knew it could be used in a positive manner and kept it a secret... it's so inconceivable.

"And if that's true, it looks like whoever's behind all of this may have gone so far as to kill Dennis Claremont and his assistant in order to maintain that secret."

CHAPTER 10

“You made a great choice, young lady,” Joe Hislep said. “This big gal has a great temperament and she’s sharp as a tack.”

“Thank you, Aunt Sharon. Thank you, Uncle Heath. This is so gracious of you,” Kayla said with a smile, stroking the head of the chestnut filly Sharon and I had just purchased for her.

“It’s the least we could do after all you’ve done for us,” I replied while Sharon gave Kayla a hug.

“Now we can go riding together!” Riley shouted. “What are you going to name her?”

“How about I let *you* name her, Riles. Do you have a name in mind?” Kayla asked.

“Uh... how about Jumper?” Riley said with a sheepish grin.

“Excellent! Everybody, this is the new Jumper!”

Everyone smiled. Seconds later, Sharon’s flash-pad began to buzz. It was Gil.

“Hello, Sharon. Pack your bags; it looks like we’ll be heading to Oklahoma after all. I definitely want to speak with Jeremy Reasoner,” he said, before relaying the latest revelation.

“Wait a second here. You’re telling me Ahar believes the mineral actually could be used in a medical capacity?” Sharon said, astonished. “How could that be?”

“I guess God only knows,” Gil answered. “You know, I must admit I thought your husband had really lost it when he told me how he believed your son was cured, but now I’m left to really wonder.”

“Is Westgale going public with this?” Sharon asked.

“I’ve asked him to hold off until after we interview Reasoner,” Gil replied.

“I’m in. When are we leaving?”

“Tomorrow morning.”

When Sharon and Gil arrived in Oklahoma, they were picked up by a black grand-electro from the Justice Department. The vehicle drove along a series of long and winding dirt roads, passing fields of corn, and rows of ancient weeping willows. More of a city person, Gil was instantly taken by the picturesque scenery.

“We really take it for granted, don’t we,” he murmured.

“Huh?”

“The beauty. Look at the limbs of those trees swaying in unison, as if they’re dancing to nature’s own little symphony,” Gil said as the cool autumn breeze guided the willow branches. “And that golden sunlight on the fields... incredible.”

“Whoa—look to your right,” Sharon exclaimed.

“Wow! It looks like an endless red velvet blanket,” Gil replied as they passed a vast expanse of red soil.

“We’re here, sir,” the driver said. The vehicle pulled into the lane and slowly drove toward the Reasoner house and farm buildings in the distance.

“Look at all those apples,” Sharon said, indicating an apple orchard running along the lane. “It looks like an artist’s rendering.”

“Very idyllic, indeed,” Gil agreed as they passed a large herd of cattle peacefully grazing in a field on the opposite side.

The grand-electro stopped in front of the house. Gil and Sharon exited the vehicle and walked down a sandy path toward the front door. When they were a few feet away from the door, a man appeared. He was wearing a dark blue flat cap and matching overalls. He was average height and looked very fit.

“Hello, how can I help you?” he said, looking over the heads of Gil and Sharon toward the grand-electro.

“Are you Mr. Jeremy Reasoner?” Gil asked as they approached.

“Yes, I am,” he replied.

Gil and Sharon took out their identification badges. “I’m Special Agent Gil Robichaud with US Federal Justice, and this is Sharon Claremont, District Attorney for Vexton County.”

With raised brows Reasoner replied, “Well, I don’t know if I should be honored or afraid.”

“We’d just like to ask you a few questions, Mr. Reasoner,” Gil said.

“I don’t have the slightest idea why you’d want to speak with me. Will I require a lawyer for this?” Reasoner asked.

“You have every right to an attorney, Mr. Reasoner. You can even ask us to leave right now, if you so wish. However, I guarantee you, we will be back and our questions will be answered. It’s entirely up to you,” Gil explained.

“I have nothing to hide. Come on in.” Reasoner led them into the house. He was extremely calm, considering the situation. “I’m sorry the house is a tad more untidy than it usually is. That’s what happens whenever my wife goes out of town to visit her sister,” he said as he removed a couple pairs of gloves from the living room sofa. “Please have a seat. Can I offer you some apple juice and biscuits?”

“We’re fine, thank you,” Gil replied.

Reasoner sat in a recliner across from them. “Vexton County? I’m certain I haven’t been there, but it sure sounds familiar,” he said matter-of-factly.

“How about the name Dr. Frank Langford? He’s a Vexton veterinarian. Does his name ring a bell?” Sharon asked.

“Langford? I must admit that name sounds familiar,” Reasoner said, rubbing his chin. “If I’m thinking of the right guy... he’s rather tall, like six-foot-five?”

“Yes. Do you recall meeting him at an American Medical Organization conference thirty years ago?” Gil asked.

“Whoa... thirty years ago. You’re really taking me back in time. I definitely remember going to that conference. Unlike most of the people who attended, my company had to literally buy a seat,” Reasoner answered.

“I do realize it’s quite some time ago, but I need to know if you recall speaking with Dr. Langford regarding a dog... an old Alaskan Malamute?” Gil asked.

“Ah, yes, the story of a dog and a miracle mountain—that’s it, Vexton. I knew the name of your town seemed familiar,” Reasoner said to Sharon.

“According to Dr. Langford, you were rather taken by the ‘dog and a miracle mountain.’ In fact, did you not insinuate you were going to investigate the mountain?” Gil asked.

“Yes, I actually gave it some thought, but I guess you could say that was at a time when I was blinded by my own entrepreneurial spirit. Fortunately, I saw the light before I ended up losing everything I had. The little guy is so up against it in business,” Reasoner explained with a chuckle.

“I take it you’re referring to your business, Earthly Remedies?” Sharon asked.

“Ugh—the memory of that business still haunts me. Bringing an end to that fiasco was my salvation. Sure, I was ambitious, but I was also very naïve in thinking I had all the answers,” Reasoner replied. He waved the memory away.

“Do you recall ever relaying Dr. Langford’s story to anyone else?” Gil asked.

Reasoner thought for a moment, then shook his head. “I may have, but I don’t have any particular recollection. It was all so long ago.”

“If your business was such a failure, please tell me, Mr. Reasoner, how you were able to purchase such a stunning farm,” Gil asked.

“After I dissolved Earthly Remedies, I took some finance and investment courses, and then I got lucky with a few international stocks—before the War Within raised its ugly head,” Reasoner replied calmly. He rose. “Are you sure you wouldn’t like some of my freshly made apple juice and biscuits?” he asked.

“Thank you for your hospitality, Mr. Reasoner, but we’re going to be on our way,” Gil replied.

“Well, I’m sorry I couldn’t have been of more help to you,” Reasoner said as he led them to the door. “Has something serious happened in Vexton?”

“Actually, there’s quite a lot going on. You’ll be hearing about it soon, Mr. Reasoner,” Sharon said on her way out.

“If anything else comes to mind, please do call me,” Gil said, handing Reasoner his card.

On their way to the airport, Gil sensed Sharon was feeling anxious. “You still think there’s more to this guy, don’t you?” he asked.

“I don’t know, Gil. The timeline of events leaves me feeling a tad uneasy,” Sharon said, staring out the window at a grove of weeping willows.

“Yeah, I agree. He also appeared a little *too* prepared when it came to answering our questions. It’ll be interesting to see what Shamir uncovers from his banking records,” Gil replied.

“I think it was a wise idea to tap his flash-pads and keep him under surveillance,” Sharon added. “I don’t think the guy was telling us everything he knows.”

“I’m certain, after tomorrow evening’s press conference, we’ll eventually find some of the answers we’re searching for,” Gil said.

* * *

While Sharon was in Oklahoma, Riley and I visited Mom.

“He’s getting bigger and more handsome every day,” Mom said as she bent down and gently pinched Riley’s cheeks. He was decked out in his new cowboy outfit. “And in a few days, my little cowpoke is going to be nine years old!”

“I hope you come to my birthday party, Grandma,” Riley said, bouncing with excitement.

“Of course. I wouldn’t miss it for the entire world. Now, what do you have in that envelope?” Mom asked.

“It’s a drawing I want to show you,” Riley said with a sheepish grin.

“A drawing? I didn’t know you like drawing, Riley. Grandpa Dennis used to love drawing... Well, let me see it,” Mom said, beaming.

Riley slowly pulled the paper from the envelope.

“Wow—that is one neat-looking fish, Riley!” Mom exclaimed.

“It’s Gordon. Daddy’s old angelfish. Mr. Shelby told me all about him,” Riley said.

“Who’s Mr. Shelby?” Mom asked.

Zack chimed in. “Good ol’ Don Shelby. He was one of Neville Hollis’s farmhands, back in the day. A real hard worker and a great storyteller. I’m surprised to hear he’s back in town.”

“Apparently he was just visiting,” I replied. Wanting to speak privately with Mom, I asked Zack to entertain Riley while we went into her unit.

“Come here, cowboy,” I heard Zack call out to Riley as we left. “I want to hear all about that pony of yours.”

I knew I had to tell Mom that Sharon and I now believed Dad was murdered. I’d thought practicing *how* I’d tell her would make things easier, but it didn’t. Nervousness made my breathing rapid and my palms sweaty. I could never forget that dreadful day when Mom held me in her arms and told me Dad had died in that crash. Now I realized just how difficult it must have been for her to break the news to me.

“So, why does my normally relaxed, loving son look so anxious?” she asked in her usual pleasant manner. I took a deep breath and moved closer to her on the sofa. “Come on, Heath,” she said seriously. “I know when something’s bothering you.”

I ended up stammering, “Do you remember how I told you Sharon and I believed Riley was cured the night of the Vexton Gleam?”

“Yes, I do. And do you remember me telling you you were crazy to think such a thing?” she asked in response, grinning.

“I surely do.” I chuckled. “Well, we’ve recently learned there’s a whole lot more to Moon Shade Bluff than we think.”

“Heath Claremont. Don’t tell me you’re becoming a believer in all the folklore surrounding that old pile of rock,” she said with a raised brow.

I reached out to hold her hands, and said, “There’s much more to all of this than some old tales from the past.” I proceeded to explain in detail. As expected, she was completely stunned.

“Murdered? Your father was a good, decent man. Who would want to kill him?” she cried.

“The federal authorities are still attempting to piece everything together. We think Dad was murdered because he and his assistant knew the truth about Moon Shade Bluff,” I said, slowly caressing her shoulders as she wept.

“And this all started with that dog?” Mom asked, attempting to regain her composure.

“When we combined the discovery of the mineral with Linda’s story about Sally, I guess a light went on in our heads,” I said, handing Mom a tissue.

When Sharon returned, she informed me Westgale was planning to hold a detailed press conference regarding Moon Shade Bluff the following evening. “Is he going to speak of Riley being cured by the Gleam?” I asked.

“Fortunately, he isn’t. But he is going to speak about your father. After a thorough examination of the laser beam burn that was discovered on the photos of the robo-copter, Federal Justice is now regarding your father’s death as a homicide,” Sharon said.

“Hopefully this will lead to finding the bastards who killed him,” I said firmly. Sharon looked at me and sighed. “What is it, honey? Is there something bothering you?” I said in response.

“I’m just concerned about all the speculation this is going to lead to,” she replied. “You have to remember, the minerals from that mountain have been used to manufacture a potent narcotic—”

“And people are going to speculate that my father may have been criminally involved. I can see where you’re coming from,” I calmly interrupted. I instantly thought about Mom, and what this would do to her. And then there was Riley, who’d recently become so interested in learning about his Grandpa Dennis. Anyone who truly knew my father would know he wouldn’t have been involved in criminal activity. But the outside world obviously didn’t know Dennis Claremont like we did, and the idea of this incredible man’s memory being tarnished left me feeling

sickened. After all, our memories of him were the only connection we had left.

“When the story’s made public, it will have a drastic impact on all of us,” Sharon warned.

“I guess that’s the price of justice.” I sighed. “I’m certain you and I will be able to handle whatever’s thrown at us, but Mom and Riley... that’ll be quite a challenge.”

“Well, hopefully the positive news of the mineral’s capabilities will take the headlines away from the investigation.”

I nodded. “By the way, how did things go with Jeremy Reasoner?” I asked.

“Actually, he appeared to have all the right answers, which in a strange sort of way left Gil and I feeling rather uneasy. So, Gil decided to monitor his flash-pads and banking records. He’s also placed him under 24-hour surveillance,” Sharon replied. “That’s all that can be done for now.”

CHAPTER 11

The following evening, Westgale addressed the nation about the discovery of the mineral on Moon Shade Bluff, and all aspects relating to it, including the suspected murder of my father. “My Chief of Medicine and Science, Dr. Jack Ahar, and his associates believe this mineral is an important discovery that may lead to a medical breakthrough of substantial proportions,” he proclaimed, his demeanor upbeat. Then his expression turned grave. “My Administration is offering a \$10-million reward for information leading to the arrest of those individuals who are behind the manufacturing of this narcotic, as well as the murders of Dennis Claremont and Ferguson Macintosh.” He looked intently into the UCIT camera and declared, “Mark my words. We will find you, and you will be punished to the full extent of the law.”

I listened to Westgale speak, yet still found it difficult to comprehend that my father had been murdered while saving the lives of two young boys. I had no choice now but to accept it as fact. My feelings must have shown on my face because Sharon asked, “Do you want to talk about it, Heath?” She gently caressed my arm.

“I just can’t believe how evil and heartless these people could be,” I said, my throat tight.

“It appears whoever did this was prepared to do whatever it took to protect their secret... including murder,” Sharon said gently.

“At least Westgale didn’t tell the world how we believe Riley was cured. Whatever we do, we just can’t put him through that, Sharon.”

"I fully agree with you, but I do think we have to tell him about your father being murdered. If he hears the news from somebody other than us, it'll be even more difficult for him."

"Since his birthday's tomorrow, let's at least wait until the day after," I said.

She nodded. "That's a wise idea."

"Hi Grandma. I'm so glad you came to my party," said a beaming Riley as he came running to the door.

"Somebody else is here with me," Mom said with a grin.

"All right, Uncle Zack!" Riley exclaimed as Zack appeared beside her.

"This is my grandma. And this is Uncle Zack," Riley said to his friend Christopher, who had followed Riley to the door.

"Is he the man who made those neat robots you showed me?" Christopher whispered.

"Yes, that's him." Riley turned back to Mom and Zack. "I showed Christopher the pictures of the robots you used to make."

"That was many years ago, boys," Zack replied with a chuckle. "Now I make food instead of machines."

"I want to open Grandma's present first," Riley exclaimed after the birthday dinner and cake.

"Here you are, my little prince," Mom said as she handed Riley a box gift-wrapped in Washington Androids paper.

Riley tore at the paper. "Laser Flash Frenzy! This game is amazing! Thanks, Grandma. Do you remember when we played this game at Uncle Skip's place?" Riley shouted to Sharon.

"I remember, Riley. You were the champion that night." Sharon laughed.

"Hey, Riley, there's something else in there," I said, noticing another wrapped package at the bottom of the box. I handed it to Riley.

Once again, in a mad state of euphoria, Riley tore off the paper. "Wow, my own American flag!" Riley bellowed as he unfurled the flag.

"And that's not just any American flag," Mom said with a smile. "That flag was given to our family in memory of your

Grandpa Dennis for saving those two young boys at Moon Shade Bluff.”

Riley looked at the flag and said solemnly, “Thanks, Grandma.”

After Riley had enthusiastically opened gifts from the other guests, including the very latest top-of-the-line soccer ball from Kayla, it was time for the grand finale. I nodded toward Aaron and the two of us went into my locked office and retrieved Riley’s last gift for the evening. “I can’t wait to see what Mommy and Daddy got me,” Riley said as Aaron and I carefully carried the covered gift into the living room.

“Okay, Riley, on the count of three, you and I will pull off the cover,” I said. “Take one end, Riles. Okay, here we go. One... two... three!”

“All right!” Riley exclaimed. “An aquarium—with my own angelfish!”

“It’s a saltwater aquarium. We’re going to keep it right here in the living room,” Sharon said.

Riley looked in awe at the fish. “Look, Grandma... that one looks just like Gordon!” he exclaimed as he pointed at the gold and blue angelfish.

“Oh my goodness, he does,” Mom said, pulling Riley close to her.

Once the celebration came to an end and everyone had gone home, I walked by the living room and noticed Riley staring listlessly at the aquarium.

“Hey Riles, you know we can add more really neat rocks and even toy scuba divers in there if you like,” I said.

“Yeah, I guess that’d be okay,” he murmured.

“What’s wrong, Riles?” I asked.

“Christopher told me.”

“What did Christopher tell you?”

“He told me he heard on the World Connect that Grandpa Dennis was murdered. Why did they kill him? Why? Why did they kill him?” Riley cried. Sharon, who had been lingering in the doorway, now came in and held him as he wept.

“It’s okay, Riles,” I said gently. “Most of the people in the world are kind and caring people. But unfortunately there are also bad people in the world. Sometimes they do really bad things that we can’t control. Now the only thing *we* can do is try our best to be the kind and caring people. That’s all we can do.”

“You know those angels I told you about?” Sharon asked. “The ones you told us you pray to?”

“Yes. I still pray to them every night,” Riley said softly as Sharon dried his tears with a tissue.

“Tonight, how about you, me, and Daddy pray to them together? We’ll say a special prayer for Grandpa, okay?” Sharon said.

“That’d be really neat. Maybe I could tell them to tell Grandpa I have an angelfish that looks just like Gordon.” Riley smiled.

* * *

“I knew I should have done it,” Hector said, pacing the backstage floor at the Regal Show Room.

“Done what?” Vincent asked.

“Got out of this bloody mess. They’ve been deceiving us all this time—hiding some type of special medical potion. I always figured this was a helluva lot bigger than selling drugs,” Hector growled. He stopped and turned to point a finger at Vincent. “And you know who’ll be the first to go down! This is not good, Vincent.” Hector shook his head and resumed his pacing.

“Relax, Hector,” Vincent said calmly, though he was grappling with his own fears. “The fact they’ve come out begging for the public’s help, offering \$10 million—that just goes to show they have nothing on us, or the organization.”

Hector’s flash-pad buzzed and he quickly read the message. He looked up. “There’s a car waiting for us out back.”

“I’ll be there in a second,” Vincent called out as Hector headed toward the back exit. The timing of this made Vincent anxious. *The organization will do whatever it takes to avoid leaving any trace of itself. If I get in that car, I’m a dead man!* Vincent was certain of it. In fact, concerned he’d have to one day make some kind of getaway,

Vincent had concealed a wig, a pair of sunglasses, a cane, and a jacket in one of the theater's lockers the day after he learned of Sylvain's murder. Now he hurriedly donned the disguise and darted toward the front door. Hector's screams followed him. *Adios, Hector*, Vincent thought as his companion begged for his life. *I'll never see you again.*

Vincent walked down a narrow walkway and stepped into a large alleyway frequented by homeless men and women. He joined a group gathered around a fire in an old drum and waited until he believed the coast was clear before leaving the vicinity and checking into a nearby motel. He felt like a trapped man with nowhere to turn.

The organization had been very selective when it came to choosing those they employed, and as such, performed extensive background checks. They looked for those with no personal life, people who could function in a clandestine manner. This meant they more often than not brought in ex-cons who were literally alone in life. The organization told them that when, for whatever reason, their services were no longer required, they'd be given a new life outside of America. Whether this was true or not, no one really knew. To Vincent, it had become evident that it wasn't.

In Vincent's case, there was one acquaintance he knew he could turn to in times of trouble. In the criminal underworld, he was referred to as Samson. For a period of time, Vince and Samson had worked together as debt collectors for a ruthless racketeering crime syndicate known as the Eternal. On two separate occasions, Samson had saved Vincent's life. A bond had formed between the two men; Vince felt indebted to his friend—but he also trusted him above any other.

The following day, Vincent took an express train to Detroit, where Samson had resided since his release from prison three years earlier. Although he was traveling incognito, whenever the train stopped and passengers boarded, Vincent put his chin to his chest to hide his face. As each passenger entered, Vincent trembled with fear, waiting for a moment of discovery that never came.

Samson's residence was a five-minute walk from the train station. When Vincent arrived he checked his time-pin and realized he was

earlier than expected. Before making his way up the walkway to the house, he anxiously checked his surroundings to make sure he hadn't been followed.

At that moment, his flash-pad buzzed. It was Samson. Vincent answered. "Hey, good timing. I just got here," he said.

"Vinny, my man. Looking forward to seeing you, bro," Samson said. "I'll be closing the diner in half an hour, so I should be home in about forty-five minutes. Make yourself comfortable. Here's the code to open the door," he added, and reeled off a series of numbers and letters.

Vincent opened the door without problems, and stepped into Samson's abode with a sense of relief. That lasted until he reached the entrance to the living room, where a man in a brown, pinstripe suit sat in front of a flash-screen.

"Who the hell are you?" Vincent blurted.

"I can either be your best friend or your worst enemy—that all depends on you," the man replied. Vincent reached for his laser-gun, and pointed it at him. "So I guess it's not your wish to be friends," the man observed calmly.

"Who the hell are you?" Vincent asked again, his voice cracking with fear.

"My name's Dirk. I'm a scientist by trade, and sometimes a public speaker. But I much prefer my role as the organization's Director of Operations. Now, I think it'd be wise for you to lose that gun, Mr. Bruno. My associates outside would hate to have to come in here and mess up your friend's cozy little house."

Vince cast a fearful look out the window. Three men were standing unobtrusively in the street in front of the house. Vincent slowly set the weapon on an end table.

Dirk grunted and turned his attention back to the flash-screen, where UCIT was presenting a feature on Moon Shade Bluff. "Wow, who would've thought that a large heap of rock could be so interesting," Dirk observed, flashing a sinister grin at Vincent. His silver hair and beady eyes shone in the light from the flash-screen.

"Does Samson know you're here? Is he somehow involved in this?" Vince asked.

“Oh, no. Your friend has really turned his life around. We wouldn’t dare think of luring him back to the dark side. I hardly recognized him from the photos I had seen... Oh yeah, that long, messy hair he used to sport is now trimmed nice and neat, and those wild eyes look very tame,” Dirk replied.

“Have you been following him?”

“Actually, before coming here, we paid a visit to his lovely diner,” Dirk said, reaching for a bag on the end table to his right. “I figured you’d be hungry, so I picked up a couple of burgers. Come on, let’s go into the kitchen.”

Vince reluctantly followed Dirk into the kitchen. “Sit,” Dirk said. Vincent sat. Dirk handed him a burger. “I hope you don’t mind that I took the liberty of ordering your burger with the works,” he said with a wide grin.

Vince stared uneasily at the burger.

Dirk took a bite of his. “Mmm, delicious!” he bellowed. “Come on, enjoy.” He waved his hand at Vince’s burger. “I’ve never seen someone so afraid of a hamburger.” Dirk laughed.

“It’s just that I’m not very hungry. I had a large lunch on the train,” Vince mumbled.

Dirk pushed his own burger aside. “It’s okay. I fully understand your apprehension. But to ease your mind, you must believe me when I tell you my cohorts and I have not come here to do you harm, Mr. Bruno.”

“What about Sylvain and Hector? Not long ago, I opened up a box and found Sylvain’s head in it. And yesterday, I heard Hector screaming for his life. How could I not be anxious?” Vince said, glancing out the kitchen window. One of Dirk’s menacing-looking henchmen was standing in the yard.

Dirk sat back in his chair with his hands laced behind his head. “Well, the only reason those gentlemen ended up in such an unfortunate predicament was because they disobeyed the organization. Severely.”

“I’m aware of what Sylvain did, but Hector... why was he killed?” Vince asked.

“Ah, Hector. What a shame,” Dirk murmured. “He was so close... so close to completing his duties. But once again, fear proved to be man’s worst enemy.”

“I don’t understand,” Vince said.

Dirk turned on his flash-pad and displayed a photo of a picturesque home someplace in Italy. “Venice,” Dirk supplied. “This would’ve been Hector’s new home—if he wasn’t so stupid.” Dirk shook his head.

“Please, tell me what he did that made you guys kill him!” Vince asked anxiously.

“We discovered he was on the verge of going to the authorities. Therefore, he needed to be eliminated,” Dirk said as he turned off the flash-pad.

“So, where does this leave me?” Vincent asked.

“Well, sometimes one man’s misfortune is another man’s lucky break. I hope you like Venice.”

“You’re sending me to Venice?”

“Yes, in a few days, after your final deed is done, the idyllic home I just showed you will become *your* new home. We’ll also be setting you up with a \$5-million money fund to help you begin your new life.” Dirk leaned forward. “You will absolutely fall in love with Venice. The people are free-spirited and very sincere, and then there’s the breathtaking architecture.”

“Please, tell me: this final deed... what does it entail?”

“It’s very simple. You will be responsible for arranging our final shipment of green-hearts. You’ll receive a set of instructions tomorrow afternoon. Once you have completed the assignment, you’ll receive the itinerary for your move to Venice,” Dirk explained. “Now, go on—eat your burger. It’s getting cold. Oh, and Mr. Bruno, do enjoy your evening with Samson. True friends are so hard to find, and even more difficult to keep.”

In Vincent’s mind, the last few weeks had felt like years; the last few years, an eternity. He’d completed his final assignment and would be ever so grateful to never see one of those pills again. He was hoping to finally be free of this madness. Although, in the back of his mind,

he wondered if he ever would. Even though he wasn't party to the organization's inner workings, he still knew the core of their secret. He also knew the lengths they'd go to in order to keep it hidden.

For two days, he'd been waiting patiently for Dirk to contact him. On this day, he'd spent the better part of the afternoon sitting out on his apartment balcony, looking at photos from his youth. One photo in particular caught his attention: he was holding up a trophy shaped like a bronze fist. The photo had been taken when he was fifteen years old, and he'd been named Best Up and Coming Bare-Knuckle Fighter at his community's local gym. He would never forget the weeks that followed that day. It had all begun the next morning.

"Come on, Vincent, smarten up. Hit the damn bag like a real man. I won't accept this garbage. Just because you won some trophy by beating a bunch of local punks doesn't mean shit to me. If you're going to eventually compete as a professional, you're going to have to do better than this!" his stepfather, Angelo, yelled.

Vincent continued pounding the worn-out punching bag.

"You've gotta get a rhythm going—pace yourself, then bam! Put your fist through his face! Stop punching like a frightened little child!" Angelo exclaimed. He demonstrated. *"Do you remember when I showed you those view-files of Devan Bedlam? Do you remember how the second he sensed his opponent was losing steam he'd go in for the kill? That's how you do it, my boy. That's why he's been World Champion for the last five years."*

As the relentless badgering continued over the next few weeks, Vincent began feeling lost and confused. He decided to quit going to the gym, and gave up the idea of becoming a professional bare-knuckle fighter. Realizing his stepfather wouldn't understand, he turned to his mother, hoping she would. But she was furious with him.

"You want to quit? After all the time and money Angelo has spent on training you, you're just going to quit? He's trying his best to make you into something!" she shouted.

“Make me into something? Oh no, Mother. This is all about him. He’s trying to turn me into something he wanted to be,” young Vince replied.

“You’re a pathetic little bastard. You’ll end up just like your lowlife father, sitting alone in a dark prison cell!” she shouted.

Vincent had had enough; he knew he had to get away, and that’s exactly what he did. And at the age of fifteen he discovered an entire new world—a world of crime. A dark, gypsy existence filled with buying and selling guns and drugs, gambling, loan sharks, fly-by-night girlfriends, and, as his mother had predicted, several visits to prison.

As he sat on the balcony with a bottle of whiskey, reflecting on his past, his flash-pad buzzed. The flash-message read: *You’ve made it, Vinny! Great work on the final assignment. The organization’s work is done, and now we can all move on. For you, this means a new life in Venice! And for your friend Samson, his lovely new girlfriend, and her two adorable daughters, well, they’ll be able to live happily ever after without some mysterious men watching their every move.*

A grand-electro will be waiting for you in front of your building at 8:00 a.m. sharp. I will be escorting you all the way to your new home, on a luxurious private jet. Oh, and a new designer wardrobe will be waiting for you in Venice.

P.S. We’re proud of you!

After he read the message, he shook his head and looked up at the sky, wishing he could somehow escape into the ether.

It was a warm autumn evening and the sky was peppered with glittering stars. Every sound Vincent heard echoed through his entire being, and everything he saw gave way to a memory from his *early* childhood. Those were the days he cherished, the days before his stepfather tried to turn him into a bare-knuckle champion, and the days before he entered that cesspool of corruption that became his life. As hard as he attempted to

remain positive, he couldn't squelch the memory of how his downward spiral began.

"They simply don't need me anymore, Vinny," his father Piero sighed as he and Vinny sat on the ground beside a bed of rose bushes. The air was heady with their scent.

Nine-year-old Vincent replied, "But you can fix electros and robo-cycles better than anyone!"

His father reached over and placed a hand on Vincent's shoulder. "Thanks, son, but you see, they have machines that can get the job done twice as fast as I and my friends at work can," he said in his husky voice.

"I don't care, you're better than some stupid machine," Vincent said, frowning. "How will you get money if you don't work?" he asked.

"It'll be okay, Vinny my boy," Piero said with a smile, hugging Vincent.

Vincent had come to learn that whenever his father used the expression "Vinny my boy," it meant he was concealing the fact that he was actually feeling anxious. "Come on, let's go get you one of those new neon soccer balls."

"Uh... I really don't need one," Vincent said sheepishly, out of concern for his father's financial situation.

"Vinny, come here," Piero said to Vincent, standing before him. "Stop frowning. Everything's going to be fine. I'm your father and I will always take care of you," he added, looking Vincent directly in the eye.

The next day, while Vincent and his father were kicking around their new neon soccer ball in the park, two mysterious men showed up. One was carrying a brown envelope. "Give me a minute, son," Piero said, and went over to the men. He spoke with them for a few seconds, handed them a small package, then took the envelope and stuffed it in his back pocket.

Vincent watched this type of thing go on for a good part of a year. Sometimes Piero would be the one handing over an envelope and receiving a package. Vincent began to feel uneasy about the

situation, but did not confront his father, who had told him these people were friends and business acquaintances.

Then came the July afternoon Vincent would never forget. It was the warmest day of the year—so warm that there was no way they were even going to attempt to run around kicking a soccer ball. Instead, they picked up two cherry-flavored Freeze-Blasts and sat in the shade of a large tree.

“Dad, is there a chance your work might call you back?” Vincent asked hesitantly.

Piero sighed. “Not a chance. In fact, they just released another twelve employees over the last two weeks.”

“What about other repair shops?” Vincent asked, trying to be optimistic.

“They all have those damn machines, Vinny. We humans have lost the battle,” Piero replied with a huff. “Don’t worry. Everything’s going to be fine, Vinny my boy,” he added, as if he could sense Vincent’s worry.

Moments later, they saw a man in the distance, waving his hand. “Just give me two minutes, Vin. I have to go and see one of my associates,” Piero said nervously. “Hey, do you want me to grab you another Freeze-Blast on the way back?” he asked Vincent.

“Uh, no... I’m fine,” Vincent replied, keeping his eyes on the man.

He watched his father approach the man and remove a package from his pocket. As he handed the package to the man, two police officers emerged from the bushes nearby. It was a setup, Vincent realized, as he watched his father being arrested.

Frozen in place in a state of shock, he jumped when he felt a tap on his shoulder. When he turned to look up, a female police officer said softly, “You’ll have to come with me, young man.” She offered an encouraging smile. But as he watched his father being taken away, he wept uncontrollably.

Vincent came back to the present, tears streaming down his cheeks. *How did I let my life come to this? Did I not learn anything*

from my father's transgressions? he asked himself. If only he'd said no when Sylvain came to him with the offer to work for the organization. If only he'd taken that job at Samson's diner upon his release from prison... It'd always baffled him, why Sylvain had targeted him in the first place. The few times he asked Sylvain, the answer was always the same: "I simply did what I was told to do. Your name was on the list."

On several occasions over the past few weeks, Vincent thought about taking his own life. But something gave him the strength to face another day, as bleak as it may have seemed. In his head he kept hearing his father's words: "Everything's going to be fine, Vinny my boy." He kept trying to convince himself that those words were true, but it was becoming close to impossible. He knew it was very likely he'd be killed the following morning when he met with Dirk. But he also knew if he attempted to run away, he'd certainly be killed.

Since the day of the Vexton press conference, a battle had played out in Vincent's mind about whether or not he should go to the authorities and surrender, or take his chances with the organization's promise, which he believed was a giant lie. He realized that if he were to now go to the authorities, he'd be placing the lives of Samson, his girlfriend, and her daughters in serious jeopardy. How could he do that to someone who'd saved *his* life, twice? Vincent felt like a man trapped in a cage. A cage of his own making.

The following morning, a silver grand-electro pulled up in front of the apartment. "Call his flash-pad and let him know we're here," Dirk ordered. His associate, Army, complied. Vincent didn't respond. Dirk pounded the dashboard in frustration.

Army tried to calm him down. "I wouldn't worry, sir, we've had eyes and ears on this clown since he returned from Detroit. I know for a fact he's still up there."

"Go get him. I'll wait here. I told the son of a bitch 8:00 a.m. sharp," Dirk said.

The burly Army entered the building and took the elevator to the fifteenth floor. When he came to Vincent's apartment the door was

slightly ajar. Equipped with a mini laser-gun and a styngor, he slowly entered the apartment.

“Mr. Bruno,” he quietly called out as he knocked on the bathroom door. There was no reply. “Mr. Bruno, we’re waiting for you,” he said, raising his voice. He turned to his right and saw strands of dark brown hair protruding above the back of the living room sofa. He drew his gun and took a couple of quick steps toward the sofa.

Vincent Bruno was indeed sitting there. He was dead. An empty bottle of whiskey and an empty container of pills lay on the sofa by his side. Army pulled out his flash-pad and called his superior.

“What in the hell is going on here!” Dirk growled as he stormed into the apartment. He looked toward Army, who nodded toward Vincent’s body. Dirk moved in closer and checked to confirm Vincent was dead. “Well, I guess it beats the hell out of being thrown from a plane,” he said with an evil grin.

CHAPTER 12

In the Freedom Home's main conference room, Attorney General Champ Sutton was presiding over a meeting of the country's top law enforcement officials. "Have your people made any traction regarding the green-hearts, Sergeant Starks?" he asked.

Sergeant Tanya Starks, Director of Federal Narcotic Policing, looked up and shook her head. "Amazingly, we have no record of them anywhere in the US, outside of the batch found in JD Wren's apartment," she replied. "We've had undercover agents across the country put word out on the street, and not a darn thing turned up. They're nowhere to be found."

"What about internationally?" Gil asked.

"I'm glad you asked, Agent Robichaud," Starks replied. "If these drugs are being sold anywhere, it has to be in the HKM."

"Oh? Why's that?" Sutton asked with a raised brow.

"If they were being shipped and sold anywhere else in the world, we would've tracked them down by now," Starks answered confidently. "But as everybody in this room is well aware, the HKM government has become a massive bed of corruption, and the country has found a way to really prosper from legalizing and selling a variety of narcotics."

"That makes sense, considering the laser-gun that left the blast and the tree-eyes were from the HKM," Gil replied. "I think we should check with the Action Express depots across the country and have them look into their HKM shipments."

“We’re on it. We’ve asked their security team to perform a review and be on alert for anything strange regarding HKM shipments,” Starks answered.

After working day in and day out on Project Vexton, Gil realized he had to find some time for an evening with his family.

“Okay, Dad, you’re all ours tonight,” his daughter Pauline said.

“That’s right, honey. Keep that flash-pad tucked away and out of sight,” his wife, Kia, added with a chuckle.

“All right, all right... Here, look—I’ll set it on emergency mode. There... are you all happy?” Gil laughed. “Now let’s get to the restaurant; we don’t want to be late for our reservation.”

“Oh my Lord, Dad, that steak could feed an entire family!” exclaimed his son, Sammy, a short time later as the waiter slid Gil’s order onto the table in front of him.

“This is a good old-fashioned porterhouse steak, son. I lived on these during my bodybuilding days,” Gil said as he cut into the steak. He put a piece into his mouth. “Wow... cooked perfectly—a taste of heaven!”

“I guess our kids take after me,” Kia said with a chuckle; the three other plates all contained baked salmon fillets with a side of spinach.

“Hey Dad, is that story about the dog in Vexton true?” Pauline asked.

“Now, now, Pauline, I thought we were going to give your father a break and not talk about that stuff tonight,” Kia said with a grimace.

“It’s okay, sweetheart,” Gil said to Kia before turning to his daughter. “Yes, Pauline, from all accounts it appears the story about the dog is true.” Something drew his gaze to a man sitting alone on the other side of the restaurant. The man was staring at him, and seemed extremely fidgety.

“Will you take us to Vexton one day?” young Sammy asked. “That place seems really neat, with that mountain. And they say there’s all kinds of ghosts and aliens,” Sammy added, dropping his voice as if scared, though it was still tinged with excitement.

As much as Gil tried to pay attention to his son, the stranger across the restaurant distracted him, and he watched the man from the corner of his eye.

“So, will you take us, Dad?”

“Huh?” Gil replied.

“Vexton—will you take us to Vexton,” Sammy said, raising his voice.

“Maybe... someday. Now, settle down and finish your food,” Gil said.

Stabbing his fork aimlessly into his salad, the man across the room continued to stare at the Robichaud table. Gil had had enough. “Have you noticed that guy across the room and how he’s been staring at us?” he whispered to Kia, not wanting to alarm the kids.

“Yeah; he’s kind of giving me the creeps,” she whispered back.

“Well, I’m going to have a word with him,” Gil said. “Get the kids out of sight,” he added.

“Hey guys, let’s go check out the gift store in the lobby,” Kia said to the kids.

Gil waited for them to exit the restaurant before he walked over to the man. “Hey partner, is everything okay?” Gil asked politely.

The man had dropped his head to focus on his salad when he saw Gil approaching; now he slowly raised it. “I need to speak with you,” he replied in a somber tone. “Please have a seat.”

Gil studied him a moment. He noticed the man was wearing an American military pendant. “Army?” he asked.

“Yes sir,” the man replied. “Seven years of service, and proud of every second,” he added with conviction.

“Well, on behalf of myself, my family, and this country, I want to thank you... I didn’t get your name,” Gil said.

“Tyler Monroe—Major Tyler Monroe,” he said with a nervous look around the restaurant. He reached into a pocket and displayed his military ID.

“Hmm... all looks in order,” Gil said as he quickly scanned the records. “Now, you said you needed to speak with me. Did you follow me here?” he asked.

“Yes I did, and I apologize if I made you and your family uncomfortable, but I desperately need to speak with you,” Monroe replied.

“I don’t understand. You could’ve easily contacted my office rather than having to follow me around the city,” Gil said.

“I was afraid.”

“Afraid of what?”

“I have important information about JD Wren, and I’m afraid they know I do,” Monroe said, his uneasy gaze sweeping the restaurant.

“Who are *they*?” Gil asked. He noticed Kia standing at the entrance, her expression concerned. He gave her a quick nod to assure her all was fine.

“JD bought those drugs from someone who called himself the Polar Bear.”

“Polar Bear?”

“Yeah, I guess it’s some kind of nickname.”

“Do you know his actual name?”

“No.”

Gil nodded; it had been worth a try. “This could really be the break we’re looking for. I’m glad you came forward.”

“I was just about to head back home to my wife and kids in Atlanta when I saw the Vexton press conference.”

“I’m going to have one of my agents come here and pick you up,” Gil said. “He’ll then escort you to the Prestige Hotel. We’ll get you a room, and make sure it’s continuously monitored. Then tomorrow morning I’ll have my agent escort you to the Freedom Home where we’ll meet with the Attorney General.”

“Uh, is that necessary?” Monroe asked.

“I think it’s a wise precaution,” Gil said, and Monroe nodded.

Gil stepped away and contacted Shamir, instructing him to look into any connections between the “Polar Bear” moniker and the criminal world.

Early the next morning, Tyler Monroe was brought in to meet with Gil and Champ Sutton. He spoke of his time spent in the army

with JD Wren. "JD was the kind of friend and soldier who always had your back, and his intelligence was extraordinary. That being said, I was always concerned for his mental state."

"And why was that?" asked Sutton.

"JD was paranoid about the HKM," Monroe replied. "He believed that one day the HKM would swallow America and spit it out for its own amusement."

"He said that?" Sutton asked. Monroe nodded.

"Did he ever speak to you about Vexton-Tech and the fact that its consumer robots were being made in the HKM?" Gil asked.

"Every chance he had. He was furious that the largest tech company in the country chose to make those machines in the HKM," Monroe replied. "Then when his sister, Tammy, became ill he immediately blamed it on her Home Servant robot. He even contacted the government with his concerns."

"Yes, we're well aware of that. Now, did you ever hear him speak about blowing up any schools or government buildings?" Sutton asked.

"Oh, no; I would have definitely alerted the authorities if I did," Monroe answered. "One day I did see him reading the AXE doctrine and he shrugged it off, saying he just wanted to see what all the fuss was about. Little did I know he'd become obsessed with it."

"Now, Agent Robichaud informed me that you have information regarding the narcotic. How do you know this Polar Bear was the person who sold JD the drugs?" Sutton asked.

"One day when JD and I were on leave, he received a call on his flash-pad. He asked me to answer the call because he was busy tending to something," Monroe began. "When I said hello, a voice said, 'Hey JD, this is the Polar Bear inviting you to a game of green-hearts. Same location as before.' JD got real nervous and grabbed the phone from me and went into another room. When I asked who it was, he told me he was being invited to a card game. At the time I believed him, but after I saw the Vexton press conference, I came to realize there was no way he was being honest with me that day."

"And you're concerned that whoever this Polar Bear is knew it was you who answered the call. Is that correct?" Sutton asked.

“That’s correct, sir,” Monroe replied.

Gil tapped his flash-pad. “I want to thank you for coming forward, Major Monroe, and please be advised we’ll do everything in our power to ensure your safety.” Two of Gil’s agents arrived to escort the major from the building.

“So what do you make of it?” Sutton asked when the young man was gone.

“We’ve got to find this Polar Bear,” Gil replied. “I’ve got one of my analysts working on it.”

Two days later, after spending countless hours conferring with law enforcement offices across the country and a number of undercover agents, Shamir called Gil to say he’d found out who Polar Bear really was. He briefed Gil in his office. “His real name is Evan Sylvester. A lifetime criminal,” Shamir said, displaying photos of Sylvester on the flash-screen. “He’s also known as Mr. Sylvain. The guy has spent more time in prison than he has in the outside world. He’s been involved with every form of racketeering you can name.”

“And I take it the ‘Polar Bear’ moniker comes from his white hair,” Gil said as he studied the photos.

“Yeah; apparently he also got the name because he’s considered bipolar, and he can be as ferocious as a bear,” Shamir said. “The man’s been described by many as a savage beast.”

“Is he currently behind bars?” Gil asked.

“He was last released from prison three years ago, and there’s been no sign of him anywhere since,” Shamir answered.

“Were you able to identify any crime organizations he’s actually worked with?” Gil asked.

Shamir shook his head. “That’s the crazy thing. It’s like he’s some kind of itinerant criminal. My staff’s going to dig a little deeper to see if they can get some actual names,” he added.

Gil ran his hands through his hair. “I’ve ordered our National Investigation people to run a full probe on the guy,” he said. “I’d hate to put out an APB and possibly tip him off, but we may have no other choice.”

“With all due respect, sir, if he’s still part of the scene, I’m sure he’ll somehow be made aware of the fact that we’re investigating him,” Shamir said.

Gil sighed and nodded. “Great work, Shamir. I’ll be briefing the president and Attorney General Sutton in an hour or so.”

Two hours later, a worldwide APB was put out on Evan Sylvester.

* * *

“Oh my Lord, for a country we’re on such bad terms with, it’s amazing how much business we actually do with them,” Narcotics Policing Agent Will Pope said to the junior agent accompanying him around New York City’s enormous Action Express shipping depot, as they looked over packages destined for the HKM.

“This is the sender,” said the depot’s chief of security, indicating five large boxes. “It’s the fact they’ve been making this mad rush of shipments out to the HKM lately that really caught our attention.”

“May I see the sender’s name and the description of the contents?” Agent Pope asked.

“Of course.” The chief handed him the shipment form.

“Thank you, sir. That’ll be all,” Pope said. The man nodded once and stepped away. “Hmm... L&B Products is the company,” he said to his fellow agent. “This says that the product inside is a children’s vitamin called Fun Drops.” He cut open one of the boxes and pulled aside the protective cushioning that lined the carton, revealing fifty containers of pills. Twenty-five of them were labeled Fun Drops, each containing 150 pills of various shapes and colors. The other twenty-five containers were filled with pills that were heart-shaped and green in color. “Whoa... I think we may have just found exactly what we’re looking for,” Pope said with a raised brow, lifting one of the containers to study its contents. “If these are what we suspect they are, this is big news.”

The two agents began gathering the evidence to send to Dr. Ahar’s Washington lab for analysis.

Gil and his team were elated to finally have a concrete lead in this perplexing case. “You’re telling me L&B Products is a subsidiary of Step 1 Health?” said a shocked Gil as Agent Gallio presented him with a report on the company.

“Yeah, one of their many,” Gallio replied. “They specialize in infant and children’s health care products. And what I found interesting is that Lawson Pierce’s brother, Cameron, manages the operation.”

“Have you been able to find out where in the HKM those boxes were heading?” Gil asked.

“All I can tell you is that they were being sent to the central health care depot in the northwest region of the country,” Gallio replied. “Shamir’s looking into it further.”

“And these Fun Drop vitamins, do they come in the form of green hearts?” Gil asked.

“No. From what I’ve been able to ascertain, there are no green-colored or heart-shaped Fun Drops whatsoever,” Gallio replied.

Gil took several deep breaths, then, “Step 1 Health... damn it!” he yelled. The veins at his temples throbbed. “I can’t believe this. We’re still all reeling from that bloody Vexton-Tech mess, and now this? What the hell is happening to this country?” He buried his face in his hands.

After being briefed by Gil, Champ Sutton called for an emergency meeting. Looking beaten, Westgale entered the conference room and poured himself a vodka on the rocks. He loosened his tie. “If we determine SIH is behind this, it will be the end of us, David,” he said to Dave Perry, who was in the midst of studying Gil’s report. “There’ll be no coming back from this one.”

“It doesn’t look very good, sir,” Perry had to agree. “Now that Ahar has confirmed that the company was shipping the narcotic.” He shook his head and continued to read the report.

When the others arrived, Westgale made his way to the front of the room. He looked solemnly from face to face. “There are no words to express what I’m feeling at this moment,” he said. “To think that

Lawson Pierce was in some way involved in this disastrous turn of events breaks my heart and soul.” He paused. “Without that man’s assistance, I wouldn’t be president. He supported me in every way imaginable. And now, through his actions, he’s completely destroyed my legacy, and more importantly, that of the PBA.”

Champ Sutton rose. “With all due respect, Mr. President, are we not being premature? Maybe we’re looking at another corporate sabotage like what we saw with Vexton-Tech.” He didn’t sound convincing.

Dave Perry rose. “The more I think about this case, the more convinced I become that S1H is behind the entire thing. I believe they knew about that mineral, not just that it could be used as a narcotic and make them loads of money through drug trafficking, but that the mineral’s medicinal potential could put a real damper on the company’s business of healing people.”

“All we have to do is look at the scope of this criminal operation. There is absolutely no way this is the work of some corporate moles. Oh, no... this has to be the work of a substantial, highly corrupt organization—and unfortunately it looks like it’s one this country has admired for many years.” Anger flushed Westgale’s face red. “How will we ever rebound from something like this?”

In another conference room down the hall, Gil was meeting with the heads of the government’s law enforcement agencies, preparing to coordinate a full-out blitz on S1H. “This all has to take place simultaneously,” said Martin Stevens, the director of the National Department of Investigation.

“I agree. It’ll be quite an undertaking, considering the scope of S1H’s business. But it’s paramount that we approach this operation with complete synergy,” Gil said.

Stevens rubbed his chin, deep in thought. “I’m concerned about the danger our men and women could be facing when executing these raids,” he said with a grimace. “After all, we’re talking about a group who’ve gone to the extent of using a very rare high-tech laser-gun and tree-eyes.”

“Are you thinking we should involve the military?” Gil asked.

“As insurance, I think it’d be wise to have units on standby,” Stevens replied.

“What are your thoughts, Colonel?” Gil asked Colonel Peters.

The colonel thought for a moment, his face etched with concern. He sighed heavily. “I agree. But what I’m fearing far more is the *public’s* reaction if and when we confirm Step 1 Health is involved in this madness, especially considering how close Lawson Pierce and his daughter are to this Administration.”

CHAPTER 13

It had been a long day for Step 1 Health Chairman Lawson Pierce. He'd just finished his third business meeting and was looking forward to returning to the office to tie up some loose ends before he and his wife, Brooke, flew to Australia for a much-needed vacation.

His luxurious white grand-electro was waiting for him when he exited the building. "Back to the office, Timothy," he said to the driver as he got in. Then he noticed the driver was a much larger man than Timothy. Before he could do anything beyond gasp, the passenger door opened and a very skinny man slid into the backseat beside Lawson. He was holding a laser-gun.

Startled a second time, Lawson turned toward the man. "Wait a second—Dirk? What is going on?" he asked in shock.

"Don't be alarmed, Lawson," Dirk replied as the electro pulled away from the curb.

"Where the hell is Timothy?"

"He'll be fine, providing he can find a ride home. I guess next time he'll know better than to leave such an impressive vehicle unlocked."

"What are you doing, Dirk?"

"We're just going for a little ride. So, you just sit back and relax."

"Listen to me, you little runt, I need to get back to the office. So tell your thug to turn this damn electro around, right now."

"Now, now, now... You're not used to taking orders, are you?" Dirk answered with a sneer, moving the gun as a reminder to

Lawson. “All your employees cater to your every whim. Always the king of the castle, huh, Lawson?”

After driving for twenty minutes, the driver pulled the grand-electro over to the side of a dirt road. Lawson had no idea where he was. Dirk waved the laser-gun, indicating that he should get out. The driver and Dirk followed suit. Dirk waved the gun toward the rear of the white electro and Lawson noticed for the first time a dark green van waiting for them. “In you go, Lawson,” Dirk said.

“Where the hell are we going?” Lawson demanded as they climbed into the van.

“Please, Lawson. Army here likes quiet when he’s driving,” Dirk replied calmly, nodding toward the driver.

* * *

Two dozen National Investigation agents stormed Step 1 Health’s New York City headquarters, part of a simultaneous blitz on the entire operation. Once the agents had secured the building, Director Martin Stevens entered and escorted CEO Nora Pierce Davidson into her office.

“Oh my God! What is happening?” she exclaimed once her initial panic had passed.

“Have a seat, ma’am,” Stevens said politely. “Where’s your father?” he asked.

“He’s not here. He’s been on the road all day,” Nora replied. Her eyes flitted to the activity beyond the glass of her office wall before focusing on Stevens. “Why are you and your men here? Did something happen to my father? Are you looking for him?”

Calmly, Stevens pulled up a chair and sat directly in front of her. He then explained, in detail, what was taking place.

“There has to be a mistake, sir,” Nora cried. “There’s no way my father could have known anything about that mineral, let alone the fact it could be made into a narcotic or be used for medicinal purposes. And as far as L&B Products is concerned, it’s one of our most valued divisions. It’s our health care line for children.” Her voice rose toward hysteria; Stevens maintained his calm.

“Before this raid took place, I spent quite some time studying your company. I must say, it is a rather enormous operation,” Stevens said.

Nora took a moment to gather herself; when she spoke again, her voice was calmer as well. “That it is,” she agreed. “And we take immense pride in our accomplishments. Dad and I have worked tirelessly to build the company into not only the largest, but the most important health care company in the country.”

“So large that I guess you may not be privy to all that is going on,” Stevens suggested. “Would you not agree, ma’am?”

Nora gaped at him a moment, then stood and walked toward the door. “I’ve had enough of this. I’m not speaking any further without my lawyer. We have a business to run here,” she said. “So, unless you’re placing me under arrest, I’m asking you to leave my office.”

“I’m going to ask you again: where is your father?” Stevens asked, a hard edge to his voice.

Her façade of control crumbled; Nora grabbed her flash-pad and tried to contact her father. There was no response. “He’s not answering,” she informed Stevens, hysteria tingeing her voice again. She sat down at her desk, face blank with shock.

Seconds later, two agents entered her office and began methodically gathering data. Nora stepped out into the reception area, and watched as the agents made their way through the building, moving from office to office.

By now, the company’s chief legal counsel, Robert Capella, had arrived. “Are they allowed to do this, Robert?” Nora asked the attorney.

He slowly exhaled. “They have a federal warrant,” he replied. “They could take a wrecking ball to this building right now, if they so wished, and there’d be nothing we could do about it. Where’s your father, Nora?” Capella asked.

“I have no idea. I tried reaching him on his flash-pad, and I had no luck,” Nora replied. Her flash-pad buzzed, and she scrambled to answer it. She read the message. “Oh my, that’s Dad’s driver. Dad’s grand-electro was stolen,” she told Capella.

“This is insane, Nora. As we speak, every facility this company owns is being raided, and we have no idea where the hell your father is,” Capella said, shaking his head in disbelief.

One of the agents approached. “Excuse me, ma’am, but we require access to your father’s office, and it appears we need a code to enter,” he said.

Nora turned to Capella, who gave her a nod encouraging her to comply. Walking slowly to the panel by the large steel doors Nora pressed a series of buttons with a trembling hand. The doors opened. Nora stepped inside.

“I’m sorry, ma’am. I’ll have to ask you to leave the room,” the agent said.

Nora reluctantly stepped out of the office. “Can’t you do anything to stop this?” she asked Capella, who gently took her arm and led her back to the reception area.

“Do you realize how serious these accusations are?” he said, eyebrows pinched in concern. “Believe me, Nora, I know how these things work. This wouldn’t be happening if the government didn’t have just cause. Now, I need you to be honest with me. Do you have any idea why this is happening?” he asked.

“Damn it, Robert, I have absolutely no clue whatsoever what is going on, or what my father’s done,” Nora exclaimed. “I mean, the things they’re accusing us of are beyond comprehension.”

Not far away, in Jersey City, Gil and his team were preparing to conduct a full inspection of SIH’s L&B Products. “Gentlemen, how can I help you?” Cameron Pierce said as he came out to the reception area at his receptionist’s summons. When Gil presented the search warrant, Pierce growled, “This is private property. You just can’t come barging in here!” he yelled. “Do you realize this company is owned by Step 1 Health?”

Gil had studied the profiles on the Pierce family. Although they were brothers, Cameron and Lawson were different in many ways. Whereas Lawson was known for his relaxed and analytical disposition, Cameron was hyper and emotive. Even their choice of

clothing style was worlds apart, Gil noted—Cameron had shaggy hair and was dressed casually; Lawson had an extensive collection of designer suits and was always perfectly groomed.

“Please step aside and allow my agents to perform their work,” Gil said sternly.

Mumbling wordlessly, Cameron grabbed his flash-pad from his desk and made a call.

“Is it true, Uncle Cameron?” Nora cried when she picked up. “Have you been shipping drugs from the L&B warehouse? And where the hell is my father?”

“I don’t know where your father is. But what I do know is you’d better get Robert Capella down here, now,” Cameron hissed.

“I’m not sending anybody anywhere until you answer my questions!” Nora shouted.

Cameron didn’t respond. He simply dropped his flash-pad to the floor and anxiously watched Gil’s team tear the place asunder.

“Jackpot!” called out one of the agents as he pulled a container of green-hearts from the back of the safe in Cameron’s office. Cameron watched numbly as a Narcotics Policing diagnostic machine confirmed the pills were a match, and offered no resistance as his arms were pulled behind his back and handcuffs clicked around his wrists. In a state of shock, Cameron Pierce was taken away.

* * *

“Ah, here we are,” Dirk said as the van pulled into the back entrance of the Regal Show Room. “I’m sure you spent many an evening in this very theater, wining and dining your elitist friends,” he sneered. “My being just a run-of-the-mill scientist, struggling to get by, it was always a little out of my league.”

“Is that what this is about? Are you looking for some kind of ransom payment?” Lawson asked with a raised brow.

“Always thinking about money. What is that slogan at S1H? Oh yeah: ‘We’re here because we care.’ Such beautiful words from such an ugly organization,” Dirk sneered.

“After all this time, I still can’t believe you’re so bitter at the fact I didn’t give you that contract.” Lawson laughed. “You see, Dirk, you may be a brilliant scientist, but you’re also a slimy little snake, and what you’re doing right now proves my point. I’m actually shocked that laboratory you’ve been running all these years has withstood the test of time.”

“Oh well, I may not be ‘Perfect Pierce,’ but I do my best,” Dirk scoffed in response. He nodded to Army to lead Lawson into the theater.

“Right there will be fine, Army,” Dirk said as the big man led Lawson to a black leather sofa situated on the stage. “Now just sit tight.”

“Just what in the hell are we doing here?” Lawson asked.

“We’re waiting for a mutual friend. According to the message he just sent me, he should be here shortly,” Dirk replied. “Keep your eye on him, Army,” he added as he exited the theater.

* * *

Back at the Freedom Home, Attorney General Champ Sutton was busy reviewing the information sent to him during the SIH raids when his secretary informed him he had a visitor who claimed to have important information.

“Come in, Shamir,” Sutton said to Gil’s lead investigator.

“I’m sorry to be bothering you at such a busy time, but I think I’ve discovered something very important,” Shamir said.

“Please, pull up a chair,” Sutton said, indicating the chair across from his desk. “So, what do you have for me?”

“It has to do with Jeremy Reasoner,” Shamir said calmly.

Sutton leaned forward. “I thought there was more to this guy than what he wants us to believe,” he replied. “What were you able to learn?”

“I had our forensic financial people meticulously analyze the investments that he’s supposedly been living off of over the last thirty years, and they discovered it’s all been a sham.”

“The numbers were forged?”

“The entire portfolio and the deed to the farm were forged. He’s been fooling the government for thirty years. And it’s no surprise, considering how well this was orchestrated.”

“How in God’s name has he been able to pull this off?”

“He’s had loads of help.”

“Do you know who was working with him?”

“Yes, sir. It was the Fryman Group. It appears Edgar Fryman himself was the actual orchestrator of this charade.”

“Is this for certain?”

“Beyond a shadow of a doubt.”

“This shouldn’t surprise us, Shamir. After all, it was the Fryman Group’s financing that enabled Lawson Pierce to see his vision through, and in turn enabled the Fryman Group to become such a powerhouse. Now, please tell me we’ve maintained our surveillance on Reasoner.”

“Oh yes. As we speak, our agents are secretly watching him shop at his local supermarket.”

“Great. They’ll need to bring him in. I’m also going to add Fryman to our APB list.”

* * *

Jeremy Reasoner sat in handcuffs on a plane, headed to the Federal Justice Center in Washington. He shook his head. Life had been good. He’d thought it would last forever. But when Moon Shade Bluff became the focus of the nation’s attention, he’d feared his life would never be the same.

He had once been young and determined to make a real difference in the world. After spending months researching the concept of alternative medicine, he’d created a company called Earthly Remedies, investing his life savings in the business. It didn’t take him long to realize how challenging it would be to see his dreams come to fruition. The obstacles were enormous. Money was going out much faster than it was coming in.

He’d kept seeing features on the World Connect regarding the American Medical Organization’s yearly conference. Come hell or high water, he’d decided he was going to get there, even if it meant paying his own way. Somehow he’d pulled it off. He found himself in a room with the most important medical minds in the country. He

was also thrilled to find that, amongst the purveyors of traditional medicine, there were also many in attendance who supported alternative medicine.

Veterinarian Frank Langford's story about Sally the Alaskan Malamute had intrigued him. When he got home, he read everything he could about Vexton and the supposedly magical powers of Moon Shade Bluff. He was excited about the possibilities, but what could he do about it? Just recently married and struggling to keep his company afloat, he desperately required financial assistance.

After stumbling across a documentary on the Fryman Group, he'd made several calls, hoping to set up a meeting with Edgar Fryman, to no avail. There was no way Edgar Fryman was going to take time from his busy schedule to meet with someone he didn't even know. Accepting that, he made an appointment to see one of his underlings. On the plane ride to Chicago he had gone over his presentation time and time again. Although he was most interested in the prospects of Moon Shade Bluff, he also had ambitious plans for other projects.

When he arrived at the Fryman Group's luxurious office tower, he realized he was early for his appointment and decided to grab some breakfast. Entering the lounge he recognized a man sitting at a corner table, by himself. Those long dark sideburns, that pug nose on a face that resembled a bulldog's—there was no doubt it was Edgar Fryman himself. Jeremy began to approach, then noticed Fryman was speaking into his flash-pad—no, yelling: "And I want every damn cent! Do you understand?"

Jeremy had stopped a few feet from the table, unsure what to do next. Should he turn and retrace his steps? Close the short distance between himself and Fryman's table? Fryman made the choice for him. Looking up, he asked, "Can I help you, young man?"

"I'm sorry, sir. I didn't mean to intrude on your space," Jeremy had said nervously.

Fryman waved that away. "So, what brings you to Fryman Towers?" he asked.

Jeremy took a deep breath. "I'm hoping to attain funding for my business."

“Oh?”

“Yes, I have an eleven o’clock meeting scheduled with Allison Murray.”

Fryman leaned back in his chair. “Ah, Allison. She’s my newest investment specialist. A very bright young gal.”

“I’m really looking forward to meeting with her.”

“Have a seat, friend,” Fryman said, directing Jeremy to the seat across from him. “I’m Edgar Fryman,” he said as he put out his hand.

“I’m Jeremy Reasoner. It’s an honor to meet you, sir,” Jeremy said as they shook hands.

“Now, you look like you’re starving. How about you join me for the breakfast special?” He consulted the menu lying on the table. “Let’s see... today it’s a bowl of oatmeal, scrambled eggs, and toast.” He looked up. “How does that sound?”

“That sounds great,” Jeremy replied, enthused by the happenstance meeting.

Fryman tapped his flash-pad to place the order, then looked at Jeremy. “So, what type of business are you running?”

“It’s called Earthly Remedies; it’s an alternative medicine company.”

“Hmm, that field really continues to flourish,” Fryman said. He thought for a moment. “I’ll tell you what. Since I’ll have a free hour or so after breakfast, why don’t you make your presentation to me instead of Allison? To receive clearance, anything you propose to her would have to go through my office anyway.”

“Uh... yeah, I would really appreciate that, sir,” Jeremy replied, amazed at his good fortune.

“Okay, I’ll inform Ally.” Fryman messaged her from his flash-pad. “There we go. Now, before breakfast is served, tell me a little bit about yourself and what your goals are.”

Jeremy told Fryman about his life and his aspirations for the future. “My dream is to one day own a farm like this one,” he said as he displayed a photo of a picturesque farm on his flash-pad.

As Fryman was admiring the photo, his flash-pad buzzed. “Just give me a minute,” Fryman said. Jeremy waited. Fryman appeared

agitated by what he was hearing in his earpiece. “The answer’s no. The deadline is tomorrow noon. I already gave the bastard an extension,” he said angrily. He abruptly ended the call and leaned forward with a piece of advice for Jeremy. “Never, ever be sympathetic in business. It’s the surest way to guarantee failure.”

After breakfast, Edgar brought Jeremy to his office on the top floor of the building. When he entered, Jeremy was taken aback by the office’s lack of extravagance. “Surprised?” Fryman said, watching him. “People always expect lavish decor—expensive furniture, paintings, and sculptures—but that’s just not me. In fact, even young Allison’s office down on the sixth floor is far more exquisite than mine,” Fryman said with a grin as he tossed his overcoat onto a chair.

“That being said, I think this guy here definitely adds some pizzazz to the decor,” Fryman added as he directed Jeremy’s attention toward a tank containing a large lizard in one corner of the room. “This is Romeo. He’s a *Uromastyx*. He’s a good guy, but as you can see, he’s very shy,” Fryman said as the lizard cowered at the back of the tank. “Come on, Romeo. It’s feeding time.” Fryman tapped on the glass, prompting Romeo to come to life. The lizard hissed aggressively as Fryman lifted a jar of crickets and dumped them into the tank. “It’s hard work taking care of this fellow, but he’s well worth it,” he said, smiling as he turned away from the tank. “Now, it’s time for you to show me why I should give you my money.”

Jeremy asked Fryman if he could use his flash-screen to display the view-file he’d prepared.

“By all means.” He sat back, placed his feet up on his desk, and watched the presentation. When the view-file ended, Fryman clapped his hands. “Very impressive... very interesting stuff,” he added.

“I also prepared these financial projections,” Jeremy said as he handed Fryman the document.

Fryman took a few minutes to study the numbers. “Hmm... you’re an impressive young man, Jeremy, and your business plan is rather fascinating,” Fryman said, rubbing his hand along his chin. “But I’ll be honest with you and tell you that the only aspect of your

presentation that really piqued my interest was your thoughts on the mountain in Vexton County. Yeah, it's quite strange, but there may be something to that."

"Actually, that's the project I'm really planning to focus on," Jeremy said enthusiastically.

"What? Are you planning to climb the mountain with some garden tools and start digging?" Fryman laughed. "If there is something to this, it will be a major undertaking." He paused and headed back toward the lizard tank. "I'll tell you what. I'll call on one of the mining companies that I control, and I'll also call on an associate of mine who happens to be a brilliant scientist, and we'll get you the answers you're looking for. And then, if we discover something of substance, we'll discuss the matter further."

* * *

As Lawson Pierce sat in that cold, damp theater with a menacing giant watching his every move, he remained surprised by—no, totally unprepared for—this turn of events. He feared for his life. "Do you realize what the men you work for have done?" Lawson asked the hulking Army.

"I do what I'm paid to do," Army replied gruffly.

"Don't you realize that eventually they're going to have to eliminate you, considering you know their secrets?" Lawson said.

"Please, just remain quiet and everything will be fine, Mr. Pierce," Army calmly replied.

Lawson sat quietly, surveying the once grand theater. Dirk was correct; he used to frequent the Regal Show Room, back when he began mingling with society's elite. In fact, he'd been in attendance during the theater's final play, *The Heart Within*. It was a year to the day after the War Within was declared over, and the play had been presented in an attempt to erase the feelings of horror the war had left by focusing on a future America seen through the eyes of children and the elderly.

During the play, youngsters were paired with seniors and given a general topic, such as family, school, war, and so on, then asked to

engage in conversation by asking each other questions about the topic. The final segment of the play saw a ten-year-old boy named Willis share the stage with a one-hundred-year-old man named Albert. What intrigued Lawson and the others in the theater was the fact that these were real people sharing their heartfelt thoughts on life during a very difficult period.

When young Willis was asked by the narrator why he was proud to be an American, he responded by saying, "I'm proud to be an American because we care about each other so much. Like my mother—she's a doctor. During the war she helped so many strangers who were hurt. She did everything she could to make them feel better."

When Albert was asked the same question, he slowly rose with the aid of his walker, and made his way over to young Willis. He gave the boy a hug. "What makes me proud to be an American is knowing there are youngsters in our society, like little Willis here, who will honor the future of this country with compassion and respect," he said into the microphone. There wasn't a dry eye in the house.

To end the play, Willis was asked to make a wish and tell the audience what it was. "Okay... I wish Albert could live another hundred years," he said with a grin. When Albert was asked to do the same, he joked, "My wish is that Willis's wish doesn't come true." As expected, the reply brought smiles.

A door creaked open, followed by the sound of a gravelly voice, bringing Lawson back to the present. He quickly turned his head. Dirk was standing in the entrance with Edgar Fryman. Fryman was wearing a black leather overcoat. The passage of time had left only a few strands of gray hair struggling to span his large head. He'd maintained his long sideburns, but they were now salt and pepper. Again, Lawson slipped into the past. This time he recalled his follow-up meeting with Fryman.

"So, now that this government has finally cleared the way, how does it feel to be on the cusp of reinventing the entire health industry?" Fryman grinned.

Lawson shook his head with a wry smile. "For a while there, I was really concerned the whole concept was going to be shot down."

"The people of America spoke, Lawson. And finally our friends in Washington took their heads out of the sand and saw the light." Fryman paused to light up a cigar. "I usually refrain from smoking in my office, but since this is such a special occasion, I can't resist. Here you are," he added as he handed Lawson a cigar and reached over to light it for him.

"I really hope our being the innovators of the concept will enable us to get a firm grip on the market," Lawson said.

"Firm grip? With the resources Step 1 Health will now have behind it, it'll be more like a stranglehold," Fryman said as he puffed his cigar, blowing rings of smoke toward the ceiling. "Now, regarding the finalization of our deal, there is one more thing we need to agree on," he added.

"And what might that be?" Lawson asked with a raised brow.

"Well, in order for that bill to pass, I had to use my connections with the HKM."

"The HKM?"

"Do you recall hearing about the fourteen American undercover federal agents who were recently released by the HKM government after being detained for the last ten months?"

"Of course, I'd have to be living under a rock not to have heard."

"Well, you're looking at the man who made that happen."

"How did you become involved in that?"

Fryman had described his meeting with Vice-President Michael Scott:

"I'm sorry I had to drag you all the way out here, but I'm sure you understand why we couldn't meet at my office," said Scott.

"It's actually quite nice out here. Sometimes it's rather refreshing to get out of the office and enjoy nature," Fryman replied, nervously twirling a twig between his fingers.

"I'm going to be frank with you. It doesn't look good, Edgar. Personally, I think the idea is solid, but right now there's absolutely no way the bill will pass," the vice-president said, frowning.

"Even after all that expert testimony?" Fryman sneered. The twig snapped in half.

"As usual, conventional thinking is stifling innovation."

"And the president?"

"Like me, she's most definitely in favor of the bill passing, but our hands are tied."

"So tell me, Michael: if this is all you have for me, why in the world did you drag me out into the middle of nowhere?"

"Because the president and I believe you can help us get the bill passed."

"I'm all ears."

"If our government isn't able to get those fourteen federal agents out of the HKM within the next few weeks, we're done—without a doubt. In fact, those in Congress who voted to risk the lives of those fourteen men and women are the very same people preventing the bill from passing."

"Ah... let me see if I have this right. I use my HKM connections to get those agents released, and then innovation somehow finds its way into Congress."

Lawson remembered Fryman concluded that story with a grin.

"And there you have it," he said.

"That is truly amazing... and somewhat disturbing," Lawson replied, startled by the revelation.

"That's how it works, my friend. Self-preservation is every politician's greatest motivator."

"How did you pull it off?"

Fryman looked Lawson in the eye, then tapped a few buttons on his flash-pad. Within seconds a cabinet at the back of the office opened. Fryman walked over and retrieved a container of heart-shaped green pills. "Now, when I was reviewing your company's

subsidiaries, I came across a company called L&B Products," he said.

"Yeah, that's our children's line of health care products. It's being run by my brother, Cameron," Lawson explained. "The company's Fun Drop vitamins are very popular. They're being distributed worldwide."

"Yes, I noticed that you're even shipping them to the HKM's central health care depot," Fryman said, puffing his cigar.

"That's something that was dear to my father's heart. He believed that the welfare of children around the world shouldn't be restricted by political conflicts," Lawson explained.

"That doesn't surprise me. Your father was a very caring soul."

"So, are you asking me to ship these to the HKM?" Lawson asked as he picked up the container and studied the pills. "Is this part of the deal you made?"

"Exactly."

"Are they some type of vitamin?"

"Some people might refer to them as that, but most people simply call them drugs or narcotics." Fryman laughed. "The great thing is, the HKM government wanted these drugs so badly that not only did they agree to release the agents, but they're also willing to pay me a very fair price, on a continuous basis, for years to come."

"Ha... that's a good one." Lawson chuckled and puffed on his cigar. When he looked at Fryman, he noticed he wasn't laughing. "You are joking, aren't you?"

"Just consider them a new and improved version of your Fun Drops," Fryman said.

"Wait a second. You aren't joking. These really are drugs."

"Yes, they are. If there's one thing I've learned over the years, it's that a good business deal also shouldn't be restricted by political conflicts."

"Yeah, but this isn't a business deal; it's drug trafficking."

"Actually, once the pills find their way to the HKM, they're legal. I'm relying on you to get them there," Fryman said with a smirk. "It'll be very simple for your company. I will have boxes of these

pills discretely shipped to L&B Products on a periodic basis, and you will send them along with your Fun Drops to the HKM."

"Are you out of your mind?"

"So I take it you're refusing to oblige?"

"I can't believe this. Did you seriously think I would agree to this?"

"You ungrateful little idiot. If it weren't for me that bill would never have passed. But if you don't want my money, you don't have to take it. I'm sure you won't have trouble finding another investment firm that will gladly hand you all that money," Fryman said sarcastically.

"This is sheer blackmail."

"That's such a harsh term. I view it more as a very enticing business proposition."

"So, you're telling me that if I don't accept this 'proposition,' you're going to renege on our deal?"

"Yeah, and unfortunately, because the investment community is such a close-knit group, I'd have to make sure everyone's aware of your brother Cameron's gambling issues."

"What are you talking about?"

"Do you think I don't know why your father left the business solely to you?"

"My brother's gambling issues are in the past."

"I certainly hope so, considering he once owed the Eternal close to two million dollars."

"How do you know about that?"

Fryman sighed and leaned forward. "My friend, I am the Eternal," he said calmly.

Lawson sat back in his chair, stunned. "Uh... did you just admit to being the person behind the largest racketeering outfit in America?" he mumbled. "I know you've never been recognized as the most ethical businessman in the world, but—the Eternal?"

Fryman rose and came around his desk to pat Lawson on the back. "Don't fret, my friend. Eighty percent of what I do is legitimate. It's the other twenty percent that makes the real money."

He stubbed out his cigar in a marble ashtray on the corner of the desk and tossed it into a wastebasket.

Still stunned, Lawson watched Fryman feeding his pet lizard. "How have you gotten away with it all these years?" he asked.

"I work very hard at it. You see, having a wise exit strategy is the most important part of any business deal—legitimate or otherwise," Fryman answered, unloading a bag of worms into the tank. "Come and get it, Romeo... that's my boy." He laughed as the lizard devoured the worms.

Lawson stood abruptly and ran his hands over his face. "I can't believe this!" he bellowed.

"Shh," Fryman said. "Quiet. You're frightening Romeo."

Lawson slouched back down in the chair. "I worked so hard to make this happen, and now you're telling me I'm about to borrow money from one of the biggest crooks in this country," he groaned.

"Give your head a shake, man. Big business is ugly. It's corrupt. It's dog eat dog. Do you think one becomes a multibillionaire in this society by being a nice guy?" Fryman waved an arm at the door. "If you wanna walk out that door and end up like the worms I just threw to Romeo, go ahead and be my guest."

Lawson's senses reeled, confusion scrambled his mind, but his ambition to succeed remained strong. He'd worked so hard to get where he was, and without Fryman behind him, he'd be done. He wouldn't dare think of exposing him. He'd heard stories of the Eternal's wicked ways, and betraying Fryman was now a terrifying prospect. He also realized that finalizing this deal was the only way to prevent his brother's former gambling problems from being made public. Lawson slowly exhaled. "I know one day this will probably come back to haunt me... but you have a deal," he said somberly.

"I believe in you, Lawson. Think of what you've accomplished. It's absolutely amazing," Fryman said with conviction. "I know for a fact your father would be extremely proud of you."

"Hello, Lawson... it's been a while," said Fryman as he and Dirk each pulled up a chair.

“You sick bastard,” Lawson replied with disdain.

“Is that the appreciation I receive for helping you turn your company into the largest in the country?” Fryman said. “Judging by that suit you’re wearing, I’d say our partnership was extremely beneficial to you.”

Lawson could barely contain his anger. “I regret the day I ever accepted a single dollar of your blood money!”

“Oh my, where’s all this anger coming from? There may be a gun pointing at you right now, but there sure wasn’t the day you accepted my money. It’s amazing, how the desire for success can cause someone to sink so low,” Fryman sneered.

“The fact that I got into the gutter with somebody like you sickens me. You and your slimeball associate are nothing but vermin.” Glaring at Fryman, Lawson stabbed a finger toward Dirk.

“You know what sickens *me*, Mr. Perfect? The way you became all political after *my* money put you on the map. Placing your financial support behind the wretched Peace-Bringers when you knew how strongly I was opposed to their inane political platforms. Helping to enable that weak and delusional yes-man, Westgale, to deplete our military down to a group of useless, pimple-faced cadets,” Fryman snapped.

“The last time I checked the return you made on your S1H investment, it was by miles the biggest your firm has ever seen. Wasn’t it, Edgar?”

“Yeah, but it’s such a shame you’re now going to be viewed as the biggest *fraud* this *country* has ever seen.”

* * *

A tall lady with wavy red hair ran into the New York Justice Center, paused and looked around, then strode over to the front desk.

“So, what brings you here, ma’am?” asked the officer on duty.

“I thought it was important to bring this here,” the woman said. She showed the sergeant an identification card.

The officer looked at the ID card. It bore a photograph of a man with neatly coiffed white hair. The name on the card was Evan Sylvester.

“And your name is?” asked the sergeant, reaching for her flash-pad.

“Sandra—Sandra Overton,” the woman replied. She looked anxious.

The officer spoke into her flash-pad, then looked at Sandra. “My superior would like to speak with you, Ms. Overton,” she said, and led Sandra to his office.

“Where did you find this, Ms. Overton?” the officer asked, looking at the ID card the sergeant handed to him when they’d entered.

“I found it outside the old Regal Show Room,” Sandra answered.

“What in the world were you doing there?” the officer asked. “That theater is nothing but an empty shell.”

“I run a New York City theater group for young children and I was taking them on a bus tour of past and present theaters in the city,” Sandra explained.

“Where exactly did you find the card?” the officer asked.

“When we came out of the bus to take photos, I found it in the ravine along the east side of the building. I remembered seeing this man’s photo on the World Connect.”

“Hmm...” the officer said as he turned the card around and noticed a dark red blotch on the back. It looked like blood.

CHAPTER 14

After Cameron Pierce was arrested and the L&B Products building had been secured by his agents, Gil made his way by robo-copter to join Martin Stevens and his group at the Step 1 Health headquarters. “Do you think Nora was aware of any of this?” Gil asked Stevens when he arrived.

“She’s claiming she was completely unaware any of this stuff was happening, but that’s all we were able to get from her. The company’s attorney has now advised her and all of her executives to avoid speaking with us,” Stevens replied, his frustration clear in his voice.

“What about Cameron Pierce?” Gil asked.

“He has also heeded the attorney’s advice,” Stevens replied.

* * *

Tension hung heavy in the air of the Regal Show Room. “How could you?” Lawson shook his head in dismay. “How could you have held back the truth about that mineral? And then killed two innocent men in the process!” he shouted.

“Sadly, those men knew more than they needed to know. And as I’m sure you can recall, before the New Order Treaty was established that mountain would have been property of our wretched government, with no chance for *anyone* with half a brain to have prospered from it,” Fryman answered calmly.

“You’re pathetic!” Lawson growled.

“You have it all wrong, Lawson. I actually did both you and society a favor,” Fryman answered with a grin. “Now, sure, if that information had been made available to the public all those years ago, I would have lost most of that precious money I put into your greedy hands. But there would have been far more for *everyone* to lose.”

“What are you talking about?” Lawson snapped.

Fryman turned to Dirk. “Enlighten our friend, Dirk.”

Dirk rose and began pacing, as if he were lecturing. “You see, I’ve been studying that mineral for more than thirty years, and what that arrogant, self-worshipping Jack Ahar and his associates have discovered about it is only the tip of the iceberg. In time, as they continue their research, they will learn that that mineral has the power to turn the human body into an impenetrable shell against *every* serious illness known to man.”

Lawson sputtered for a moment. “You’re both psychopaths!” he yelled. Army pulled the gun closer to Lawson’s body as a warning. “How much has he paid you to go along with this sick plan?” Lawson asked Dirk.

“Actually, this may come as a shock to someone as money-hungry as you, but my motivation was purely altruistic,” Dirk replied, smiling.

“And I guess the manufacturing of illegal drugs has nothing to do with making money, does it?” Lawson retorted.

“Illegal? Those drugs are perfectly legal—in the HKM. I still laugh when I think of Edgar asking me to make them into green hearts. I remember him saying, ‘Green is for money, and the heart shape is for my love of money,’” Dirk said in a gravelly voice, mimicking Fryman. Fryman snickered.

“You sick bastards,” Lawson murmured.

“I’m sure most people would agree with you. But then again, you and most people wouldn’t understand. When fully utilized, that mineral would increase the average life expectancy of human beings to approximately 120 years. Do you realize what that would

mean? It wouldn't be a giant asteroid or a nuclear war bringing about man's demise. Oh no, mankind would meet its end from the chaos created by an uncontrollable mass of humanity!" Dirk said with feeling.

"It's a real shame we're having this very thought-provoking debate while the authorities are raiding your business," Fryman said matter-of-factly.

"You set me up! You rotten son of a bitch!" Lawson growled as he stood up, only to be pushed back down by Army, whose breathing was becoming heavier by the second.

"That's correct. As I've always said, 'Every business plan requires a solid exit strategy,'" Fryman sneered. "The authorities must be wondering where the big boss is. And then there's your daughter and your brother. They must be ashamed that you knew all about that mineral for all these years and kept it a secret, solely for your own greedy reasons." He laughed.

"And you think you're gonna get away with all of this?" Lawson replied.

"Well, as they say in the world of fixed gambling, 'I think that's a sure bet.'" Fryman laughed again.

* * *

"Mr. Reasoner, let me get this straight," Champ Sutton said. "After Dr. Langford told you about that dog appearing to be miraculously cured, you met with Edgar Fryman, hoping he would provide you with funding, so that you could perform your own inspection of Moon Shade Bluff. Is this correct?"

"That's correct, sir," said Reasoner, his expression somber. "After our initial meeting, he called me back several weeks later. I was very surprised to hear from him.

"When his secretary brought me into his office, he was speaking on his flash-pad. It sounded like he was arranging to collect funds from some restaurant owner. As he was wrapping up the phone call, he became quite belligerent. I can still remember him telling the guy, 'This is your last chance. If those funds aren't transferred to me by

Friday, you'll become an instant widower. Do you understand, boy?" To tell you the truth, it terrified me."

He recounted the rest of that follow-up meeting:

"He ended the call and looked at me, shaking his head. 'Sometimes it's awful, Jeremy. These people make promises, and then just like that—' he snapped his fingers '—they break them. Me, I take pride in keeping my promises. Just like I promised I'd call you back. And here we are.'

"At that point he told me he was prepared to make me a deal. I was thrilled thinking he was willing to lend me the money. But instead, his plan involved paying me off by handing me a deed to a farm in Oklahoma, a load of money, and a fake investment portfolio.

"I was totally caught off guard. I figured he must have struck gold in that mountain. 'With all proper respect, Mr. Fryman,' I said to him, 'why are you doing this? What did you discover in that mountain?'

"He told me that wasn't my concern. 'You can either accept my deal,' he said, 'or walk out of this office just as you came in: a young man with big dreams who will always remain a dreamer.'

"He was getting angry, which scared me. I wondered what I'd gotten myself into. Reluctantly, I accepted his offer. 'Where do I sign?' I asked.

"He laughed. He said, 'Where do you sign? Oh Jeremy, you're so naïve. The only thing you need to do, my friend, is walk out of this building and never mention any of this to anyone. Now, if you decide to do otherwise, well, I promise you'll be a very busy man... attending funerals. Is that understood?' I told him I fully understood.

"The last thing he said as I left the room was 'Just remember: I never break my promises.'"

Reasoner sat back with a heavy sigh, as if the confession had taken all the air out of him.

"Do you realize what your negligence and selfishness has contributed to?" Sutton asked Reasoner.

"I had no idea what was going on, sir. And after he threatened me I figured it'd be wise to keep my mouth shut," Reasoner replied.

“Did you not wonder why he was being so gracious with you, and why he demanded your silence?”

“Of course I did. On a daily basis. Years went by, but I never heard a single word about Moon Shade Bluff, until I watched that recent press conference from Vexton,” Reasoner said. “I realize I should have come forward. I guess fear got the best of me.”

* * *

“There’s an empty dark green van parked behind the building,” Agent Gallio reported to Gil as he flew above the theater. “I checked the license plate, but it’s not registered.”

“Keep your eyes on that van. Our scope’s been able to capture some images through one of the windows,” Gil replied from a fake delivery truck parked at the side of the theater. “From what we can see, there are four people inside.”

“Are you able to identify any of them?” Gallio asked.

“As expected, we’ve got Edgar Fryman, Lawson Pierce—whoa, this is interesting. There’s a rather large somebody, holding Lawson Pierce at bay with a laser-gun that’s on kill mode,” Gil said.

“And the fourth individual?”

“We can’t identify him.”

“Can you tell what’s going on in there?”

“It appears rather intense. It looks like the other three are holding Lawson Pierce hostage.”

“Are you going in?”

“We currently have four of our bomb-detection robots checking each side of the building for any signals. If and when we receive clearance, we’ll be going in.”

* * *

“For God’s sake, how can you support these rotten bastards, knowing what they’ve done?” Lawson said, looking Army in the eye. The burly henchman’s eyes were beginning to water, and the sound of his breathing was more a grumble.

Suddenly, he let out a roar that made everyone stumble back a step in shock. “You bastards!” he yelled, turning the gun toward Dirk and Fryman.

“What are you doing, you overgrown child?” Dirk yelled.

“I’ve been waiting for this opportunity since the day of that Vexton press conference, which I was watching with my wife—who, as you’re well aware, Uncle Edgar, suffers terribly from three separate autoimmune disorders,” Army shouted.

“Put the gun down, Army!” Fryman shouted. “This isn’t going to do anything to help Kathy.”

“For thirty years, you bastards have been playing God. But now you’ll be exposed as two pathetic, self-absorbed liars!” Army shrieked.

“You’re making a big mistake, fat man,” Dirk said evenly.

“Ha! You’re such an idiot, Dirk. Did you seriously think my uncle was going to make an exception to the rule?”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Dirk asked, glancing over at Fryman.

“You see,” Army drawled, “according to good ol’ Uncle Edgar’s script, you’re scheduled to be eliminated, right after Mr. Pierce here.”

“Don’t listen to him, Dirk. He’s out of his mind,” Fryman said, his gravelly voice a note higher.

“Don’t feel bad, Dirk. I’m certain after you and Mr. Pierce were dealt with, I would have met my fate through some unfortunate fatal accident, leaving, as usual, the great Edgar Fryman the only man left standing,” Army sneered.

“I’ve heard enough of this garbage,” Dirk said as he took a couple of steps toward Army.

“Take one more step and I’ll turn you into my *own* science experiment,” Army warned.

Seeing Army distracted by Dirk, Fryman reached into his coat pocket and pulled out his own laser-gun.

“Fryman has a gun!” Lawson shouted.

Army whirled toward Fryman. A split second later, *pew-pew-pew-pew* rattled around the old theater, the reports of each shot pinging off the walls. Fryman’s lifeless body hit the floor with a thud.

Dirk lunged at Army, but the much larger and more powerful man easily tossed him to the floor, dropping his gun in the process. As Army went for his gun, Dirk scrambled toward Fryman's gun and snatched it up. "Well, I guess now *I'll* be the last man standing," Dirk drawled, the gun trained on Army.

Again, a laser blast pinged around the room. Dirk Zarbo instantly crumpled. Behind him, Gil Robichaud stood in the front entrance of the theater, his laser-gun still buzzing from the blast.

Army dropped his gun and raised his arms. After a moment, Lawson Pierce hesitantly followed suit.

As he sat waiting with his attorney to be interrogated at Washington's Federal Justice Center, Lawson Pierce's mind reeled with consequences and implications. How could he have tarnished his father's memory the way he had? Then there were all the honest and dedicated employees of Step 1 Health, including the many doctors and nurses and support staff. Last but not least, he thought about his pride and joy, Nora, and how he'd let her down. A sob crept up the back of his throat, but he suppressed it viciously. He thought back to the day she was appointed Step 1 Health's CEO.

"So, how does it feel to be CEO of the largest company in America?" Lawson asked her with a smile.

Nora blushed. "Wow, I still can't believe it. I guess it helps when your father's the chairman."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! Wait a second," he protested. "Those men and women in that boardroom would not have voted you in if they didn't fully believe in your abilities. Over the last twelve years, you've worked your way through every department in this company to get to where you are today. Everybody involved with this company realizes you deserve this."

When the doors of the interrogation room opened, Lawson raised his head and saw Westgale standing in the doorway, scowling. "How? How could you have done this?" he demanded as he entered

the room. He pounded the table in front of Lawson. “You’ve humiliated not only me, but this entire country! When this news breaks—God help us!”

Lawson sat listening, feeling dazed.

“I won’t have you speaking to my client in such a manner. In fact, Mr. Pierce will not be speaking with anyone at this time,” Robert Capella said firmly.

“Thank you, Robert, but I’ll speak for myself. Actually, I think it’s best you leave,” Lawson said.

“Leave? You’re in no position to speak to anyone without legal representation,” Capella replied.

“That’ll be all, Robert. I’ll call you if I need you. Right now, I need to deal with this matter personally,” Lawson said. Robert reluctantly left the room.

Seconds later, Champ Sutton entered. “I think you’d better see this,” he said to Westgale. He turned on the flash-screen at the front of the room and scanned a data-chip. “This was just confiscated from Dirk Zarbo’s Manhattan lab,” he said as the screen displayed a detailed report on the Vexton mineral. The report’s summary described a mineral capable of curing cancer, autoimmune disorders, diabetes... and any other number of medical wonders. “Ahar and several of his associates are reviewing loads of material from his lab as we speak,” Sutton added.

“Oh my God. Is this for real?” Westgale said as he continued reading. He suddenly turned back to Lawson, his face red with anger. “How could you be so evil, to keep something like this hidden away?”

“I don’t know anything about the mineral or this report. You have to believe me, William,” Lawson pleaded. “I’ve dedicated my life to health care, to helping people. I would never have withheld the medicines that mineral could make possible, let alone have people killed in order to do so.”

Sutton turned to Pierce. “Now, before we go any further, you need to tell me who you’ve been selling those pills to.”

“I wasn’t selling those pills to anyone,” Lawson answered. “Edgar Fryman blackmailed me into shipping the drugs to the

HKM's central health care depot. I know where our Fun Drops ended up, but as far as the drugs are concerned, all I know is that they were in some way being directed to the HKM government."

"Blackmailed by Fryman?" Westgale asked. Lawson explained the deal Fryman had forced him into.

"You're telling me the HKM government traded those fourteen agents for drugs?" Westgale asked, stunned.

"Precisely. And the crazy thing is, they've continued to buy the drugs off Fryman for the last thirty years," Lawson replied.

"I was a member of Congress at that time, and I was one of the few members strongly in support of the bill from the beginning, but I was certain there was no way it was going to pass," Westgale said. He shook his head. "I always wondered how in the hell it did. Now I guess I have the answer."

"I just can't believe how blinded I became by my own ambition. I never meant for any of this to happen," Lawson said softly, head bowed. "I've let so many people down, including you." He looked up. "I'm so sorry, William."

"Before I can accept an apology or a single word you've told me, a full investigation of this mess will need to be conducted," Westgale said.

"If you choose to believe anything I'm telling you, please believe me when I tell you Nora had absolutely no knowledge of Cameron and me shipping those pills," Lawson said.

Down the hall, Gil was interviewing Army, whose real name was Houston Armstrong. Emotionally distraught, remorseful, and furious that he'd been kept in the dark regarding the secret of Moon Shade Bluff, he was more than willing to divulge everything he knew, even if it meant incriminating himself.

"Please tell me the role you played in all this madness, Mr. Armstrong," Gil asked.

"I've been the Number Three person in the operation for the last fifteen years," Army replied.

"Behind Fryman and Dirk?"

“That’s correct. Because I was Fryman’s nephew, I was one of the few people he felt he could trust.”

Already deeply entrenched in Fryman’s racketeering operation, the Eternal, Army had been asked by Fryman to oversee what was being referred to as “the organization.”

“He brought me to a warehouse and showed me these heart-shaped green pills,” Army said. “I said I’d never seen them on the street, and he said, ‘That’s because they’re not. This is a very special project. I was able to broker a deal with a rather large partner, and it’s been running as smooth as silk for fifteen years.’ I asked him who the partner was and he said it was the HKM government—since they’d legalized and began overseeing the sale of certain narcotics, they’d become an important partner.”

“So, I take it, all this time your uncle never mentioned how that mineral could not only be used as a narcotic, but could also be used as a miracle drug,” Gil said.

Army took a deep breath. “I knew my uncle was a wicked person, but keeping that secret—that’s beyond belief; that’s evil.”

“To your knowledge, is there anybody else other than your uncle and Dirk Zarbo who knew or knows about the medicinal properties of the mineral?”

“No. I’m very confident there isn’t.”

“If the green-hearts were not being sold on American soil, how did they end up in the hands of American soldier JD Wren?” Gil asked.

“That was all Sylvain’s—Evan Sylvester’s—doing... and it cost him his life,” Army replied.

“What was Sylvester’s role, to begin with?”

“He worked under me, along with two other lifetime criminals—Hector Carlos and Vincent Bruno. They were enforcers for the Eternal, but eventually their main responsibility became managing the inventory and the logistics for the green-hearts. They were also responsible for monitoring the area in and around Moon Shade Bluff... until my uncle ordered their murders.”

CHAPTER 15

The entire Westgale Administration spent the next several days behind closed doors, piecing together evidence and planning a strategy for moving forward. “We can’t just shut them down, gentlemen. We’re talking about the most important corporation in the entire country, and one of our largest investment firms,” Westgale said to Dave Perry and Champ Sutton. As the investigation was still ongoing, they had managed to keep the details as to why they raided SIH out of the public domain. But for how long could they do this?

“So far, other than the fact they were shipping the narcotics, there doesn’t appear to be any other issues with Step 1 Health. And as far as Nora Pierce Davidson is concerned, after I thoroughly interviewed her, I believe she’s telling us the truth: she had no knowledge of what her father and uncle had been doing,” Sutton said.

“Are you suggesting we allow the company to continue to function with Nora maintaining her role as CEO?” Perry asked.

“Yes. I think it’d be in the best interest of everyone,” Sutton replied confidently.

“I agree, David,” Westgale added. “We must make certain Lawson Pierce and his brother are held accountable for their actions, but unless our investigation turns up something different, the way I see it, it is not necessary to go any further.”

“I concur,” Perry replied. “And the Fryman Group?”

“That’s a little trickier. It’ll probably take quite some time for that investigation to be completed,” Sutton replied, shaking his head.

“The fact that Fryman was operating the largest racketeering operation in the country alongside one of the largest investment firms... well, we’re looking at some very complex dealings. Fortunately, some of his key executives have come forward and are more than willing to speak. And they’ve agreed to keep the details surrounding his death under wraps, for the time being.”

Westgale frowned. “Our past government set this entire thing in motion by giving Fryman free rein to make a deal with the HKM government. That really sickens me.”

“That’s the other thing I wanted to discuss with you, sir,” Sutton said. “I’m of the opinion we also need to hold accountable those from our government who contributed to this madness.”

“Since former President Montgomery is no longer with us, I’ve arranged to meet with former Vice President Scott this evening,” Westgale replied.

“I’m sure it’ll be very interesting to see his response when you break the news to him,” Perry said in a droll voice.

Now seventy-two years old, former Republican, American vice president and current MAA supporter Michael Scott appeared much younger than his age. Still healthy and actively managing his own consulting firm since leaving politics twenty years earlier, he was a gregarious man who always enjoyed being in the public eye. Along with running his consulting firm he was also part owner of the New York Billionaires professional soccer club.

“Thank you for accepting my invitation, Michael,” Westgale said, leading him to the presidential drawing room. “Can I fix you a drink?”

“Oh boy, could I ever use one,” Scott replied. “My Billionaires really took it on the chin last night.”

“Now, let me see if I remember correctly... vodka and cranberry on the rocks?” Westgale asked.

“It still works for *me*,” Scott replied as he plopped down on a sofa. “Wow, I must say this is a pleasant surprise. It’s been way too long, William.”

“Yeah, I do miss those hard-fought political battles we used to have.”

“You were quite a stubborn little bugger, back in the day.”

“We Democrats had to be, or else you guys would’ve shredded us and fed us to the lions.”

“Oh no, we never would’ve taken the time to shred you, we’d have served you up whole,” Scott said, snickering. “All kidding aside, I was really surprised to hear you’ve decided not to run for reelection.”

“The last few months have really taken their toll on me.”

“Now, as a former Republican and of course, current Military Alliance supporter, I’d be lying to you if I told you I agreed with your presidential platform. However, I fully admire and respect your perseverance. And I can understand why you’d be so worn out, considering you now have to worry about Cobra Pix and Pinia, after dealing with that whole Vexton-Tech scandal.”

“I know you’re definitely no stranger to having to deal with turmoil. To this day, I’m still amazed at how you and President Montgomery handled that HKM hostage ordeal all those years ago.”

The former vice president suddenly sat up. “Those poor, but lucky souls. They were two days away from being executed. That we got them out of there was a miracle. I still make a point once a year to meet up with the eleven of the fourteen who are still living. As I’m sure you can imagine, there’s never a dry eye in the house.”

“What always amazed me is how, after that whole dreadful ordeal, those agents were suddenly released. It came out of nowhere. Did the HKM government ever give you and President Montgomery a reason why?” Westgale asked as he poured himself a cup of tea.

“When push came to shove, I guess they figured it’d be in their best interest to comply with our request,” Scott answered, a hint of nervous tension in his voice. “To be honest with you, William, when the president and I received word those fourteen men and women were on their way home, we really didn’t care why those twisted HKM bastards decided to release them.”

Westgale glared at Scott briefly, then pulled a small container of pills from his pocket and placed it on his desk. “Now, would *these* have had something to do with why those agents were released?” he asked sternly.

Michael Scott stared at the container. It conjured a vivid flashback.

“Are you ever on time for anything?” he snapped.

“Sorry to have kept you waiting, Michael, but I think what I’m going to tell you will make it worth the wait,” Edgar Fryman replied with a grin.

“You sly bastard. You did it, didn’t you?”

“They should all be released about six hours from now.”

“I don’t even know if I should ask, but I will. How the hell did you pull it off?”

“Very simple—my friends in the HKM government really took a liking to my exquisite little pills. My associate did such a fabulous job,” Fryman replied.

“So then it worked, just like you said it would,” Scott said, laughing.

“Before you contacted me, they’d already been checking out the pills for a few months, but I figured they’d come around. Those babies are more valuable than gold! Now that the HKM government has become the country’s primary drug dealer, I think it’s safe to say that the Eternal will be of great importance to them.”

“Great work, Edgar,” Scott said. He reached into his pocket and took out five one-hundred dollar bills and handed them to Fryman. “Now, since I’m feeling lucky, I figure it’s time to give the Billionaires another chance. Hopefully they’ll finally find a way to get out of their rut this Sunday, and I’ll see your man on Monday to collect.”

“Oh, I just love it when my customers bet with their heart instead of their head,” Fryman quipped. “Good luck, Michael.”

“What in the world are those, William?” Scott asked as he continued to stare at the container.

“Thirty years... even you had to have known in the back of your little scheming mind that one day this would come back to haunt you,” Westgale growled.

“I realize how stressed you’ve been lately, but you really need to calm down,” Scott said, blinking uneasily.

“Was President Montgomery in on this, too? Was she?” Westgale demanded.

Scott loosened his tie, leaned back on the sofa, and let out a gasp. “How in the hell did you find out?” he asked, his body trembling.

“The secret deal you made with Edgar Fryman—it’s no longer a secret,” Westgale replied. He then described in detail the course of events.

Scott listened intently, his face etched with fear and confusion. “Fryman was killed?” he said in shock.

“He was killed by my very own chief of security.”

Still stunned, Scott asked, “You mean to tell me this is all linked to that mountain in Vexton County?”

“Precisely,” Westgale answered. “Why is this so shocking to you?” he asked. “I even held a press conference about those pills.”

“Look, I’m not going to deny I was aware Fryman made a large drug deal with the HKM government in order to free those agents, but I knew nothing about where the drugs came from, or the fact that this Dennis Claremont and his associate were killed in the process,” Scott exclaimed.

“What about the Eternal? Are you going to tell me you weren’t aware he was running the largest racketeering operation in the country? Some of Fryman’s associates recall seeing you quite often.”

Scott sighed. “Yeah, I was fully aware of what Fryman was about, and so was President Montgomery,” he said. “But you see, he was very useful to our government, especially when it came to brokering deals internationally and helping us track down foreign terror groups.”

“You corrupt bastard!”

“Come on, William. You know as well as I do that the entire world is corrupt, and always will be. When the president and I made that deal

with Fryman all we cared about was bringing those fourteen American men and women home, where they belong. And we did it.”

“And of course, because the world is ‘corrupt,’ it was okay for you to bribe Congress. How are you able to look in the mirror at night? I’m sure your guilt must gnaw away at your conscience on a daily basis.”

“Oh, look who’s talking. If I recall correctly, wasn’t Lawson Pierce not only your favorite golfing buddy, but also your campaign’s special piggy bank?”

“And he, like you and those members of Congress, will face the consequences.”

“You’re a hypocrite, Mr. President. Look at the mess you created. Nobody wants you around here anymore. And now you’ve so badly alienated the youth of our country that they’re collectively clinging to a doctrine that spews out sheer hatred.”

“Wow, even in your twilight years, you haven’t lost the ability to come up with a good rant,” Westgale said as he tapped his flash-pad.

Seconds later, Gil Robichaud entered and walked over to Scott. “Michael Scott, you’re under arrest,” he said calmly.

“Hold on here. You can’t do this to me!” he exclaimed as Gil cuffed him.

“Don’t worry, Michael, you won’t be alone. Soon you’ll be reunited with some of your friends,” Westgale said as Gil escorted him out of the room.

“You’ll never get away with this!” Scott shouted on his way out.

* * *

Once Westgale was confident due diligence had been performed on the case, he and Gil headed to Vexton, where Westgale planned to go public with news of recent events. However, before doing so, he and Gil requested a meeting with Sharon and me at the Vexton Justice Center. We met in the main conference room.

“Mr. and Mrs. Claremont, it’s wonderful to see you again,” Westgale said as we all shook hands. “And how’s that adorable son of yours doing?”

“He’s doing very well. Thank you for asking,” I replied. “I don’t know if you recall the flash-message you sent him, but it really thrilled him.”

“Of course I remember sending him that message. And I also remember the kind thank you that was sent to *me*.” Westgale smiled. “I must tell you, the little, but important things like that really help me get through the day.” He gestured for Sharon and me to be seated. “Well, before I address the country tomorrow, Gil and I thought it’d be best for the both of you to learn, firsthand, the details of this most peculiar case.”

Sharon and I expressed our appreciation, adding that we wanted to learn everything we could about the case, no matter how difficult or painful.

As Gil began giving us the details, I realized that if Linda Washburn had not returned to Vexton, this entire investigation may still have been at a standstill. But as I listened to what Gil told us, my anger also grew.

“Now, when my agents went to search the Regal Show Room, they discovered two data-chips of great importance to this case,” Gil said as he took one of the chips and scanned it to the flash-screen at the front of the room.

Unsure what the data-chip might reveal, I took Sharon’s hand and held it tightly. The view-file began with a distorted image of a night sky. After a few seconds, the murky image began to come into focus. The screen suddenly went black, then shifted to an image in a forest. Slowly, the camera began to move eerily from tree to tree. We heard the hooting cry from an owl. After scanning the forest, the camera shifted toward a mountain. From there it ascended, displaying a shimmering turquoise light. Seconds later, the camera panned slowly across the mountaintop before coming to a standstill. In a flash there was Riley, his arms reaching for the sky, standing atop Moon Shade Bluff. The screen quickly faded to black.

“Those bastards!” I shouted in anger. *Who had recorded my child?*

“Are you sure you want me to carry on?” Gil asked gently as Westgale poured us both glasses of water.

“Yes. We would appreciate that,” I replied, as Sharon flashed me a sympathetic glance.

Gil approached the flash-screen again, and scanned the second data-chip. We watched images of leaves, tree branches, and all kinds of litter swirling through the air. Giant hailstones relentlessly pounded the ground. The piercing wind sounded like a thousand screaming demons. Every few seconds, thunder boomed like a cannon blast. The sky was black as night, although the time stamp said it was noon. Sharp-edged bolts of lightning began piercing the sky. I knew what was coming. I started trembling, and my eyes watered.

Suddenly, the footage moved to a robo-copter that emerged from the blackened clouds. “Oh my God,” I heard Sharon murmur as she held my hand as tightly as she could. And then a flash soared across the sky and hit the robo-copter. The screen faded to black.

I sat speechless. Then I wept. Sharon held me in her arms.

“Would you like some time alone?” Westgale asked us gently.

“I’m okay... thank you, sir,” I replied as I quickly regained my composure.

“As I’m sure you can tell by what you’ve seen and heard today, this entire cover-up was meticulously executed,” Westgale said.

“The really bizarre thing is, from what we can tell, the operation was in its final stage. The shipments of green-hearts we were able to track down were the last they had planned to send out,” Gil said.

“Has Narcotics Policing been able to track down the drugs in the HKM?” Sharon asked.

“No, and it really doesn’t surprise me,” Gil answered. “That country is so large, those drugs could be going anywhere.”

“What I’d like to know is how Dirk Zarbo fits into this madness,” I said. “Am I correct to assume Fryman was paying him large sums of money to take part?”

“Actually, that doesn’t appear to be the case. It looks like his involvement had to do with his scientific belief that overpopulation will be the demise of mankind,” Gil answered. “Fryman was driven by greed, whereas Zarbo was driven by paranoia.”

“And what about his claims regarding the mineral?” Sharon asked.

“Dr. Ahar and his team have been working day in and day out on this,” Gil replied. “He’ll be arriving here tomorrow to brief the president.”

“How could something so wonderful have come out of something so horrific?” Sharon said as she took my hand.

* * *

When Ahar arrived the following afternoon, he was filled with excitement. “This is incredible news, sir,” Ahar said as his assistant presented Westgale with a flash-pad. Westgale read the report’s lengthy summary.

“Oh my God!” he exclaimed after he finished reading. Tears of joy filled his eyes. “This is amazing!”

“It sure is, sir. A single injection by the time the child is two years old will provide an unprecedented level of biological immunity,” Ahar said with conviction.

“And what exactly does that mean?” Westgale asked.

“Unfortunately, the body would continue to age and eventually die, but the average age expectancy would rise to 120 years,” Ahar replied.

“Are you and your associates one-hundred percent sure of this?” Westgale asked.

“Ironically we’re fortunate that Dirk Zarbo’s been performing such extensive research and analysis over the last thirty years. As demented as he may have been, he was a brilliant scientist. From the info we gathered from his lab, it appears he performed a series of clinical trials. I and several of my associates have cross-referenced his work and everything’s checked out perfectly. We’ve even located and analyzed many of his human guinea pigs. We’re ready to go,” Ahar replied. “As of now, it appears we’ll be able to inject every newborn in this country for approximately the next ten to fifteen years, depending on how much of the mineral we can get out of that rock—veins could run deeper than estimated. The amazing thing is,

the mineral can cross the placenta, conferring the same immunity to a fetus, so once a female is injected, any child she gives birth to won't require an injection."

"This is totally incredible."

"I'm still having difficulty believing it myself."

Westgale rubbed his chin as he thought. "I need you to be honest with me, Jack. Are you concerned about any ramifications? Like overpopulation?"

"I don't know if I'm the person you should be asking," Ahar replied. "From the moment I decided to dedicate my life to science and medicine, my goal has been to assist my fellow human beings to live the healthiest and longest lives possible, and I feel that goal is justifiable. That aside, in a strange way, I share Zarbo's concerns."

"The eventual demise of humanity?"

"I like to remain optimistic that we'll be able to find solutions and deal with the situation accordingly, but it'll be a challenge." Ahar paused and looked intently at Westgale. "You're not thinking of holding this back, are you?"

"Never. Now, I realize you and I won't be around long enough to witness the full effects of how this all plays out, but I believe we can only deal with what we know," Westgale said. "The fact that we'll now be able to protect every infant is a miracle. And I'm not about to turn my back on a miracle."

* * *

Westgale, Gil Robichaud, and Dr. Ahar remained in Vexton, and three days later they were joined by Dave Perry and the rest of the Administration's executive committee. Westgale thought it would be an interesting political move to relay this incredible news from atop Moon Shade Bluff. The PBA desperately needed some positive attention, so why not turn it into a memorable event? Sharon and I were invited to join them, and we watched from the sidelines.

A robo-copter landed on the mountain, and Westgale exited with Dave Perry. As the UCIT camera projected their smiling faces on to the World Connect, Westgale approached a makeshift podium. With

American flags on either side of him waving in the breeze, he spoke sincerely to the American public. "My friends, this is a day to celebrate. This incredible gift, *wherever* it came from, is a true miracle!" He smiled, looking to the heavens as a rush of wind made his suit jacket flap wildly. Removing the jacket, he handed it to one of his staff and rolled up his shirtsleeves. "That's more like it," he said with a laugh. "This is for our children, and the generations to follow."

The sound of another robo-copter drew all eyes upward. It began descending toward the cliff. The president saluted the copter and continued. "It is my honor to welcome some very special guests."

When the copter landed, a man and a woman exited. In the arms of the woman was a baby, nestled in a blanket. Exiting the copter behind them was Dr. Ahar. Westgale looked toward them with a nod. "I would like to introduce Tina and Gary Nickerson, and their beautiful baby boy, Daniel." The small gathering atop the cliff applauded, along with those below. "I would also like to introduce America's Chief of Medicine and Science, Dr. Jack Ahar."

Ahar stepped forward. "In this cylinder is what will now be referred to as the VX drug," he said, smiling. "What you are looking at is without a doubt the greatest medical discovery in the history of the world. Seconds from now, I will be performing the first ever VX vaccination on young Daniel."

Ahar stepped back from the podium and approached a bassinet that now held baby Daniel. The baby remained calm. Removing a small cylinder from his medical kit, Ahar adjusted the baby's position, removed the blanket, and held the cylinder about six inches above the baby's chest. He smiled at the small audience waiting with great anticipation. "Here we go," he said, then pressed the button atop the cylinder, sending out a flash of light. The process lasted seven seconds. The baby remained calm as Ahar tucked the blanket back around him. The proud parents stood over their child, crying tears of joy.

Westgale returned to the podium. "There you have it, my friends. A truly moving moment, and a little slice of history." He turned to embrace Tina and Gary Nickerson before the family was escorted

to a waiting robo-copter. Westgale looked up to the sky with tears in his eyes as the copter ascended high above.

“And now,” he said when the copter was gone, “I think Vexton’s DA, Sharon Claremont, said it best when she asked how something so wonderful could come out of something so horrific.” And he gave a detailed account of the crimes related to the miracle mineral.

The attention leveled at Vexton was something we’d never seen before, nor thought we’d ever see. Our small town had become a tourist attraction. People traveled from all over the country to view Moon Shade Bluff, which was now being referred to by some as the eighth wonder of the world. The Federal Department of Agriculture and Environmental Safety had continued to maintain complete control over the mountain, with the assistance of the military. Secretary Gibson estimated it would take several months before excavations were complete, and until then access required permission. As expected, this angered many visitors who had wished to climb or be brought by robo-copter to the summit to take in the marvel firsthand. However, even knowing they’d only be able to view the mountain from the base or via a robo-copter tour, people were still arriving in droves.

Meanwhile across the country, people were asking questions about the mountain. Had it been blessed by a higher power? Was it under the control of a benevolent alien race, coming to the aid of humanity? All this attention increased interest in the *Book of ZeZ*, as people set out to learn more about the legend of Moon Shade Bluff.

Personally, I was torn when I thought about Moon Shade Bluff. On one hand, I had watched my son being cured of a life-threatening illness while standing atop the mountain. But on the other hand, its magnificent power had indirectly caused my father’s death.

One aspect of the attention the town fully embraced was its positive economic impact. After a long day at work, I paid a visit to Hollis Farms to pick up a couple of their apple pies. The lineup

to purchase the pies seemed to go on forever. The amazing thing was, in this whole crowd, I didn't recognize a single soul.

Neville Hollis saw me from a distance and walked over as I stood at the back of the line. "Wow, Nathan was right, this is getting crazy," he said.

"Who'd ever have thought our small town would garner such attention?" I replied.

"Yeah, to think there was a time the name Vexton wouldn't make it onto even the most detailed maps," Neville said, shaking his head.

"It's amazing how that big ol' rock ended up becoming a national sensation," I said.

"Come on, Heath. Let's go into the main house," Neville said, leading me away from the lineup. "I'll make sure Nathan grabs a couple of pies for you."

"Wow, I don't think I recognized a single face out there," I said as we settled in the living room.

"Tell me about it; the guys are having a tough time keeping up," Neville responded. "I'm sure it's just a passing craze. Pretty soon we'll go back to being just another small American town that's known for its lovely scenery." He chuckled. "Now, on a more important note, how are you coping after learning about your father?"

I exhaled and ran my hands over my face. "It's a challenge, Nev," I replied. "It's not easy, but I know I can handle it. It's my mother who's really having a difficult time. But Sharon and I, along with Zack and the rest of the group at the retirement home, are there for her."

"It really is terrifying to think there are human beings out there who could be so wicked, who would cover up such an incredible discovery," Neville said. He changed the topic. "By the way, Kayla and Riley were here the other day."

"Oh yes, I know. They told me they met one of your old farmhands."

"Yeah, Don Shelby. Great guy; lots of fun, and a real dedicated worker."

“So I’ve heard.”

“Riley really took a liking to him. He told him all about Gordon.” Neville chuckled. We both looked up as a worn-out Nathan dragged himself into the living room, balancing pies in one hand.

“It’s complete madness out there. I think we’ve sold more of these things in the last week than we have in years,” he said as he handed me the pies.

CHAPTER 16

Back in Washington, Westgale decided to address some of those questions regarding Moon Shade Bluff, so his office set up an interview with Cryptic. With a neon Lady Justice flashing on its chest, Cryptic and a UCIT cameraman were escorted through the Freedom Home hallways into an area that honored past presidents. Westgale arrived a few minutes later.

“Is there a particular reason you chose this area of the Freedom Home to conduct this interview?” Cryptic asked.

“Sometimes I think it’s important to honor those who have served in this important position,” Westgale said, his admiring gaze shifting to a shrine honoring those who’d served before him.

“Will the plaque honoring the late President Montgomery be removed?”

“That’ll be up to the Strategic Council.”

“Do you think it should be?”

“If it’s proven that she was guilty of what she’s been accused of, then yes, I think it must be.”

“Now that it’s been established that Step 1 Health was shipping drugs to the HKM, why should the American people trust or support the company?”

“I’m not about to tell the American people who or what to trust. All I can tell you is that once we discovered what had taken place, we took immediate, appropriate action. At this point in time, we have no evidence suggesting anyone from Step 1 Health was

involved in that cover-up, or the murders of Dennis Claremont and Ferguson Macintosh.”

“What do you say to those who see this as another black mark on both capitalism and the American government?”

Westgale thought for a moment. “I completely understand how angry and disillusioned these crimes would leave people feeling. However, I prefer to look ahead and learn from the past,” he said firmly. “It goes without saying that as long as humans walk this Earth, the battle of good versus evil will live on. In this particular instance, in the end, I’m glad to say goodness prevailed.”

“There are some who suggest that the release of the VX drug will eventually lead to severe overpopulation, which in turn will lead to the end of humankind. Do you agree?”

“No, I don’t. I remain optimistic that humans will make the necessary adjustments, through education and strong governance, to maintain human sustainability here on Earth.”

“Who will own the rights to the mineral?”

“The man who brought the discovery to the attention of our government. The Director of Vexton Land Protection, Heath Claremont.”

* * *

At the same time Cryptic was interviewing William Westgale, Dave Perry, who had flown to Vexton on the presidential jet, was meeting with me. “Well, Mr. Claremont, as per the New Order Treaty, since you are the person who initiated the discovery of the mineral, you now legally own its rights.” I stared into space. “Did you hear what I said, Heath?”

“Uh... yeah... I heard you. I don’t know what to say,” I stammered.

“I understand this is all rather overwhelming,” Perry said as he opened his briefcase and took out several documents. “I highly recommend you receive some professional guidance as soon as possible.” I was still lost for words. “I hope you realize you are on your way to becoming a billionaire.”

“Are you certain the rights belong to me?” I asked, still in shock.

“When those minerals were sent to Director Gibson, and our government wasn’t able to match them with any others in our database, you became the rights owner.”

“But Kinsley, he was the one—”

“Even though we know the professor did the actual work, you were the person who initiated the exploration of that mountain. My office has spoken with the professor and he’s in agreement with this. The proof of this is included in the documentation, along with an offer from our Administration. There is also more pertinent information in the package.” Perry paused and looked me in the eye. “I realize that by no means will this eliminate the pain and shock of learning your father was murdered, but you should be very proud of your discovery. My office will be in touch within the coming days.”

I escorted Dave Perry out of the house, and took a seat on the front porch. It was a starless night, and even the usually prominent Vexton moon was covered by a blanket of haze. With the exception of a faint rumbling sound that I assumed was distant thunder, the night was eerily silent. Sharon was still at the office tying up some loose ends, and Kayla and Aaron had taken Riley to a special dinosaur exhibit.

The last few months had been such a whirlwind it was nearly inconceivable that it had all been leading to me on my way to becoming a billionaire. Most people would have been jumping for joy. Not me. Not in this case. After all, my father’s murder was at the root of my good fortune.

Exhausted, I felt my eyes start to close, only to snap open when a thunderous roar shook the porch. Several flashes of lightning sliced through the sky. Seconds later, a heavy downpour chased me inside. When I entered the house, my flash-pad began to buzz.

“Heath, it’s me, Wyatt,” my VLP assistant said. He sounded nervous. “Are you aware of what’s happening?”

“Yeah, it looks like we’re in for one of our nasty storms—”

He interrupted. “No, no, not that. Moon Shade Bluff.”

“Moon Shade Bluff?”

“Yeah, we have to get over there. I’ll come by and pick you up in my copter.”

“What’s going on?”

“I don’t know; my flash-pad received an emergency signal from headquarters.”

Several minutes later, I heard the copter approaching and threw on my jacket. The copter was waiting in an adjacent field. By now, the weather had cleared.

“What do you think is happening? Do you think it has to do with the storm?” I asked him as we took off.

“I guess we’ll soon find out,” Wyatt answered.

As we approached the forest around Moon Shade Bluff, I immediately noticed how the Vexton sky had changed from an empty, pitch-black sheet to a canvas filled with winking stars surrounding a luminous moon. When I looked down, to my shock, I saw rows and rows of flashes below us, at the base of the mountain.

“What the hell is going on?” I said to Wyatt as the copter began to descend.

When we came closer, we saw a mass of people dressed in black, wearing balaclavas and holding torches. The military unit in charge of guarding Moon Shade Bluff was standing its ground.

Sergeant Evans approached us when the copter landed. “Good evening, Mr. Claremont.”

“Sergeant Evans, what on God’s earth is going on here?”

“I wish I could tell you. It appears to be the same group that did this same thing outside the Freedom Home the other evening.”

“Have they said anything?”

“Not a thing. They’ve just been standing there, silent. We’ve given them five minutes to clear out,” Evans said, checking his time-pin, “or else we’ll be forcing them out.”

Seconds later, a member of the group raised his torch, prompting the rest of the group to call out in unison, “Free Anya! Free America!” The entire group then calmly left the area in an orderly fashion and made their way toward waiting buses.

“Well, I still have no idea what that was about, but thankfully, it all ended peacefully,” Evans said, relieved.

Still alarmed at what we’d just witnessed, Wyatt and I made our way back to the copter, at which point my flash-pad began to buzz. It was Sharon.

“Are you aware of what’s been going on?” she asked in a panic.

“Yeah, I’m actually here right now,” I replied.

“What do you mean?”

“I’m here at Moon Shade Bluff. I saw those characters in full force.”

“Moon Shade Bluff?” she said. I explained. She had no idea what I was talking about.

“Wait a second, what are you talking about?” I asked.

“Turn on the copter’s flash-screen and tune in to UCIT, and you’ll see what I’m talking about,” Sharon said nervously.

“I’ll turn it on,” Wyatt said. He then tuned to UCIT.

“What in the world?” I exclaimed as the screen displayed two large buildings, both on fire. Cryptic then appeared on screen, and began providing a recap. “I’m here in New York City, in front of Step 1 Health’s headquarters which, as you can see on your screen, has been set ablaze. The other building you are looking at is the Fryman Towers in Chicago. I have a young man here with me who claims to have witnessed the Step I Health building being set on fire. And what is your name, sir?”

“Peter,” the young man answered, eyeing the camera nervously.

“Would you kindly tell us what you witnessed?”

“It was crazy, man. I counted six robo-cycles in a row. They just soared past the building and started throwing what I’m guessing were fire-zaps.”

“Are you able to describe what any of these people looked like?”

“All I can tell you is that they were all dressed in black leather.”

Eyewitness accounts in Chicago were exactly the same. Fortunately, both buildings were empty at the time of the crimes.

Minutes later, UCIT received a view-file relating to the arsons and aired it. The footage showed a man dressed in black, wearing a

balacava. He was sitting at a table in what appeared to be an old basement. “Blackheart here,” he said. “This evening AXE took pride in setting two corporate pigpens on fire. Soulless, capitalist swine have no place in this country. Let this serve as a warning that a new movement is on its way. Free Anya! Free America!”

* * *

“Who the hell does this Blackheart son of a bitch think he is?” Westgale yelled as the view-file concluded. “Mitchell, has your team been able to make any headway into this new group?” he asked Colonel Peters.

“I have my grandson leading a covert operation, but after the way Johnny T brought down Wagner, this group is being extremely cautious,” Peters replied. “In all honesty, we’re not sure what we’re dealing with here. We don’t even know how, or if, Blackheart is connected.”

“Come on, Mitchell, I agree we need to address the problem, but you know as well as I do that these street thugs have nowhere near the resources or manpower to pose a real threat,” Westgale replied.

Peters grinned and nervously tapped his fingers on the desk. “We’re not just talking about street thugs. Whoever’s at the core of this has been recruiting a wide spectrum of youngsters, including some of the brightest university students from across the country, and surprisingly, it’s working. Just look at the size of these mass gatherings.” Peters paused. “This is a true youth movement, and I’ve concluded it’s their wish to start a revolution—tear down our entire system.”

“Wait a second here. You’re telling me many of the country’s university students are also falling for that garbage?”

“Yes, very much so. In their minds, this country is severely broken, and they’re going to do whatever it takes to fix it, on their own terms.”

“And this obsession with Anya Ahar, do you believe this is for real?”

“Her tale of woe, and her performance in the Judicial Triangle, really resonated with this country’s youth. Combine her brilliant

scientific mind with that doctrine, and strangely enough, we have a tragic hero who's become some bizarre symbol of hope."

"How do we combat this insanity, Mitchell? I mean, for God's sake, we just can't let them go around setting buildings on fire, and I'm sure as hell not going to put up with their intimidation tactics."

Peters shook his head and sighed. "I wish I had an answer for you, William. I agree we have to nail whoever is responsible for those fires, and any other laws they break, but if we're overly aggressive without cause, it could very well harm us."

"In what way?"

"I'm afraid we'd be throwing fuel onto an already raging fire. The less attention we give these fools, the more difficult it will become for them to achieve their immediate goal."

"A revolution?"

"The way I see it, that's their long-term goal. For now, their strategy revolves around gaining strength in numbers."

"What about the fires?"

"Look at them as commercials—a way to gain attention."

* * *

When I arrived back home, Sharon greeted me with a cup of tea. "What an eventful night," I sighed as I took a seat on the sofa.

"Yeah, it looks like this whole AXE thing is starting to really get out of hand," she said, shaking her head. "This is the last thing the country needs right now." Obviously, she hadn't been told that I'd been granted the rights to the mineral.

"Sharon, I think you'd better have a seat," I said. When she sat down beside me, I explained. "Westgale even spoke about it in an interview this evening," I finished.

"Wow... all along, I just assumed the government would be claiming the rights," Sharon replied after a stunned moment.

"Prior to the formation of the New Order Treaty, that would have been the case—but here are the official documents saying otherwise."

"Oh my... this is rather complex stuff," she said as she began scanning the material. Then it dawned on her. "Whoa—this

proposal they've made is incredible. These rights will be worth billions of dollars!"

"We're going to need some solid professional advice from someone we can trust, and I think I know who that person is."

"Oh?" Sharon said with a raised brow.

"Skip," I answered.

CHAPTER 17

When the War Within ended and the Outer Commission had been established, it immediately began deploying officers—or guardians, as they became known to America. Their purpose was to continuously assess the state of the nation, report to their superiors in the commission, and meet with the US president if deemed necessary. After his meeting with Colonel Peters, Westgale was summoned by the commission to meet with one of these guardians for breakfast the following morning in the Prestige Hotel’s dining room.

“Good morning, Mr. President. I’m Macdonald,” the guardian said when they met.

Westgale looked around the spacious dining room that Macdonald had reserved for the two of them. “I feel so guilty that the two of us are taking up this entire room.” He chuckled.

“I made the arrangement understanding how important your privacy is, Mr. President,” Macdonald replied.

“I’m actually surprised this meeting wasn’t called several months ago,” Westgale commented as a waiter presented a tray of muffins and fresh fruit.

“I hope you don’t mind if I indulge,” Macdonald said, reaching for a banana muffin and a handful of grapes.

“Not at all,” Westgale replied as he studied the youthful, British guardian whose bright orange hair and big green eyes reminded him of the face etched on his childhood blow-up punching bag.

This was only the second occasion since becoming president that Westgale had been called to meet with a guardian. The first time was when the US asked to be allowed to enter the Battle of Oria and aid the Orian government in taking on Cobra Pix and the Iron Lotus.

“Let me see here... hmm... Considering this report from my superiors, it’s actually shocking that you’re sitting here right now,” Macdonald said, lifting his eyebrows as he popped a grape into his mouth. “Those berries... teal-berries—it looks like they not only saved a load of young Americans, they also saved your presidency. The last few months have been rather tumultuous, I must say. Sometimes that can be a direct sign of inadequate leadership,” he added as he continued reading from his flash-pad.

Taken aback by the comment, and the fact that the only time Macdonald moved his eyes away from the device was to take a bite of his muffin, Westgale glared at the guardian. “What are you insinuating?” he asked, his scowl deepening.

“Well, the fact you’ve decided to not run for reelection tells me quite a lot,” Macdonald replied, still reading from his flash-pad, dropping muffin crumbs all over the table. He then signaled the waiter to bring over two coffees.

“Do tell me: what exactly does it tell you?”

“That your ambition outweighs your capabilities. But I wouldn’t fret, you’re certainly not the first American president to fail their country, and sadly, you won’t be the last.”

“And who the hell made you judge and jury?”

“Now, now, Mr. President, let’s not get all defensive. Keep in mind who you’re speaking with,” Macdonald said sternly.

As much as Westgale wanted to tell him to go to hell and storm out of the room, he realized he had to restrain himself. After all, without the Outer Commission coming to its aid, America would most likely have become part of the HKM. “With all due respect, did you call this meeting to tell me what an awful job I’ve been doing, or is there actually something you wish to discuss?”

“My goodness, this coffee is appalling.” Macdonald grimaced. “Is it not possible to get a fresh cup of coffee around here?” He called

for the waiter to replace the coffees. “I’m so sorry, Mr. President, but I wouldn’t serve that coffee to a rat in a sewer. Now this... VX drug... that’s a rather extraordinary discovery,” he added, once again turning his attention to his flash-pad. “How does your Administration plan to proceed?”

“We’ve made a proposal to the person who owns the rights to the mineral that enables us to make the drug. We’re confident he will agree to transfer the rights to our government.”

“And if and when he agrees?”

“The AMO has already set in motion several programs that will enable us to get the medication distributed throughout the country.”

“What about outside the country?”

“Right now, our focus is solely on America.”

“Well now, I hope all those sweet, innocent little infants will actually still be Americans when they’re ready to leave their cribs.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“That last time I checked, there’s a deadline that is rapidly approaching, and if that giant load of money isn’t paid to the commission by that day, well, we’ll be calling in the debt and America—will be no more.”

“You’ll be getting your money.”

“Great. And then your country will once again have its complete independence. And if that happens... let’s just hope you and the rest of your countrymen don’t screw it up again.”

* * *

“I guess my timing was spot on; what brought you back to Vexton?” I asked Skip.

“This old mansion is in dire need of plumbing work,” he replied, referencing the Levin estate, “and since Dad’s so busy with his campaign, he asked me to come back for a few days and deal with the matter.”

“A lot has happened around here since you headed off to California.”

“I know. I heard all about it. I’m still in shock over the news about your father.” Skip shook his head. “And Moon Shade Bluff—who would’ve thought? You, my friend, are going to be one wealthy man.”

“And that’s why I contacted you, Skipper,” I said as I handed him the government documents pertaining to the minerals. “You’re the only person I know I can trust to help me with this,” I added as Skip began to scan the documents.

“Whoa... this is some heavy stuff,” he said. “I’ll need some time to go over the material in detail, but based on my first impression, I think it would be wise to accept the government’s offer. I’ll get back to you.”

“Much appreciated. So, did you also hear about AXE paying a visit to Moon Shade Bluff, the same night they set fire to those buildings?”

“Yeah. It looks like these guys are more than a bunch of street thugs breaking windows and spraying graffiti.”

“I hope I’m wrong, but I’m thinking this could get very ugly.”

* * *

Westgale’s meeting with Macdonald got him thinking about the Outer Commission’s deadline. He was particularly concerned about the tension mounting over Cobra Pix’s conquest of the Pinian government.

“My God, Mitchell, this is what I was afraid of!” the usually calm Westgale shouted. He turned his flash-screen on, leaving Colonel Peters to read the Outer Commission’s decision prohibiting American forces from intervening in Pinia. Westgale sat at his desk with his head in his hands.

Peters shook his head and sighed heavily. “Can we not appeal?” he asked.

Westgale rose and strode to the back of the office, where he sat down on a sofa. “It’s a unanimous vote; we can’t appeal, Mitchell,” he murmured.

“Are these people insane? Do they not realize the ramifications of this lunatic taking over the world’s richest country in natural resources?” the colonel exclaimed.

“They have us where they want us, and they know it. Under Pix’s command, Pinia isn’t going to stop doing business with the rest of the world. But it will stop doing business with America, and without the Pinian deal we’ll never get close to paying that debt by the deadline. I don’t want to give up the VX drug, but in order to save this country we may have no choice,” Westgale said.

He sighed. “As a country, we were so naïve when we started that bloody War Within... so naïve to think we could rip this country apart like we did and continue to garner the respect of a superpower,” he added, his face tight with anguish. “And now it’s been more than two and a half decades and we remain a mere shadow of our former self; we’ve become servants to those who once feared our very existence.”

“What angers me is that we’ve come so far with the World Harmony Program, and now something like this will give the MAA the fodder they’ve been searching for,” Peters agreed, his face flushed with anger.

“Yeah, and things were progressing rather well with the Pinian government. But I guess we all know how unstable it is over there. The thing that really concerns me is that the HKM has backed away from the Harmony Program; that surely doesn’t bode well for anyone,” Westgale said, frowning. “Is there any word on the American aid workers in Pinia, Colonel?”

“The reports I’ve received show that most will have no problem getting out of there,” answered Peters, “but the group in the north... I’m sorry to say that’s a whole other story, considering Pix has a real fixation with that part of the country.”

“And if he finds out it’s my daughter leading that group, God only knows what he’ll do,” Westgale said anxiously.

Peters headed to the door, where he paused. “I’ll make certain everything within this government’s power is done to keep Jessica and her fellow aid workers safe, William,” Peters said solemnly before stepping out.

Westgale moved back to his desk, fear for his daughter’s life conjuring the conversation they’d had just a little over a year ago,

when she'd made her decision to go off to Pinia. They'd met at the Field of Honor.

"Come on, honey, you can't seriously be thinking of taking your team to Pinia," he protested. "For heaven's sake—you've just been offered the position of VP of Strategic Planning at Step 1 Health. Lawson Pierce has told me himself how much he covets your management skills."

"Yeah, and I'm sure the fact I'm the president's daughter makes him covet my 'skills' that much more."

"In most instances you'd probably have a valid point, but not with Lawson. When it comes to his treasured company, the man is all business. He would not have offered you that position if he didn't believe in you," Westgale said with pride.

"Thank you, Dad; I appreciate your vote of confidence—and your concern. But I need to do this. I need my team in Pinia to help those children. The country has come so far, but the northern region is still way behind, and I want to do my part—give them the basic education they'll require to live a productive life," Jessica said as they approached a flash-screen displaying a view-file of the War Within. As images of the old White House and many other treasured buildings and monuments were shown burning to the ground, Westgale put his arm around his daughter and held her tightly.

"It's just so difficult to watch," he sighed. "A country so blinded by apathy. I'll never forget the day the Militant Alliance waged war on our government. This can't happen in America—that's what it seemed everybody was thinking. After all, our way of life was untouchable." Jessica's gaze was full of empathy. "We had everything freedom could provide, but we failed to nurture that freedom and appreciate it. Instead, we became far too preoccupied with the materialistic aspects of life." His voice was rising.

"Once technology started to override both human intellect and emotion, an impenetrable shadow was cast over our existence. It was only a matter of time before absolute chaos would stare us in the face like the devil himself—and then we had this," he added as they

watched a news clip showing many of the country's hospitals and schools being converted into detention centers. "Listen to the excitement in her voice, Jessica, and look at the smile on her face!" Westgale said, referring to the eager, militant-leaning reporter in the clip. As she watched several zap-grenades being launched at a New York City courthouse, her fervor grew. "We're watching a courthouse here in New York City being attacked from all angles—being lit up like it's the Fourth of July," she exclaimed. "Although I do feel for the poor souls inside that building... I must say that red, blue, and white blast powder surrounded by those raging flames is a rather breathtaking sight—so American!"

As Jessica was well aware, one of those "poor souls" inside that courthouse was Westgale's brother, Joseph. "He was such a tremendous human being... I lost many dear people to that senseless war," Westgale said quietly.

"Why do they show this, Dad?" she said, shaking her head. "It's so horrific to watch."

"Sometimes we need a lesson in history to help guide us into the future. And though we'll never truly know what the future holds for us, at least our past can provide us with fair warning of what lies ahead," Westgale said, wiping at his eyes. "And that's why I hope you'll reconsider taking your team to Pinia. If you're not going to listen to me as your father, then listen to me as the president," he said firmly. "Pinia is a slow-ticking time bomb and with Cobra Pix and his militia in control of that time bomb, soon all the progress that country has made in terms of becoming a democracy will be destroyed."

"I hear you, Mr. President," she replied with a chuckle, "but as my dad always told me, there's no reward without risk."

CHAPTER 18

Jessica Westgale always took immense pleasure in helping others. Like her father, her dream was to see the world live in peace. As an American, she believed it was actually her duty to bring positive energy to the rest of the world. After graduating with an MBA from Summit University, she quickly began climbing the corporate ladder at Step 1 Health. Although to many, including her father, it seemed difficult to believe she would walk away from the corporate ranks of S1H, for Jessica, providing aid to the children of Pinia was far more important.

Several years ago, Assistance America set up a specialized program enabling American corporations to donate food, clothing, flash-screens, and educational tools to foreign countries in need. Jessica had worked diligently over the last couple of years, maintaining and even helping to expand the program to Pinia. When delivery day came, Jessica and her team would bask in delight as they watched the Pinian children's usual expressions of sadness turn to ones of complete joy.

Today was delivery day. As the children lined up to receive their share of the items, the excitement was palpable. "At least some of them are actually lining up for the healthier food," Jessica joked to her associate, Trevor Larsen.

"Thank you, Miss Jessica, and thank you, Mr. Trevor," a smiling child said as she showed them a flash-pad she'd received in her package.

“I’ll help you set it up tomorrow. Okay, Ulu?” Trevor said.

At day’s end the team headed back to their camp, settled in, and gathered for a campfire dinner. As usual, while sitting in a circle around the fire, they began singing *God Bless America*. As they finished the last verse, they heard a loud humming in the near distance.

Jessica looked up, only to be blinded by the headlights of a large bus. Four gun-toting men dressed in red and black military clothing rushed out of the vehicle and ordered Jessica and her team into the bus. Terrified, shaken, and confused, they obliged. What choice did they have?

“Everybody relax. Remain in your seats. We are just going for a little ride,” one of the men bellowed from the front of the bus. Jessica looked out the window, attempting to gauge where they might be heading. But even though she knew the area well enough, it was far too dark, and the lack of street lighting made it impossible to tell.

“Do you know what’s going on, Jessie?” Trevor whispered.

“I have no idea... but this can’t be good. This is definitely the Iron Lotus,” Jessica replied.

The bus rumbled on for the next fifteen minutes. The anxiety inside the bus was growing by the second. Finally, after turning into a large parking lot, the bus suddenly stopped. Jessica again looked through the window. This time she saw a large neon red sign that read *HOL*, which were the letters representing the country’s only hotel chain. “Everybody exit,” called out one of the men.

The men ushered the group of twenty into the concourse area of the hotel, where they were told to sit down. Jessica looked across the room and saw faces etched with terror watching the dozen members of the Iron Lotus who stood before them. Other than the heavy breathing and whimpers coming from the frightened group of American aid workers, the room was eerily silent.

One man pointed in Jessica’s direction and two others walked down the aisle to where she was sitting. “Jessica Westgale,” one of them said as they raised her from her seat. “We need you to come with us.” They marched her out of the building and stopped her

before a stylish electro minivan. She was blindfolded, then guided into the van. One man sat in the operator's seat and the other sat in the back with Jessica.

"What is this? What is going on?" she asked, her voice quavering with terror. "Where are you taking me?"

"Please relax, Miss Westgale," the man beside her said.

"My friends back at the hotel, what are you planning to do to them?" Jessica asked. "I don't care if you kill me, but please, let them go! They've done nothing wrong. All they've tried to do is help your people!"

Back at the hotel, a dozen armed guards stood over the group seated in the concourse. A large flash-screen was wheeled to the front of the room and the lights were turned off. All that could be seen was the bright neon glow from the laser-rifles. Up to this point in time, the group had not been spoken to. This only heightened the uneasiness.

As Trevor sat in the dark, his thoughts were with Jessica. He began praying for her. He admired her deeply, especially for the fact that she was so humble and treated *everyone* equally.

Trevor had never forgotten his first meeting with her, when she'd come to speak about finding direction in life at the large group home where he'd been living in Washington. Orphaned at nine and at that point seventeen, Trevor had admitted he'd been arrested three times for stealing. When he told her he'd really changed, and wanted to help others like she did, she believed him—a year later, when Jessica was assembling her team to go to Pinia, she remembered Trevor. After talking to his personal social worker, she invited him to be part of her team. Trevor was thrilled. He finally had his opportunity to help someone—in this instance, the children of northern Pinia.

Now, Trevor wanted more than anything to help the woman who had turned his life around. But how could he get her out of this awful dilemma? Like the others, all he could do was sit and await his fate.

An involuntary gasp escaped him as the flash-screen suddenly lit up, illuminating the dark concourse area and drawing all eyes

to it. Images of the Pinian landscape, including its rich green forests, majestic mountains, and plentiful lush valleys, were displayed, accompanied by the haunting notes of classical music. *Is this some kind of strange ritual before the slaughter?* Trevor wondered.

Guilt consumed Jessica as, still blindfolded, still being jostled in the back of the moving van, she felt she'd failed her fellow aid workers and put them in harm's way. Sure, they were all well aware of the risks involved, but as the team's leader, Jessica felt responsible for their well-being.

The van suddenly stopped and the two men exited the vehicle, leaving Jessica inside. She heard them speaking to each other in their native tongue outside the van, and she was able to make out some of what they were saying. She could hear one of the men telling his cohort that his father was waiting for them.

The side door slid open and she was guided out of the van and the blindfold was removed. She blinked rapidly, momentarily blinded by a bright laser-light one of the guards held. When her eyes adjusted, she realized she was on a side road in the middle of nowhere. As the men began to guide her through the dark, misty forest, her anxiety grew with every step.

"Where are you taking me? Damn it! Please, tell me something!" she shrieked, her fear overwhelming her as a faint howl echoed through the trees.

"Please relax, Miss Westgale," the larger man said as they continued to march her through the leaf-carpeted forest, their trek punctuated occasionally by twigs snapping underfoot and accompanied by the humming of insects, a sound that seemed to become more intense as they moved deeper into the underbrush. Again, she heard the howling. She shivered, but said nothing.

They came to a clearing surrounded by giant pine trees. When Jessica looked up, through the mist, it appeared as though the moon was touching the tips of the trees. The men guided her along a brightly lit pathway with tall neon poles radiating a red glow.

Memories of her life ran through her mind. A privileged life that had afforded her the opportunity to do things and travel to places most people could only dream of. However, Pinia wouldn't be on most people's lists. She could still hear her father and mother warning her to stay away from that "forsaken place," but the children of northern Pinia needed someone, and she wanted to be that someone. Her father had suggested full-time security guards while in Pinia, but that would have been in opposition to all she stood for. It always preyed on her mind, how much her father's influence presented her with opportunities that would otherwise have been beyond her reach. The posh private school growing up, the lucrative job offers after graduating university; how much of it was because of the person she was, how much of it was due to the fact she was William Westgale's daughter?

"Please stop, right here," the larger man said to Jessica. She heard footsteps coming through the trees, to the left of her.

"Good evening, Miss Westgale. I'm Cobra Pix," a voice said. He took a few steps into the light. On either side of him walked white Pinian mountain wolves. They began to hiss, displaying razor-sharp teeth, their golden eyes picking up the red glow of the neon lights.

Jessica struggled to remain calm, but dread engulfed her. Here she was, standing before a man whose claim to fame was his hatred for America, and in particular, *her father*.

"Please don't be afraid," Pix said as he settled the wolves by slowly caressing the tops of their heads; he seemed to have complete control over them. "There's not many of these around anymore... such beautiful creatures," he said with a smile. Two more of his guards appeared, and rolled out a massive red and black blanket for him to sit on. The wolves retreated toward one of the pine trees and lay down peacefully. "Look at that moon... so magnificent," he said, gazing upward in awe. "It's as if it's there for our eyes only. Please, have a seat, Miss Westgale."

Jessica moved hesitantly forward and sat a few feet away from him. Being so near him filled her with fear. That powerful physique,

bald head, and thin, red-penciled eyebrows made him look alien. She struggled to find the courage to speak.

“Please,” she begged, “I don’t care what you do to me, but my associates, back at the hotel—I beg you, please let them go!”

Pix studied her for a moment, then signaled for the wolves to come over to him. They immediately responded to his call, slowly trotting over to lie down beside him, their intense eyes fixed on Jessica. Pix gently coaxed one of the wolves closer, and it lay its head on his lap. “A wild beast,” he said. “That’s how most people would refer to my four-legged friends here. When in actuality, I can guarantee you they’re far more civilized than the humans who label them. Now, if they were to feel threatened, or their personal space were to be invaded, well, that would be an entirely different story. But then again, I’m certain that would be the case for all creatures on this planet... including me. Would you not agree, Miss Westgale?” Pix asked.

“I’m not here as an intruder, sir. I’m here in Pinia to bring aid to the children of the north,” Jessica explained.

“I see you’ve met my son, Shadow,” Pix said, inclining his head toward the larger of the two men who had escorted her to the woods. Jessica looked up and nodded in his direction. “Now, Shadow has spent the last few days learning everything he can about you and your fellow aid workers.” Pix paused to take an apple from a sack he’d been carrying over his shoulder and threw it for one of the wolves to fetch. Jessica looked back up at Shadow. He acknowledged her with a nod.

Pix continued. “I want to commend you on your tremendous work. Permitting you to come over to Pinia and help our children is probably the only wise thing the Pinian government has done in the last ten years.” He launched another apple from his massive hand. “From the day my father was forced out of office, Pinia has remained oppressed due to a weak and directionless government. We’re the richest country in the world when it comes to natural resources, and yet one of the poorer countries overall. Under my direction, I can guarantee you that will no longer be the case.”

“I wish you and your country all the best, sir. I’m just thrilled to be able to help the children of Pinia, and I surely couldn’t have done any of this without the aid of my team,” Jessica said earnestly.

“I understand, Miss Westgale, and that’s why your friends are currently being treated to a delectable three-course meal back at the hotel. They’ve earned it.”

Jessica was confused. *What in the world is going on here?*

“I’m sorry to have singled you out, but you’re the one I needed to meet with... And the blindfold—well, given the current situation here in Pinia, I’m sure you realize that secrecy concerning my whereabouts is paramount,” Pix said calmly as he removed another apple from the sack and offered it to Jessica. “Please, accept the apple.”

Even though her anxiety was easing, she was still in shock and highly confused. “I guess my friends and I should start arranging our departure out of Pinia,” she said nervously as she accepted the apple.

“Well, I was hoping you and your team would fulfill your commitment and remain for the three more months you’d planned to stay... as my guests,” Pix said, rising to his feet. The wolves sat on either side of him.

Jessica was taken aback. “You want us to stay? I mean, with all that’s going on, would it be safe?” She also rose.

“Shadow and his men will see to it you’re fully taken care of, and now that I’ve taken control of the northern part of the country, you’ll be completely free from danger. It’s your decision, Miss Westgale,” Pix said, sounding surprisingly sincere. “Shadow, please ensure Miss Westgale is brought safely back to the hotel. It was a pleasure meeting you, Miss Westgale. I look forward to seeing you in the village, if you should decide to stay.”

Shadow studied Jessica on the ride back to the hotel. “Are you okay, Miss Westgale?” he asked. “I fully understand you feeling disoriented.”

“I’m still trying to figure out what happened tonight... and please, call me Jessica.”

“I apologize for not being candid with you, Jessica, but I was simply following my father’s orders. This all had to be executed in a surreptitious manner.”

“You had me fearing for my life—blindfolded and taken to some forest in the middle of nowhere to find wolves hissing at me.”

“My father was testing you. He wanted to make sure you weren’t here in Pinia on some kind of spy mission,” Shadow explained. “To be honest with you, there were several of our soldiers hiding throughout that forest, in case you were being tracked by the American government.”

“But your father, he despises my country and most of all he despises my father... he could have had his revenge and had me killed right there, in that forest.”

“You’re correct when you say my father despises both your country and your father, but he doesn’t despise *you*. He has a great deal of respect for you.”

When they reached the hotel and entered the concourse, Shadow turned to Jessica with a subtle smile, and said, “I sincerely hope you choose to stay in Pinia. If you do, we’d like to have you stay at this very hotel, as our guests, for the remainder of your stay. We’ll have one of our buses bring you back and forth from the village on a daily basis. I’m certain it’ll be far more comfortable than your current accommodations.”

When Jessica settled into her room, she realized Shadow was correct when he spoke of the difference in comfort compared to the village, for the room matched the life of luxury she’d been used to back home. With its plush wall-to-wall carpeting, elegant furniture, and a giant state-of-the-art flash-screen, the room was a far cry from the tiny, dreary cabin she’d been staying in at the village.

Jessica was tired, but her mind was racing. *Am I to trust Shadow and his father? Or are they setting me up for something?* She was also baffled by the fact that the topics of America and her father hadn’t come up during her meeting with Cobra Pix. Although still uncertain about their motives, she went to bed committed to completing her Pinian mission.

The next morning, before returning to the village, Jessica contacted her father and explained what had taken place. As she expected, Westgale was irate. “If he harmed even a single hair on your head, I’ll—”

“Actually, both he and his son are requesting we stay the remaining few months and complete our mission, as their guests,” Jessica interjected.

“Don’t be a damn fool, Jessica. Don’t believe a word that man says; he’s a complete megalomaniac. You have to get yourself out of there. Please, Jessie, come home. If not for me, do it for your poor mother. She’s worried sick about you,” Westgale pleaded.

“Please believe me when I tell you all is calm here in northern Pinia. I don’t sense any danger whatsoever. If I did, trust me, I wouldn’t be sticking around. The Iron Lotus seems to have taken over the region without facing any resistance. I think the Pinian government as a whole realized its time was up,” she explained.

“My Lord, Jessica. Do you realize how this looks?! If word gets out that you’re staying in Pinia as a guest of that madman—” Westgale said.

“Relax, I don’t plan to accept his offer, but I do plan to see this through. I just can’t quit on those children, regardless of politics. I’m sorry to disappoint you, Dad, and I will explain my decision to Mom as soon as I have a chance,” Jessica insisted.

Her father knew how determined she could be. She heard him take a deep breath, and exhale. “You be careful, honey. Be very careful. And if you should change your mind, be sure to contact my office and I’ll personally see to it that you and your friends are brought home safely.”

CHAPTER 19

The next morning, when the group returned to the village, Jessica was surprised to see Shadow and a couple of his Lotus soldiers playing soccer with several of the children. When Shadow noticed her, he acknowledged her with a nod. She nodded back.

Minutes later he came over to her, huffing and puffing. “Wow, I haven’t done something like this in years. It feels really good to see the children so happy,” he said, smiling as he wiped a towel across his face. It was the first moment Jessica had seen him as a real human being, who could actually laugh and smile. “Please, would you join me for breakfast?” he said, indicating the small patio café next to the field.

“Sure, as long as you allow me to treat you,” Jessica said with a smile. “That’s the least I can do, considering how you and your father fed my friends last evening.”

Once they settled at a table with their two glasses of fruit punch, Shadow produced a small packet and handed it to Jessica. “This is for you. Please accept this as a token of my appreciation for the work you’ve done for our children,” he said, studying her.

“Uh... thank you,” she replied, surprised by the offering. When she opened the packet she discovered a necklace containing six small rocks. She set it on the table and examined it. The stones were exquisite, each containing fluorescent particles of blue, green, and yellow.

“I hope you like them. They’re called dragon-stones. They say you should have one of these stones with you at all times. It’s

supposed to keep you safe from harm. Other than when I'm on duty, I keep one with me," Shadow said, admiring the rocks with her.

"Oh? Why not when you're on duty? Wouldn't you want them to protect you?" Jessica asked.

"It's against our warrior code," Shadow answered.

"How did they get their name?" Jessica asked as she picked one up and studied it.

"It's believed winged, red and black dragons known as Sortars once roamed this very land. And that's how these stones got their fluorescent glow—from dragon-fire," Shadow replied.

"Do you believe in that legend?" Jessica asked with a small smile.

"Yes, I do. It's sacred to our people. It's why my father chose red and black for our colors," Shadow said as he gently tugged at the sleeve of his uniform.

"So, these stones, are they considered valuable?"

"They carry great sentimental value, but it is illegal to sell them. Only my late grandfather and a few other important Pinian people had access to them."

"Were these a gift from your grandfather?"

"Yes; before he died, he presented me and my six brothers each with our own collection. After my brothers were killed in the Battle of Oria, their wives each gave me a stone from their collections, in their husband's memory. And now I want to bestow them upon you, for your kindness."

Jessica was lost for words. "Uh... I can't... I mean, it's very kind of you, but these are special—they belonged to your brothers."

Shadow reached across the table and gently held her hands, caressing them with his thumbs. "My brothers died fighting for Pinia, and since you've come to our country, you've also been fighting for Pinia—the children of Pinia. I know my brothers would want you to have them," he said, blinking back tears.

As he held her hands, Jessica looked into his eyes and saw his sorrow. She was surprised to realize she was developing feelings for him. Sure, she was taken by his big brown eyes and broad shoulders, but she was even more attracted to his kindness

and warmth. "Thank you, Shadow. I will cherish them forever," she said with a bright smile.

"So, you haven't told me: are you planning to stay?" he asked, leaning forward.

"Yes, I and another ten members of the team will be staying," Jessica replied.

"I'm so glad. I will call the hotel and make all the arrangements," Shadow said enthusiastically.

"That won't be necessary, Shadow. I thank you and your father for the offer, but it's our wish to remain in the village, with those we are assisting."

"That doesn't surprise me," Shadow replied with a smile.

As Jessica and the group continued to work with the children, she was frequently surprised by the kindness Shadow continued to display to her and the group as well as the children. In fact, as part of the next delivery day, Shadow personally donated a few hundred pairs of running shoes and wool sweaters to the children, which touched Jessica deeply.

The fondness they felt for each other had begun to develop into a full romance. One evening Jessica invited Shadow to join her and the others for their campfire gathering. After enjoying an evening of food, drink, and laughs, the group, as was their custom, was about to start singing *God Bless America*. However, with Shadow sitting amongst them, Jessica felt it would not be appropriate. Shadow would have nothing of it. "Please, sing your song. America is your country. You should be proud of your country and treasure it," he said with fervor. After singing a few lines in a very tentative manner, a sudden surge of passion came over the group and they began singing with gusto. Shadow looked intently at Jessica. Still feeling uneasy about singing the song in his presence, she gazed into her lap while singing. When the song was completed she looked up, and they exchanged tremulous smiles.

When the others retired for the evening, Jessica and Shadow remained by the campfire. She felt so at ease as she lay back in his

arms. Gazing at the Pinian moon in its full glory, Jessica commented, “Your father was correct—sometimes it’s as if it’s there only for our eyes to see.”

Shadow pulled her closer. “How does your father feel about you being here?” he asked her softly.

“I’m sure it’s breaking his heart, but he realizes how determined I am to carry on with my work,” Jessica replied, gently caressing his hand.

“Have you told him we’ve become involved?”

“No. I actually haven’t spoken to him since we started seeing each other. And what about *your* father—is he aware?”

“Yes. My father was very happy when I told him the news. He admires you, Jessica.”

“I hope you don’t mind me saying this, but your father seems to be a very complex man.”

Shadow chuckled. “Yes. My father is probably the most complex human being you will ever meet.”

“Is he as brutal as he’s portrayed to be?”

“My father lives by his own code of justice. He will do anything to protect Pinia, and he will kill anyone in the process of doing so. But you saw, Jessica—he can also be very gentle and caring.”

Jessica slowly slipped out of his grasp and turned around to look him in the eyes. “Those government officials the Iron Lotus is said to have killed with helcin, were you part of that?” she asked.

Shadow shook his head and sighed. “My father never ordered that slaughter. It was orchestrated behind his back. And those members who were involved, well, my father had them executed,” he replied calmly.

“And this current threat to kill government officials?”

“Like I said, Jessica, my father will do anything to protect Pinia,” Shadow replied. “He also places Pinia over his own personal feelings. For example, most people think my father will refuse to distribute our vast supply of natural resources to America.”

“Is that accurate?”

Shadow laughed quietly. “No, it’s not.”

“Are you certain of that?”

“Well, I should be; after all, I’m in charge of the distribution of our natural resources, including the fera-beans. As a matter of fact, the new deal I plan to propose to your government will be far more cost-effective than the current one.”

“That’s great to hear. I’m just surprised your father still wishes to maintain a relationship with a country he so strongly despises.”

“All he wants is for Pinia to matter in the world. He wants our country to have a voice,” Shadow said as he pulled Jessica back into his arms. “He also wants you and me to join him for dinner tomorrow evening. I hope you’re okay with that.”

Jessica thought for a moment. “Okay... as long as he doesn’t have those darn wolves with him.” She laughed. He gently kissed her forehead. She looked deep into his eyes. “Stay with me tonight, Shadow,” she said as she took him by the hand.

The following morning, Shadow was up at dawn, claiming he had an extremely busy day. A couple of hours later, Jessica made her way into the village square. As she headed toward the area containing several mini soccer fields, she noticed something fascinating. Instead of the usual pairs of shoes being used as goalposts, there were now soccer nets spread across the field. “Hey Bobby, where did these nets come from?” she asked the groundskeeper, perplexed.

“A gentleman arrived here at the crack of dawn, and then a few minutes later a truck arrived with a crew of men and they began installing the nets. He said it was a gift,” Bobby replied.

“Did he tell you his name?” Jessica asked with a raised brow.

“No, he didn’t, but he sure looked familiar. He actually gave me this note to give to you, Miss Jessica,” Bobby replied as he handed Jessica an envelope.

She opened it and read the words. *My sweet Jessica, an electro will be by to pick you up at 7:00 – Love, Shadow.* With a broad smile etched upon her face, Jessica watched the children hollering with joy every time a ball entered one of the nets.

As content as Jessica felt in Pinia, and as much as her affection for Shadow continued to grow, her mother and father remained on

her mind. When she returned to her cabin after spending the day teaching the children how to use their new flash-pads, she decided to contact her father back at the Freedom Home.

“Jessica, my darling, it’s wonderful to hear your voice. Your mother sends her love. She’s traveling across Europe for the next few days with Secretary Gibson. They’ll be attending several conferences relating to environmental issues. Now, please tell me you’re ready to come home,” Westgale said eagerly.

“I’m sorry, Dad; that’s not happening. At least not until my mission is complete.” She went on to break the news of her newfound love. As she expected, her father was furious.

“A relationship with Cobra Pix’s son? Have you lost your mind?” he bellowed. “Open your eyes, Jessie. You’re being set up. How many times do I need to tell you? Pix is a deranged megalomaniac. His entire purpose in life is to bring America to its knees, and once he cuts off our supply of resources, he just may accomplish his goal.”

“That’s not going to happen,” Jessica responded.

“Of course it’s going to happen. It’s the major reason for his takeover. That son of a bitch has been aligning himself with the HKM for years. Together they will do whatever it takes to crush us, and since we’ve already done a damn good job at destroying ourselves, it won’t be very difficult,” Westgale shouted.

“Trust me, Dad. I understand why you feel this way, but Shadow has informed me his father is not going to breach the agreement your Administration made with the Pinian government. He’s going to be the man in charge of those very resources, and he actually hopes to establish a better deal for everyone involved, especially when it comes to fera-bean biofuel,” Jessica said calmly.

“Are you listening to yourself, Jessie? You’re blinded by love. These are the same men who used helcin to kill a group of government officials,” Westgale said, his tone growing angrier by the second. “They also planned a brutal surprise attack on a small neighboring country for the purpose of stealing their limited riches. How could you believe a single word from the mouths of such criminals?”

“You can’t believe everything the prior Pinian government has said. I’m not going to tell you Cobra Pix is somebody you should believe, but what I can tell you is that, from what I’ve come to know of Shadow, *he* is very caring and honorable. I don’t expect you to accept how I feel toward him, but I hope you will at least trust my judgment.”

Westgale slowly exhaled. “You be very careful, Jessie. And when you’re ready to come home, let me know.”

Jessica was nervous about the evening ahead. As much as she trusted Shadow, she remained concerned about his father’s intentions. During her conversations with Shadow she couldn’t recall him saying anything negative about his father, but she also never received the impression he admired him, either. It was as if this was the life he was born into, and he was just going to accept whatever came along with it.

Jessica’s anxiousness grew the closer 7:00 came. *How am I supposed to dress? Should I wear makeup? Will I be able to sit in the same room as Cobra Pix and not be afraid for my life?* All these questions raced through her mind. As she slowly placed the dragonstone necklace around her neck, she thought of Shadow.

At 7:00 sharp, she saw the lights from an electro shining through her cabin window. She grabbed her coat and was greeted at the door by the driver, who was dressed in his Iron Lotus uniform. “Hello, Miss Westgale. It’s a pleasure to meet you. Shadow and his father are waiting for us at the compound,” he said with a smile—a smile that seemed forced. He led her to the vehicle and opened the back door. Jessica nervously entered.

Seconds after they drove off, the clouds opened up and rain began to pound the roof of the electro. “We don’t have many autumn rainstorms here, but when they do occur, they can be quite powerful,” the driver said as the torrential rainfall intensified.

“Are you sure we should continue on in this storm?” Jessica asked fearfully.

“You need not worry, Miss Westgale. This vehicle is equipped to handle the worst weather imaginable. Now, just to be extra safe,

I'll take an alternate route, through the back roads," the driver replied calmly.

"Won't that be worse?" Jessica asked. "What about the darkness?"

"Ah, we can fix that," he replied as he tapped a button on the electro's front panel. Suddenly a neon red glow surrounded the vehicle.

"Wow, that is quite a sight," Jessica exclaimed as she watched the rain through the glow.

"So, what's it like being the daughter of the president of the United States?"

"I don't know. I'm being honest when I tell you I really don't give it much thought."

"You must receive loads of attention everywhere you go. I imagine people always want to be your friend."

"I guess it depends how they feel about my father." Jessica chuckled. "America is a much-divided country."

"Are you close with your father?"

"I love my father dearly. He's an exceptional man. And yes, we are very close. Considering how busy he is performing his duties as president, I'm grateful we've been able to remain as close as we have."

"And is your father aware of your affection for Shadow?"

Jessica was beginning to feel uneasy. *Who is this guy and what's with all these questions?* "With all due respect, I hope you understand that's a personal matter," she answered calmly, trying not to show her anxiety.

"I apologize. What's wrong with me?" the driver exclaimed. "I just hope and pray Shadow can find happiness. He's had to endure loads of sadness with the death of his six brothers... such a tragedy," he murmured sadly. The electro continued through a long stretch of dirt roads. The raindrops had now become sporadic. The driver lessened the luminosity of the neon red glow. Jessica didn't respond and wondered where this was leading. "Whenever I think of Hadar, my heart begins to crumble," he sighed.

"Hadar?"

“Hadar was Shadow’s oldest brother. He was my best friend... a true warrior. I’ll never forget how he had my back during the Battle of Oria. He gave up his life for his friend and his country,” he said. His voice cracked. “That’s a real hero. Would you give up *your* life for *your* country, Miss Westgale?” he asked in a sarcastic tone.

By now, Jessica feared for her life. Her body quivered. She struggled to reply, searching for the words he’d want to hear. “I don’t know... I don’t know if I could be as brave as Hadar, or you,” she answered apprehensively.

“I guess it would have been more appropriate to ask you if you believe your country’s worth it,” he said sardonically. “After all, we’re talking about a land of wickedness and corruption. For the love of God, your people came so close to destroying their own country, all in the name of greed!”

As he continued his rant against America, Jessica secretly sent a flash-message to Shadow, informing him she was afraid for her life. She held the flash-pad for Shadow to listen in, while clutching her necklace with her other hand. “It’s a shame that the general and his cohorts weren’t successful when they tried to oust your father from power. Are you proud to be the daughter of a cold-blooded killer, Miss Westgale?” the driver asked in a husky voice. “Let me tell you about the Battle of Oria...”

Jessica received a return flash-message from Shadow: *Jessica, place your earpiece in your ear. I urgently need to speak to you.* She quickly complied.

“Listen carefully. That’s not the man who’s supposed to be driving you,” she heard Shadow say in her earpiece. Panic edged his voice. Jessica trembled. “His name is Jolio,” Shadow said. “A man named Alton was supposed to be the person picking you up. This is not good. Judging by your coordinates, it appears he’s heading toward Oria.”

Sensing Jessica was communicating with someone, Jolio sneaked a quick look through the rearview mirror.

Why’s he doing this? Jessica asked via a flash-message. She could hear a faint humming sound coming from the front of the electro.

“Revenge—revenge against your father for the Battle of Oria. I hate to alarm you, but I want to make sure you’re aware of who you are dealing with. The guy’s totally deranged. My father released him from the militia months ago,” Shadow said, his voice edged with fear.

“Don’t fear, Miss Westgale. Every ending brings a new beginning. The cosmos awaits our souls,” Jolio said euphorically. Suddenly the humming sound grew increasingly louder.

Shadow knew that deadly sound. “There’s a green emergency lever on the door. Pull it and jump out,” Shadow cried as the humming turned into a roar. “Now!” he shouted.

With a trembling hand, Jessica pulled the lever and jumped out the door, hitting the ground and rolling from the road into a pile of leaves. The car traveled another thirty yards or so, then—*KAPOW!*—it burst into flames. Jessica watched in terror, frozen in fear.

She heard Shadow crying out from her earpiece, now lying in the leaves a few feet away, “Jessica! Jessica! Please tell me you’re okay.”

She followed the sound of his voice and retrieved the earpiece and her flash-pad from under the leaves.

“Jessica! Jessica!” Shadow called out again.

“Shadow! The electro—it blew up! Oh my Lord,” Jessica sobbed. She crawled to a nearby tree and sat leaning against the trunk as once again sheets of rain began to fall.

“Whatever you do, keep your flash-pad on and turn its light up as bright as it can go. We have your coordinates, and we’re coming for you. Just try to remain calm,” Shadow said.

She sat frozen. Even the nearby howls from a pack of Pinian mountain wolves weren’t enough to shake her from her trancelike state.

“Is everything okay, Jessica?” Shadow asked.

She didn’t respond. She began praying as she held the dragonstone necklace in her hands. Her father’s words kept playing in her mind: “*you’re being set up... you’re being set up.*”

Breaking twigs and the loud rustling of leaves brought her out of her daze. She turned to her right, and there they were—three Pinian

mountain wolves, standing about ten yards away, their golden eyes staring directly at her. They made that awful hissing sound. She turned the bright light from her flash-pad directly at them. They backed up a few feet, but it also appeared to anger them, as the hissing turned into even more frightening growls. She held the necklace tighter and continued to pray. She was certain she was going to die.

Before coming to Pinia, Jessica had done her research on these animals and learned that, unlike most other wolves around the world, these beasts felt highly threatened by humans because for years they had been the most hunted animal in the country. She recalled one of the Pinian children, frail little Ulu, telling her of her encounter with a Pinian mountain wolf.

“There weren’t supposed to be any wolves in the area the camp guide brought us to, but me and one of the counselors, Miss Rita, were gathering fruit when we heard a howling, and then saw two wolves running at us. I was really scared.” Ulu cringed as she relived the encounter.

“Oh my Lord, Ulu. What did you do?” Jessica asked.

“We climbed a tree. The wolves can’t climb, Miss Jessica,” Ulu said.

“Did they run away after you climbed the tree?”

“No, they began growling at us, but then Miss Rita threw a couple of apples from the tree and they ran away.”

Even with the flash-pad’s bright light shining on them, the wolves began to move in slowly, as if calculating their every move. Ulu’s words came back to her: *wolves can’t climb, Miss Jessica*. Naturally athletic, Jessica knew she could easily climb the tree she was resting against. However, she would have to spring to her feet, then turn and start climbing. Would she be quick enough? Those ominous golden eyes and razor-sharp teeth seemed to become larger with the wolves’ every step. She sensed an attack was seconds away. She tensed, preparing to move—

Then sirens cut through the night air, and Jessica heard the double *whump-whump* of two robo-copters descending from directly above. She glanced up, then back at the wolves. They were gone, melted back into the night.

As soon as the robo-copters landed, Shadow darted straight toward Jessica, who stood shaking on legs that would barely support her. "It's okay... it's okay, I'm here with you," Shadow soothed, holding her tightly.

They returned to the village, and Jessica cleaned herself up, had something to eat, then sat with Shadow by the campfire. "Maybe my father was correct after all," she sighed. "After what happened this evening, I really need to think things over."

"I'm so sorry this happened," Shadow said as he kissed her on the forehead. "I'd completely understand if you wanted to go home, but I'm really hoping you stay, and see your mission through."

"And face the possibility of something like this happening again?" Jessica huffed.

"I'll give you my personal guarantee that you'll remain completely safe," Shadow answered with conviction. "I'll even have a couple of our soldiers watch over you day and night."

"What about Jolio?" Jessica replied. "He was once one of your soldiers, and he's the one who tried to kill me."

Shadow sighed. "You see, Jolio and my brother Hadar were friends from childhood. Actually, Hadar was closer to Jolio than he was to any of his brothers. After Hadar was killed, Jolio viewed America as pure evil." Shadow paused. "But now he's dead... which means you'll have nothing to worry about," he assured her. "I promise you, everything will be fine."

"But how in the world did he end up in that van instead of Alton?"

"Alton had been trying to help him overcome his problems. On the way to pick you up, he was giving Jolio a ride back from the hospital where he'd been receiving therapy. Jolio forced Alton out of his own vehicle, stole his flash-pad, and left him in the middle of nowhere." Shadow scowled at that.

Jessica slowly exhaled and gazed into her lap. “I need to ask you a question,” she murmured.

“Sure. Ask away,” Shadow replied.

“Is it possible your father was behind this?”

“I hate to be so blunt, but if my father wanted you dead, it would have happened the very first day you arrived in Pinia, and he would have done it himself. He knew who you were from day one. He sincerely admires you. He’s hoping we’ll try visiting him again tomorrow evening.” Shadow hesitated. “How about it? And this time *I’ll* be the one escorting you—oh, and I promise you, there’ll be no wolves around,” he added with a chuckle.

Jessica smiled. “Yeah, I think I’ve had enough of those things to last me a thousand lifetimes.” She thought for a moment. “All right... I’ll go with you.”

CHAPTER 20

Unlike the prior evening's stormy weather, this evening was perfectly clear. As Shadow's driver drove them to the compound, Jessica admired the glowing stars surrounding a blood-red harvest moon. "What an incredible sight," she exclaimed.

"Yeah, when I was a child I always wished I could go up there and fly from star to star, then land on the moon and just watch the world from above," Shadow said, looking out the window of the grand-electro in awe.

As they approached their destination, Jessica's attention shifted from the Pinian sky to the enormous Iron Lotus compound. "Whoa... I figured it would be quite elaborate, but this is beyond belief," she said as they passed by several buildings and open areas.

"My father likes to oversee all aspects of our operation, and this setup enables him to do that," Shadow responded. "We're coming up to his palace now," he added.

A red light illuminated the massive entrance, which was flanked by two dramatic waterfalls. An intricately carved marble dragon in the center of the circular drive towered over the vehicle as it pulled up behind it, in front of the tall double doors.

Shadow noticed Jessica's nervousness as they stepped out of the grand-electro. He took her by the hand. "Come on, Jessica. Dad's been really anticipating our arrival."

As hard as she tried to go with the flow, in her mind she still had doubts about dining with a man who had so devotedly vowed

revenge against her father and country. *Well, I'm here now*, she thought. *I guess I'll just have to make the best of this.*

They entered a grand foyer of gothic design, with pointed arches that seemed to go on forever. Jessica felt as if she'd been transported back to another time. Sortar Dragons in red and black were everywhere, from sculptures to murals.

"Those are my brothers... actually they're half-brothers, and that is my grandfather," Shadow said, directing her attention to a series of gold-framed photos on a side wall.

Jessica stopped to acknowledge the photo display. When she came to the photo of Shadow's eldest brother, Hadar, she was amazed by his resemblance to Shadow. Both had big brown eyes, a prominent jawline, and even a birthmark on the right cheek—they could have been twins. A tribute plaque underneath the photo read: *A true warrior, Hadar Pix fought and died for his country in the Battle of Oriá. Hadar's spirit is now at peace in the cosmos, amongst the eternal embers from the flames of the Sortar Dragon.*

"I'm sure he was an outstanding person," Jessica said, glancing back toward Shadow, who smiled and nodded.

"My father's waiting for us in the living room," Shadow said as he put out his hand to lead the way.

When they entered the cavernous room, it was dark. Within seconds of the door opening, the room lit up. Cobra was sitting on a red, gold-trimmed throne. Today he had glittering silver eyebrows. He was wearing a black designer suit, black shirt, and red tie, in honor of the Sortar Dragon; red and black were by far the palace's most prevalent colors.

"Welcome, Jessica. Please make yourself at home," he said with a cheerful smile as he directed her and Shadow to a sofa across from him. Once they were seated, he pressed a button on his throne and two servants appeared within seconds, carrying dishes of fruit, cheese, and crackers. "Delicious," Cobra exclaimed after biting into a peach. "Go ahead, don't be shy, Jessica," he added, waving his hand, encouraging Jessica to indulge.

Jessica looked at the plate with trepidation. *This could be poison, for all I know*, she thought. It felt like a noose was being pulled tighter and tighter around her neck every time Cobra said her name. She couldn't take it anymore, she decided. She loved Shadow, but she had to confront Cobra regarding the uneasiness she continued to feel in his presence. She set the plate of food aside.

"Is everything okay?" Cobra asked, silver eyebrows raised.

Shadow immediately looked over at Jessica and frowned.

"I'd be lying to you if I said it was," she replied.

"I understand," Cobra responded in a sympathetic tone. "The ordeal you went through last evening has to have left you feeling very afraid for your safety." He rose. "Jolio was an excellent soldier... an excellent soldier, indeed. My son Hadar personally took him under his wing and trained him well." Cobra began to pace, frowning in thought. "But you see, sometimes even the toughest and most well-trained soldiers can break. Hadar actually died in Jolio's arms; Jolio was never the same again. We tried to help him overcome his anguish, but it was to no avail. He'd become extremely deranged. One of my lieutenants, Alton, continued to try to help him after he was dismissed from my militia, but I guess it was a futile endeavor." He rubbed his hands over his face.

"And you—what about you?" Jessica asked. "You've vowed to seek revenge on America, and here I am, the daughter of the US president, sitting in your palace being catered to by servants. Please forgive me, sir, but I'm very confused. Just what is going on here?"

Cobra stopped pacing, grinned, and sat back down. "You know, over the years, I've often wished the men who served under me would have the courage to challenge me, just like you have," he said as he began to file his nails. "Of course, the fact I've been referred to as a vicious and vindictive tyrant who's more than willing to kill his own people is probably why they never do," he added sardonically. "But you, Jessica—well, you've earned my full respect. The fact you remained in Pinia after I had you blindfolded and brought into the woods tells me how

determined and committed you are to your beliefs.” He raised his head and looked into Jessica’s eyes. “Honesty is the most important virtue of all.”

“Can I trust you’re being completely honest with *me*?” Jessica retorted. She saw Shadow looking anxiously back and forth between her and his father.

“Like I just finished saying, there is nothing more important than honesty. So, yes, you can count on my honesty,” Cobra replied.

“Do you still blame America for the deaths of your six sons? And is it still your wish to see the country be ‘brought to ash,’ as you’ve so often been quoted as saying?” Jessica asked.

Cobra rose again, appearing deep in thought. He walked over to a large wooden chest and slowly opened the top drawer. “My son Dorval made this for me when he was a child,” he said as he took out a wood carving of a Sortar Dragon. He placed it on the table in front of Jessica and Shadow.

“It’s stunning; very beautiful,” Jessica remarked as she studied the carving.

Cobra slowly exhaled. “I used to keep it on my desk, and every day I would look at it and think of my dead sons,” he said, eyes glittering with tears. He paused. “And yes, the thought of revenge against America and your father had become my reason for waking up in the morning. It became my lifeblood.”

“And now?” Jessica asked.

“My focus is on leading Pinia,” Cobra replied. “It’s vital that this country be given the chance to prosper without interference from the outside world... including America,” he added. He pointed toward the carving. “When you leave here this evening, I would love for you to take the carving with you as a gift.”

“I surely can’t take this from you; it’s a reminder of your son,” Jessica responded.

“My sons are always with me. They reside right here.” He placed his right hand over his heart.

“Okay, I’ll take it with me under two conditions,” Jessica answered with a sheepish grin.

“And what might those be?” Cobra asked.

“First of all, you allow me to donate it to the children’s recreation center, and second, you and Shadow tell me all there is to know about Pinia and the Sortar Dragon,” Jessica replied with a smile.

“You have a deal,” Cobra replied, laughing.

Shadow walked over to his father and embraced him. “Thank you, Father,” he said with a wide smile.

“Now, my chefs have prepared one of their delicious vegetable stews. So, shall we?” Cobra said, and led the way to the dining room.

By the time dinner was served, Jessica was feeling more relaxed. Cobra had won her over. During dinner, Shadow and Cobra spoke of their country with deep reverence. “Pinia’s a magical land, Jessica,” Shadow said as he dug into his bowl of stew.

“And we owe it all to the Sortar Dragon,” Cobra added. “Those stones around your neck, the beautiful Pinian pine trees, and our highly coveted fera-beans—they’re all gifts from Sortar Dragon-fire,” he said. Jessica found it intriguing that the people of Pinia believed so strongly in this legend, to the point where it had become like a religion.

When dinner concluded, they returned to the living room. Cobra made his way to a vast collection of phonograph records. “My father has such great appreciation for all forms of art,” Shadow whispered to Jessica. “He refers to art as the ‘universal healer.’ He’s particularly fond of classical music.”

“Ah, I think this one should do the job,” Cobra said as he held up a record. “This is called *Starlight Serenade*. It’s by my favorite Pinian composer, Minaldi.” He placed the record on an antique phonograph and seconds later the first notes drifted into the air. He closed his eyes, put his head back, and began swaying it from side to side, completely absorbed. A moment later, he sauntered over to Jessica with an outstretched hand. “May I have a dance before dessert is served?” he asked her politely.

Jessica felt her face warm. Smiling, she looked over at Shadow. He nodded and smiled, and she took Cobra’s hand.

* * *

“As expected, Heath Claremont accepted our proposal,” Dave Perry informed the president. “The AMO’s going full throttle in determining the most cost-effective ways to get the VX drug out across the country.”

“That’s good news,” Westgale said. “And what about Cobra Pix’s proposal?” he asked.

“According to our finance and economics people, it’s an extraordinary deal, far better than what the prior Pinian government was proposing. Even the Strategic Council gave it overwhelming approval. All it requires is your acceptance,” Perry replied. “With this deal we’ll be able to pay off the Outer Commission’s debt prior to the deadline,” he added happily.

“And if we don’t accept the deal?” Westgale asked.

“Our only recourse would then be to work out international deals for the drug, and even that wouldn’t guarantee anything.” Perry frowned. “I can understand your concerns in dealing with Pix, Mr. President, but this proposal is too solid to pass up. Besides, more evidence is coming out every day, proving the prior Pinian government that we thought was so democratic and caring was completely corrupt.”

“Yeah, but supporting Pix and his militia would be going against everything this Administration has stood for,” Westgale replied solemnly. “Cobra Pix used brute force to take that country over. The people of Pinia didn’t have a say. If we make this deal, David, we’d be supporting a dictator. We’d be compromising our values and beliefs, the concept of democracy.”

“And sadly, if we don’t make the deal, the people of *America* may no longer have a country to call their own,” Perry sighed.

Westgale slowly exhaled. “Before I make any decisions, I want to meet with whoever Pix has put in place to negotiate,” he demanded.

“That’d be his son Shadow,” Perry explained. “I’ll have my staff set something up.”

“Very well, but it’s important the meeting takes place in a secret location,” Westgale said firmly.

* * *

For years, like everyone else around the country, I found it interesting to watch Cryptic interview all the so-called “important people.” The robot, although loathed by most people in its early years, had actually become a trusted American figure. The day after Westgale announced that I’d become the exclusive rights owner of the mineral, a member of the UCIT staff contacted me and asked if I’d be interested in being interviewed by Cryptic. I gladly accepted.

The interview took place in front of the VLP headquarters. When the UCIT crew released Cryptic from their van, its eyes were gold and its chest displayed a neon image of Moon Shade Bluff.

After a casual greeting, the robot asked its first question. “How difficult has it been for you, discovering your father was murdered?”

“It’s been very traumatic,” I replied. “The thought of such a good man being murdered in such a gutless, cowardly manner is very upsetting.”

“What are your feelings on the VX drug?”

“It’s an incredible thing. At least something positive came out of this ugliness.”

“And the concerns regarding this leading to unsustainable overpopulation?”

“I’ll leave that one to the experts.”

“How will becoming a billionaire change you?”

“I am who I am, and I believe what I believe, and no amount of money will ever change that,” I replied.

“Does that mean you’ll continue on as Director of VLP?”

“Of course.”

“And your wife? Does she plan to continue on as the town’s DA?”

“If she is reelected, then by all means, she will.”

“During the Anya Ahar hearing, you spoke lovingly about your

son, Riley. I'd be remiss to not ask you how the young fellow is doing."

"He's doing terrific. Thank you for asking."

* * *

"Hey, Mr. Shelby. It's nice to see you again," Kayla said as she and Riley arrived at Hollis Farms.

"Wonderful seeing you again too, Kayla—and there's my man." Shelby bent down to be on the boy's level. "How's it going, Riley?"

"I'm nine years old now," Riley announced.

"Nine years old!" Shelby repeated with a smile. "I bet you received some real nice presents for your birthday."

"I got a really neat aquarium. I even have a fish who looks just like Gordon," Riley said as he took out his flash-pad and showed Shelby a photo of his new angelfish.

"Wow, he does look like Gordon," Shelby replied.

"And there are lots of other fish, too." This time Riley showed him a photo of the entire aquarium.

"Whoa... it's like your own little ocean. Look at those scuba divers. They must really enjoy being surrounded by all those amazing fish," Shelby said.

"Tell Mr. Shelby what else you received for your birthday," Kayla said, smiling.

"Kayla got me this amazing soccer ball. It's an official Washington Androids game ball."

"I bet you're a really good little soccer player," Shelby said, tousling Riley's hair.

"I'm going to play for the Androids one day. They're my favorite team."

"The Androids? That's my favorite team, too. I used to really enjoy taking my son to see them play."

"What about the special gift Grandma gave you?" Kayla said.

"She gave me this really fun game called Laser Flash Frenzy," Riley answered.

"And what else did your grandma give you?" Kayla said softly.

“Oh yeah, the American flag that was given to my Grandpa Dennis when he saved two boys at Moon Shade Bluff.”

“That’s a wonderful gift. I’m sure your grandpa would be thrilled to know you’ll be taking care of his flag,” Shelby said sincerely. “Now, I have a feeling Kayla brought you here to buy you one of those white chocolate toffee apples,” he said, winking at Kayla.

“How did you know?” Riley replied.

Shelby chuckled. “Just a lucky guess. Since I missed your birthday, I’d like to buy one right now for both you and Kayla, if that’s okay.”

“All right!” Riley shouted.

“What do you say, Riley?” Kayla interjected.

“Thank you, Mr. Shelby,” Riley said as he ran to the counter.

CHAPTER 21

Prior to their meeting, Westgale looked into Shadow Pix's past. Although information was scarce, he was able to learn that Shadow was the so-called "brains" behind the Iron Lotus. Unlike his six deceased brothers, his military experience was very limited. Westgale also learned Shadow was highly educated and fluent in several languages. What caught him by surprise was the contempt Shadow felt toward his grandfather. In his only documented American interview, Shadow commented that his grandfather's "barbaric tyrannical approach to governance set Pinia back centuries."

The clandestine meeting took place just before dawn at New York City's Gladiator Arena. For the last twenty years, the arena had been home to most of the country's premiere bare-knuckle championship fights. Many men and women had entered the pugilist diamond and not come out alive. In the years following the War Within, bare-knuckle fighting had begun to challenge soccer as the country's most popular sport.

Once in New York, Westgale boarded an unmarked robo-copter along with Agent Gallio. A second copter with Gil and Shadow Pix followed. The copters landed in a large field behind the arena. The group entered the arena, where Gallio set two chairs in the middle of the diamond.

Normally, the Gladiator Arena was a raucous place, as the fighters gave everything they had, both physically and mentally—while fans frantically screamed for their chosen fighter to destroy

the other. Every move they made was highly calculated and more times than not, the mental battle became more important than the physical. It seemed that this might be true for this contest as well, as Westgale and Shadow sat face to face, and tension built to a level that had not been seen in this particular den of madness.

“So, you’re the young man who has captured my daughter’s heart,” Westgale began, intently studying Shadow.

“Yes. I care deeply for Jessica. She’s a very special person and I love her with all my heart,” Shadow replied sincerely.

“Even though her father happens to be the man responsible for the deaths of your six brothers?”

“My brothers were soldiers, sir. They were killed fighting for a cause they strongly believed in.”

“Ah yes, the invasion of Oria. Tell me, Shadow: was that a cause you yourself believed in?”

Shadow thought before answering. “No... I’ve never believed my father should’ve invaded Oria. That all began with my very nonsensical grandfather.”

“Is your father aware of how you feel?”

“Of course. I am not my father’s puppet. We share a very close bond, but I am very much my own person.”

“And what about that deadly helcin attack on the government officials? Was that something you opposed as well?”

“My father did not order that mission. Members from one of our secondary military units decided to commit that heinous act of their own accord, and once my father found out who they were, he had them executed. The Pinian government knew the truth, but they covered it up, as always. They fed off many forms of propaganda. This is how they kept the people of Pinia trusting them.”

“And what is the future of Pinia with the Iron Lotus in charge?”

“Our country is very wealthy in terms of resources, but we’ve been very lacking when it comes to our overall development. It’s our goal to do a far better job of educating and providing for our people. We want to make them feel proud.”

“That sounds very noble, but what about the close ties your militia has with the HKM?”

“We will do whatever is in the best interest of Pinia, and that includes the proposal we’ve made to your government.”

“Yes, that is a very generous proposal. Far more generous than our recent dealings with Pinia.”

“As leaders of our country’s new regime, my father and I felt it was important to reward and retain America as a valued international business partner. I’m confident this deal, if you accept it, will provide a high degree of mutual satisfaction.”

Westgale nodded his approval, and unlike other meetings inside the pugilist diamond, this one ended in a draw. He stood and extended his hand to Shadow, who also rose and accepted it. “You have a deal,” Westgale said with a smile. “I’d like to seal it by inviting you to dinner at the Freedom Home this evening.”

“That would be a true honor and a privilege, sir,” Shadow replied.

Escorted by Gil and Agent Gallio, Westgale and Shadow left the building and crossed the field to the copters hovering above.

“It’s amazing how much Jessica has come to enjoy traveling over the last few years,” Westgale said with a chuckle, “considering how much she used to—”

“Get down, Mr. President!” one of the agents above them yelled.

A man stepped out from behind a large hay bale.

“Alton, no!” Shadow shouted, and quickly leapt to shield Westgale. Laser blasts rang out. Shadow and Westgale fell to the ground as the agent in the copter fired at the shooter. The shooter fell to the ground, dead. As agents ran to the man, Gil and Agent Gallio sprinted toward Westgale and Shadow.

“Oh my Lord, he’s been hit!” Westgale exclaimed as he rose to his feet.

“He’s still alive,” Gil said as he checked Shadow’s pulse.

Shadow stirred. “Who’s Alton?” Westgale asked.

“He said... he wanted to... watch my back,” Shadow gasped, and slipped into unconsciousness.

“Are you okay, Mr. President?” Agent Gallio asked.

"I'm fine. I wasn't hit. Thanks to *him*," Westgale replied, pointing to Shadow.

"He's alive, but we need to get him to the nearest hospital immediately," Gallio said.

"He's stabilized for now, but I've ordered tests," the attending doctor informed Westgale and Gil in private.

Westgale called for Dr. Ahar to be brought to New York, then contemplated his flash-pad. He was dreading calling his daughter with the awful news.

"Oh no!" Jessica cried as Westgale explained that Shadow was fighting for his life. "I didn't even know he was meeting with you. He told me he had to go away on business... Oh my God!"

"I was the one who requested complete secrecy for this meeting," Westgale replied.

"What happened? Who tried to kill him?" Jessica asked, sounding disoriented.

"They weren't trying to kill *him*," Westgale sighed. "It was *me* they were trying to kill."

"Was this one of those punk extremists?"

"No. After Shadow was shot we discovered a sensor-chip on his belt. It appears he wanted somebody to know where he was at all times. But it appears that same somebody wanted me dead," Westgale replied.

"Do you know who the person is?" Jessica asked.

"The man's name was Alton," Westgale said.

There was a moment's silence as she digested that. "Oh, wow. He's probably Shadow's most trusted soldier."

"Well he *was*."

"You mean Alton's dead?"

"Yes."

"I don't understand. If Alton was attempting to kill you, then how come Shadow's the one fighting for his life?"

"Shadow saved my life, honey. He made himself into a human shield."

Jessica sobbed, then said, “I need to see him.”

“Just hold tight, Jessie. I’ve already made arrangements.”

“What about his father? He needs to know.”

“My people are preparing to contact his office with all the details.”

“Please, Dad, before I come there, let me personally tell Cobra what happened. He’s here visiting the village as we speak.”

Shortly after the call with her father ended, Jessica was able to track down a member of Cobra’s security staff and explain how urgently she needed to speak with him. She waited anxiously at the patio café, by turns anguished and confused. She mentally rehearsed how she would divulge the news. This wouldn’t be easy.

When Cobra arrived, he saw her red eyes and frowned. “Jessica, is there something troubling you?” He sat across from her.

As she explained what had happened, tears streamed down her face. Cobra was stunned. “I had no idea Shadow was in the US meeting with your father,” he said, handing Jessica a tissue.

“It was regarding your proposal for the natural resources. Dad had accepted the offer just prior to Alton attempting to kill him.”

“And your father is certain it was Alton?”

“Yes. Alton was killed by my father’s security.”

Cobra shook his head. “When I learned Alton was still spending time with Jolio I was concerned, but Shadow insisted he remain a trusted lieutenant.”

“Obviously he trusted him enough to tell him about the meeting with my father,” Jessica said, dabbing at her tears. “I can arrange for you to visit Shadow in the hospital, if you so wish.”

In frustration, Cobra ran his hands over his scalp. “As much as I wish to be by my son’s side, I cannot leave, Jessica. Go—be with him. Give him my love.”

* * *

“Is he going to make it, Jack?” Westgale asked Dr. Ahar as they sat in the hospital’s private boardroom.

“It’s too early to know,” Ahar answered with a sigh. “The next thirty-six hours will tell.”

“That young man saved my life, and in the process might very well lose his own,” Westgale said solemnly.

“Let’s stay positive, William. Fortunately, Shadow Pix is a healthy, strong young man,” Ahar replied. “Right now, this rests in the hands of God. All we can do is hope and pray.”

Westgale wanted to remain at the hospital so he decided to hold a press conference there revealing the most recent course of events. He began by speaking about the Pinian deal and the positive impact it would have on the country. “This deal will enable the United States to attain levels of efficiency in terms of our energy and resources that once we could only dream of. It will also allow us to regain our complete independence—that’s right, our complete independence! When the Outer Commission set that deadline ten years ago, it seemed impossible that we’d be able to meet it. Well, in the near future, the only law we will be answering to is the American Constitution. Like the dinosaur, the Outer Commission and the New Order Treaty will be something we read about in history books. And I don’t know about you, but those are chapters I might skip.”

Westgale moved to the next segment of his speech. “If not for Shadow Pix, I would not be standing here in front of you right now. As I address you, Mr. Pix is fighting for his life. I have brought in America’s Chief of Medicine and Science, Dr. Jack Ahar, to care for Mr. Pix, and I will continue to do everything in my power to ensure he receives the best possible care.”

The reaction from Gerald Levin was immediate as he angrily spoke into the UCIT camera. “Tonight we’ve learned President Westgale has made a deal with a militia whose leader’s greatest wish in life has been to see America burn to ash. Of course Westgale has the nerve to stand there and brag about meeting the Outer Commission’s deadline. Well, let me tell you, if he’d been doing what he was supposed to be doing for the last several years, he wouldn’t have had to sink so low!” Levin exclaimed.

“This is a man who wasted billions of taxpayer dollars on the useless World Harmony Program, along with several other hopeless programs in the areas of environmental science and agriculture. The only reason Westgale needed to go running to Pinia for its natural resources is because he was desperate, and desperate leaders do stupid things. He could have worked out a sufficient deal for resources with our Canadian neighbors, back when he had the opportunity, but he chose to embrace an enemy instead of a friend.” He paused and slowly shook his head in disgust.

“What I find most disturbing is this: not only is the president being hypocritical and irresponsible in dealing with the Iron Lotus, he has not been fully transparent. My sources tell me Westgale’s daughter, Jessica, became romantically involved with Shadow Pix while performing humanitarian work in Pinia. Now, we all know as Americans, our greatness is constantly being threatened by outside sources. What I’ve come to realize is that our biggest threat comes from right here in America. It’s called the Peace-Bringers Association!”

“Don’t listen to a word that idiot says, Dad,” said a teary-eyed Jessica as she met up with her father in the hospital boardroom. “Have you been here all this time?”

“Yes,” Westgale replied. “And when did you arrive?” he asked.

“Just soon enough to hear that insensitive imbecile spew out all his insecurities,” Jessica replied. “Is there any news on Shadow?”

“Dr. Ahar’s paying close attention to him, but his condition hasn’t changed,” Westgale replied.

“Do you think the doctor will let me see him?”

“I know they’re still running tests, but I’m sure in time you’ll be allowed to see him.”

“I need to tell him how much I love him.”

“I’m certain he’s well aware of that, honey. And I’m also certain of the love he feels for you.”

“Aw, come on, Dad, you don’t know that.”

“Oh, I saw it in his eyes when he told me so. He’s a fine young man, Jessie. I’m so sorry for doubting your judgment.”

“Believe me, Dad, I didn’t go over to Pinia looking to fall in love. But Shadow... I see something in him that’s just so genuine.”

“And Cobra? What is your take on him?”

“He strikes me as a very complex person.”

“How so?”

“I think he’s torn between his father’s quest for power and Shadow’s more compassionate side.”

Westgale smiled fondly. “That’s what I admire about you, Jessica.”

“I don’t understand.”

“The man had you blindfolded and brought into the woods, then frightened you with wolves, and you don’t seem at all angry about it.”

“Oh, believe me, I was,” she exclaimed. “But he did what he did because he thought our government was using me to infiltrate his administration and his militia. From that day on, he’s actually been very gracious to me.” Jessica moved to a window to stand silent, looking at the lawns below.

“Is something wrong, Jessica?” Westgale asked.

“Come here—look,” she said nervously.

Westgale moved to the window and looked outside. Hundreds of torches lit the perimeter of the hospital, held by a human chain. As they had done on prior occasions, they stood silently.

“This is becoming ridiculous,” he said in frustration, lifting his flash-pad to contact Attorney General Sutton.

“I wish I had a solution, Mr. President, but unless they’re causing some kind of disturbance there isn’t much we can do,” the attorney general said after Westgale reported the silent protesters.

“Disturbance? My Lord! They’ve admitted to setting two buildings on fire.”

“Unless we can get our hands on this Blackheart character, or determine who the punks were that started those fires, we’re really up against it. Even though it appears this is one gigantic gang, we still don’t know how together they actually are.”

Westgale heard pandemonium down the hall. “I’ll get back to you, Champ,” he said quickly. “Something’s going on here.”

Security led him down the hall into one of the hospital's cafeterias, where several people milled around the large flash-screen on the wall. Two burning buildings were being shown on the screen.

"They said we're looking at the MAA headquarters and the PBA's Central Immigration Center. Apparently, some extremist punks have launched fire-zaps from their robo-cycles at both locations," said a nurse.

Westgale and the others stared in horror as the two fires raged like savage beasts, destroying everything in their path. Thankfully, as was the case with the two corporate buildings, there was no one inside.

Outside the hospital, once again the group performed what was becoming their well-known ritual: thrusting their torches into the air, they called out, "Free Anya! Free America!" before peacefully turning away.

As expected, while the fires raged, a view-file was discreetly sent to UCIT, in which, once again, AXE claimed responsibility: "Blackheart here. Welcome to the new age. As you sit back and watch two more pigpens turn to charcoal courtesy of AXE, please find joy in the fact that our movement will emerge as your redeemer. We will bring an end to all injustice, as we bring this country together as one. Free Anya! Free America!"

"Enough is enough," Gil said to Colonel Peters during an emergency meeting directly following the most recent events. "We have to figure out who's behind this craziness. Has your grandson and his team come up with anything that can help us?" he asked.

Peters sighed. "The organizers of the mass gatherings have been thoroughly questioned, and they claim to have nothing to do with the fires, or know anything about this Blackheart character."

"Do you believe this to be true?"

"Well, if they *were* behind those crimes, they surely wouldn't admit it. This movement seems to be emerging more as a lifestyle, like one large, generic form of rebellion. I'm certain throngs of these individuals are loosely connected to each other, but for the most part we're talking about a widespread group of *individuals*."

Gil shook his head in frustration. “You said their goal is to repair America by starting a revolution. My question is, will we be able to stop them?”

Peters sighed heavily again. “If we don’t want to end up where we ended up twenty-five years ago, we’d better.”

Jessica had now been sitting by Shadow’s bedside for hours. Fatigue was overwhelming her and she struggled to stay awake. Sometimes she would drift off, gently resting her head on his chest. The entire time she held the dragon-stone necklace tightly in her hands. Seeing the man she loved just lying there, lifeless, tore at her heart.

She thought about the promise she’d made to him regarding his mother.

“Now that I know so much about your dad, what about your mother?” Jessica asked as they sat arm in arm by a warming campfire.

“She’s a very kind and caring person. She used to play piano to get me to sleep,” Shadow replied with a nostalgic smile. “She was an incredible pianist. That’s actually how Dad met her.”

“Oh?”

“Dad funded a theater in central Pinia where she was performing in one of the plays. He was really taken by her kindness, and not long after, they married. I’m their only child. It was Dad’s second marriage.” Shadow chuckled.

“And how did good ol’ Cobra mess that one up?” Jessica asked with an impish grin.

“According to my father, Mom tried to persuade Dad to get away from my grandfather, who was running Pinia like a possessed tyrant. She wanted no part of that world, and when Dad became chief commander of his military, well, Mom couldn’t take anymore,” Shadow explained.

“Is that when she left for the US?”

“Actually, it was about a year later. She decided to get away from Pinia and get a fresh start somewhere in America. I haven’t heard from her since.”

“So, you haven’t spoken or seen your mother since you were a young boy?”

“No. And unfortunately, because of who I am, traveling to your country has been next to impossible for me. Anyway, I don’t even know if she wants to see me.”

“Do you know her whereabouts?”

“I don’t even know if she’s still alive,” he sighed. “All I know is that I’d give anything to be able to reach out to her and see her again.”

“Well now, being the president’s daughter, I think I can help you with this one. In fact, I know I can help you,” Jessica said as she pulled Shadow closer to her.

“That’s one promise I’ll gladly hold you to,” he replied.

The hospital room door opened, bringing Jessica back to the moment. “Dr. Ahar,” she said as she gave her head a shake. “Do you have an update for me?”

“I’m still waiting on some very important test results to come back,” Ahar replied. “Look. Why don’t you go and get some rest? I’ll contact you immediately if there’s any change.”

“Please, Doctor, I want you to be honest with me. Is he going to come out of this alive?” Jessica asked as tears filled her eyes.

“Honestly, I just don’t know, Jessica,” Ahar answered softly.

Jessica nodded glumly and left. She hadn’t had anything to eat all day long, so she headed to the cafeteria. Setting her tray down at an empty table, she took a few bites out of her grilled veggie sandwich, then her mind began to drift. She couldn’t stop thinking about the promise she’d made to Shadow.

As she sat at the table, deep in thought, aimlessly stirring her iced tea with a straw, her flash-pad buzzed. When she noticed it was Dr. Ahar calling, her heart jumped as fear instantly gripped her. She released the straw, reached for the flash-pad with her right hand, and clutched the dragon-stone necklace with her left. “Yes, Doctor,” she said, barely able to say the words.

“I have an update for you, Jessica,” Ahar replied.

“Is Shadow going to survive this?”

“Yes. He awoke a few minutes ago. He seems to be improving by the second, and his vitals are exactly where I want them to be. I expect a full recovery.”

“Can I see him?”

“Not at this time. He’s fallen back asleep and it’s important he gets his rest. By this evening it’ll be fine.”

“I knew I should have stayed,” she moaned. “I could’ve been there for him when he woke.”

“I wouldn’t fret, Jessica. Somehow, he knew you’d been by his side all this time.”

“Did he tell you that?”

“He actually told me to tell you to make sure you get something to eat.” Ahar ended the conversation with a chuckle.

Jessica decided that now was the time to try finding Shadow’s mother. She spent the next couple of hours searching on the World Connect, and received a lucky break when she came across an article about the history of the piano. The writer had interviewed several piano teachers across the country, and one of those happened to be a lady named Luanda Rollins, Shadow’s mother. From the article, Jessica learned that Luanda was teaching piano at a music studio in the heart of Manhattan. She contacted her driver and told him she’d like to go to the studio.

When she arrived, she was greeted by a young lady with waist-length, sandy brown hair. She was overflowing with energy. “How can I help you on this gorgeous afternoon?” she asked sweetly.

“I’m looking for a lady named Luanda Rollins,” Jessica replied.

The young lady led Jessica across a large room filled with an assortment of musical instruments, then stopped and pointed. “You can find Luanda down the hall in room 1W. Just follow the sound of her exquisite playing,” she said, beaming.

Jessica walked down the hall, listening to the clear and melodic notes of a tune she recognized: *Starlight Serenade*, the same song she’d danced to with Cobra. She waited for the playing to stop, then knocked on the door.

“Please come in,” a voice responded.

A grand piano dominated the room. A stunningly beautiful woman in a white dress with a silk burgundy scarf around her neck looked up. “Yes? What can I do for you?” She wasn’t wearing a speck of makeup, yet she looked half the age of her contemporaries.

“Hi, I’m Jessica. I could hear you from out in the hallway. I really enjoyed your playing.”

“Thank you very much. That piece of music is very special to me,” Luanda replied.

“How so?” Jessica asked.

“I used to always play it for my little boy back home,” she answered. Jessica noted her slight Pinian accent. “So, Jessica, how can I help you?” Luanda asked, studying Jessica for a moment. “Have I seen you before?”

“I’m Jessica Westgale, the president’s daughter,” Jessica replied.

“Hmm... I thought you looked familiar,” Luanda said. “And I think I know why you’re here,” she added, turning and directing Jessica to a chair across from her.

“I’m a friend of your son, Shadow.”

“Yes, I’m aware of your relationship with my son...” She hesitated. “Is Shadow going to live?” she asked. “I’ve been following the news on the World Connect, but...”

“Your son is expected to make a full recovery,” Jessica replied with a smile.

Luanda let out a sigh of relief. “What made you come and see me?” she asked.

“I made a promise to your son that I would help find you.”

“That was not a wise idea, Miss Westgale.”

“Why not?” Jessica replied, surprised. “It would mean so much for your son to see you again.”

“I appreciate you coming here, and I’m so grateful to learn Shadow is going to be okay, but I must ask you to leave and not tell Shadow my whereabouts,” Luanda said sadly.

“Why, ma’am? Why don’t you want to have contact with your son?” Jessica asked calmly. “He’s devastated by the fact you haven’t reached out to him.”

Luanda began lightly playing the piano, as if to avoid Jessica.

“Please, ma’am, talk to me,” Jessica pleaded.

Suddenly, Luanda stopped playing the piano and sat frozen. The silence was powerful. “It’s all because of that rotten bastard,” she murmured, shaking her head.

“Who are you referring to?” Jessica asked softly.

“My ex-husband, Cobra Pix,” she replied forcefully. “He’s the one who drove me away from Pinia, and he’s also the one who drove me away from my son.”

“Are you saying he threatened you, forced you to leave your country and abandon your son?”

“Of course. He’s a wicked, despicable man who only cares about himself and his endless need for power,” Luanda said angrily.

“How did he threaten you?”

“When I separated from him he called me a disgrace, and told me if I didn’t leave Pinia he would ruin my entire family, and perhaps even have them killed. He also warned me that if I ever even spoke to Shadow, he would also have him exiled from Pinia,” she replied. There was a catch in her voice.

“And am I correct to assume Shadow doesn’t know about this?”

“Yes. And I don’t want him to know. I ask you to please leave this alone. It’s my understanding Shadow and his father have grown very close over the years... Maybe Cobra’s a changed man.”

“All I ask of you is to please come to the hospital with me and see your son, just this one time,” Jessica pleaded. “I promise I won’t divulge anything you’ve told me.”

“Please be on your way, Miss Westgale,” Luanda said, pointing to the door. “And take good care of my son.”

Jessica walked toward the door and turned before exiting. “If you should have a change of mind, he’s at NYC General,” she said. Then she left the room, leaving the door open.

As she walked down the hallway, she heard the opening bars of *Starlight Serenade*, and then it stopped. Jessica walked back toward room 1W and saw Luanda leaning on top of the piano with her head in her hands, weeping.

When Jessica returned to the hospital, security immediately informed her that her mother and father were waiting for her in the boardroom.

“I guess sometimes prayers do get answered,” Westgale said, hugging his daughter.

“Jessica, honey, can I get you anything?” her mother asked.

“Just the fact you’re both here means the world to me,” Jessica replied. “Are we allowed to see him yet?”

“According to what Dr. Ahar told us, we should be good within the next hour or so.”

CHAPTER 22

“I call this council to order,” said the Strategic Council secretary. “Today we are here to vote on Request Docket SC-9J7, with the purpose of determining whether the Judicial Triangle will hear arguments for the grant of a permanent stay of execution for Anya Maria Ahar.”

Nicole Kratz wished she’d been permitted to stand up and make a passionate plea, but she was well aware this was not part of Strategic Council protocol. In these cases, members of the council were presented with documentation pertaining to the request one week in advance, then required to vote on the day of the meeting. As she nervously scanned the members of the council, Nicole feared the worst, especially considering the fact that Anya Ahar was now being viewed as more than just an angry and confused young lady; she was regarded as some kind of demented, iconic rebel.

Dave Perry, who in the past had adamantly opposed anything to do with Anya, sat beside Nicole, showing his support. “It’s those charitable donations she made that got me on board with this,” he said quietly. “It really shows a sense of contrition on her behalf. There’s no reason why we shouldn’t get the majority vote and get this brought before the Triangle,” he added.

“Please commence voting,” the secretary called out. The room went silent.

“Come on, show us those blue lights,” Nicole murmured. As each member took their turn, Nicole let out a sigh of relief with each blue

light. But even though the first seven members turned on their lights, she needed twenty more.

On the thirty-seventh vote, the twenty-seventh blue light flashed. The request was granted. In the end it was forty in favor and thirteen against.

"I knew it, Nicole," Perry said, smiling. He saw her face and gave her arm a nudge. "Come on, I thought you'd be thrilled."

"It's a good start, but success in the Triangle is all that really matters."

When Westgale received news of the vote, he was immediately fearful of Gerald Levin's response. He was right to be. Westgale and Lady of Honor April turned on the flash-screen in the hospital boardroom and watched with concern.

Levin came out with all guns blazing. When he arrived at the podium, he appeared ready to explode. "This is complete insanity!" Levin bellowed. "This country is being attacked by throngs of young brainwashed anarchists and our government is sympathizing with the person who helped to design this movement." His face had flushed red. "Does Westgale think these out of control punks are going to conform to the laws of society because an attempt is being made to spare the life of their leader? Or did he initiate this action simply to pander to the PBA's new bleeding-heart extremist supporter, Nicole Kratz, or the recently appointed Chief of Medicine, none other than Anya Ahar's father, Jack?"

"Consider the fact that we now have it on record that Westgale received massive financial support from a drug dealer—Lawson Pierce—and made a ludicrous deal with Cobra Pix, a man who has vowed to destroy America, and now he has voted to spare the life of a diabolical anarchist! Whose side is he on?"

As Levin concluded his speech, April turned to her husband. "How do you plan to counter this awful attack?" she asked.

"By doing nothing," Westgale said firmly.

"Nothing?" April replied. "That ignorant jerk just berated your Administration and called you a criminal."

“His feathers are all ruffled because I found a way to do what *he’s* been promising to do.”

She relaxed and nodded. “Ah, give this country back its independence?”

“Bingo. He’s desperate, honey. He knows we’ve turned the tide.”

“What about this AXE thing? How do you plan to deal with that?”

“Little by little. It’s difficult to fully defend against that type of rebellion, but Nicole’s assured the Association she has a solid plan to rectify that mess. She’ll be laying it out in the coming days, as part of her campaign. I completely trust she’ll get to the bottom of it.”

* * *

“Okay, Jessica, you can see him now,” Dr. Ahar said to Jessica, who was seated in the waiting room.

“Thank you, Doctor,” she replied, jumping to her feet.

When Jessica entered the room, she was amazed by how well Shadow looked. “Hello, my sweetheart,” he said warmly.

“You gave me quite a scare,” Jessica said, scurrying over to give him a hug. “It’s a good thing I had this with me.” She touched the dragon-stone necklace. “Do you realize what a hero you are? You saved the president of the United States of America—who of course also happens to be my father.” They both chuckled.

“Yeah, I may be seen as a hero for saving your father, but if it wasn’t for me, he wouldn’t have been shot at in the first place,” Shadow said.

“Don’t be silly. How could you have known Alton was going to attempt to assassinate my father?”

“I should have put two and two together.”

Jessica frowned. “What do you mean?”

“The night Jolio tried to kill you, I’m betting Alton orchestrated the whole thing. My father warned me about both of them, but I truly believed in Alton,” Shadow said, his face solemn. “He never displayed any animosity toward America or your father. In fact, he’d always tell me how he thought it was wrong for our militia to

have invaded Oria, especially after I met you. I guess that's how he won me over."

"If that's the case, why didn't he try to kill me himself? Why did he send Jolio to do the deed?"

"It was far more personal for Jolio. Not only did he lose my brother Hadar, who was like a brother to him, he also had two cousins whose living quarters were mistakenly bombed by American forces."

"Well, at least that's all history. And the main thing is that both you and my father came out of this alive."

"Yeah, and we were able to make a deal that will be of great benefit to both our countries," Shadow said. He paused before continuing. "What about my father? Was he not permitted into America to visit me?"

"When I left Pinia, your father told me he wished he could come along, but I guess he had other important matters to deal with. So he told me to send you his love."

"I guess that's what happens when you're busy running a country," Shadow quipped, turning his head to the side to hide a grimace.

Jessica's mind was still reeling from her meeting with Luanda. She was finding it difficult to comprehend how a father could go to such lengths to keep a son from his mother. However, as she had promised, she would not divulge what she had learned.

As Jessica and Shadow caught up, Westgale arrived with his security. "Dad, come on in," Jessica said. "Let me give you gentlemen a few minutes alone." She gave her father a big hug on the way out of the room.

Westgale gave Shadow a nod of acceptance. "I want to thank you, Shadow. You were willing to sacrifice your life for mine, and I will remain forever grateful." He approached with an outstretched hand.

"I simply did what any honorable human being would do for another," Shadow replied as they shook hands.

"While we were waiting for you to recover, Jessie showed me the charming necklace you presented to her. She also told me the story

behind it,” Westgale said, smiling. “That really tells me how much my daughter must mean to you.”

“There are no words to describe the love I have for your daughter.”

“I’d like you to have this,” Westgale said as he leaned over and handed Shadow a gold star military pendant. “It’s my late brother Joseph’s. He was killed during the War Within, coming to the aid of several civilians.”

Shadow studied the pendant reverently. “Wow... I accept this with honor and will forever cherish it.”

Jessica was at the front desk speaking with Dr. Ahar when she noticed a lady emerging from the nearby elevator wearing a burgundy scarf around her head. She appeared extremely nervous, which immediately caught the attention of security. Jessica motioned to them that all was okay. “Luanda, is that you?” Jessica asked as she approached.

“Hello, Jessica,” Luanda replied, shoulders sagging as if in surrender.

“What made you change your mind?” Jessica asked softly.

“Shadow is my son. He’s my flesh and blood. I can no longer lie,” she said as she removed the scarf from her head.

“Does this mean you’re going to tell him the truth about Cobra?” Jessica asked with a raised brow.

“I wouldn’t be able to live with myself any longer if I didn’t,” Luanda said solemnly.

Jessica led the way to Shadow’s room. It was a short distance, but the walk felt like a marathon. The tension built with each step. Both were nervous, but Jessica suspected they shared some exhilaration, as well. They stopped at the doorway and Jessica peeked inside and said, “You have a visitor, Shadow.”

“A visitor?” he replied, bewildered.

“Yes. Her name is Luanda,” Jessica announced as Luanda entered the room. Jessica and Shadow exchanged smiles before she gently closed the door.

* * *

“Thanks for doing this, gentlemen. It means so much to our family,” I said to Joe Hislep and his long-retired father as we wrapped up a special event honoring my father at their farm.

“Dennis was an incredible man. He deserves to be honored. It’s just awful that people would even think that he was involved in something criminal,” Joe’s father, Richard, replied. “Hopefully, with UCIT covering this event, the rest of the country will discover what a terrific man he was.”

It had been touching to hear all the wonderful stories about Dad and how he always went the extra mile to aid the farmers of Vexton. As one farmer after another took the stage to recount their Dennis Claremont story, Mom and I found it impossible to hold back our tears. Richard Hislep told the story of how Dad spent eighteen hours straight searching for one of Hislep Farm’s prized thoroughbred horses that went astray. “The incredible thing was, the day ol’ Gypsy Heart went missing was the day Dennis had planned to go away on vacation. No matter how I tried to convince him to stick with his plans, he wouldn’t have it. He led my farmhands in the search, and in the end Gypsy Heart was tracked down in the forest around Moon Shade Bluff. Oddly enough, the horse was in the same location where Dennis’s copter was shot down.”

The next speakers were the two brothers Dad saved on the day he was killed. “I don’t know what made Marty and I venture out on that crazy day. I guess you can put it down to the crazy things kids do. Our parents thought we went off to school. After I heard the projected storm had been downgraded, I convinced Marty to head out to the forest with me and help me create a view-file for a science project. Once we arrived at the area around Moon Shade Bluff, these black, threatening clouds started racing across the sky, and then all hell broke loose. The next thing I knew my brother was trapped under a tree, fighting for his life, and I could only stand there, helpless.”

Marty picked up the story. “I was lucky that tree didn’t instantly crush me. As I watched several of the surrounding trees being

pummeled by the raging wind, I thought for sure they were going to come crashing down on me. I was certain I was going to die. Then I heard the sound of the copter, and saw Tom desperately waving his arms, trying to get their attention. I wouldn't be here right now if Dennis Claremont and Ferguson Macintosh didn't risk their lives to save mine. What they displayed that day was incredible heroism and human compassion."

After the speeches concluded, the party commenced. Delicious food and beverages were everywhere. As Richard Hislep was telling Mom and I about a couple of Dad's hilarious practical jokes, Riley came running over to us. "Daddy, me and Kayla were just talking to Mr. Shelby. He was telling us how one time he was with Grandpa Dennis and there was this mean fox chasing a little white bunny, right over there." Riley pointed to the field just outside the Hislep gates. "And Grandpa Dennis started making noises so the fox would run away, but the fox kept chasing the bunny. So he went to his robo-copter to get his special whistle, the one that makes scary animals run away. Mr. Shelby said that when Grandpa Dennis blew the whistle the fox ran back into the forest and the bunny ran over to Grandpa Dennis."

"I know that story, Riles. In fact, your grandpa gave that bunny as a gift to the Vexton Children's Hospital," I said, smiling.

"Do you have a whistle like that, Daddy?" Riley asked. "You should have one in case a scary animal comes out of the forest."

"Ah, you're right, Riley. That's why this button here on my flash-pad makes a sound just like that whistle," I replied as I tousled his hair. I tapped the button and everybody laughed as the sound pierced through all the background noise.

Sharon and I were impressed with how well Riley had dealt with the tragic murder of his grandfather. During breakfast the next morning, Riley took us by surprise when he asked us if we would take him to visit Grandpa Dennis's gravesite. In the past, whenever we had suggested the idea, he always said he was too afraid. But this time was different. "I know he's not really there because he's with the angels in heaven, but I would like to go anyway."

“You know, Riley, Grandpa Dennis’s spirit isn’t just with the angels in heaven,” Sharon said tenderly. “His spirit can be wherever you like it to be.”

“Can it be with me when I go for a ride on my pony, or in my aquarium swimming with the fish?”

“Sure,” I interjected. “As long as you are a respectful young man and you treat everybody the way Grandpa Dennis would treat them, then his spirit will always be with you.”

It was a sunny, albeit windy autumn afternoon, though an early morning shower had left the leaves heavy with moisture, and they created a colorful carpet on the ground. When we arrived at the cemetery there were no other visitors. As we approached Dad’s monument, Riley became nervous, clutching Sharon’s pant leg tightly, and only occasionally peeking at the stone. “There’s no reason to be afraid, Riley,” I said as I picked him up and held him in my arms. “Why don’t you tell Grandpa Dennis about your aquarium?”

“Are you sure?” he asked, peering at me.

“Yes. Tell him about the fish who looks like Gordon,” I whispered.

I lowered him to the ground and he walked right up to the monument. Sharon and I stood behind him, each with a hand on one of his shoulders. As Riley began describing his aquarium, a sound from the trees caught my attention.

“And I have an angelfish that looks just like...”

Again, a sound. This time it was louder. It sounded like several twigs being stepped on at once.

“Daddy got me all kinds of neat rocks and scuba—” This time Riley heard it too, and jumped back toward me.

“It’s probably an animal, Riles,” I said. I felt him trembling.

The sound became louder by the second. The footsteps sounded heavy.

“Maybe you should get your flash-pad and make the whistle sound,” Riley half suggested, half pleaded.

“It’s Mr. Shelby!” Riley exclaimed.

I turned and looked. A man had stepped from the trees. My heart thumped rapidly. I opened my mouth, but for a moment, no sound escaped. Then—"Oh my God! Dad?"

"Come on, Riley," Sharon said urgently, taking Riley's arm and pulling him away.

"I want to talk to Mr. Shelby!" Riley bellowed.

"You come with me now, Riley!" Sharon yelled, ushering him to the electro.

"Take him home, Sharon," I said, barely registering anything beyond the man in front of me. "What in the world is going on?" I groaned, my senses reeling. "Dad... is it really you?"

"Yes, it's me, son," he replied, his voice cracking.

I stood frozen, looking into his eyes. Although I was only ten when I'd last seen him, I recognized everything about him—his eyes, his expression, the minor stuttering step in his walk, and even the scent of his aftershave. He took a few steps closer, and again my heart pounded in a way I didn't think it could. I fell to the ground, weeping uncontrollably.

I felt his hand on my shoulder. "I'm so sorry, son," he said, standing over me.

"Sorry!" I shouted, glaring up at him. "What the hell is this? How could you have done this to me—to Mom? And on top of it all, you've been parading around, talking to my son and my niece, pretending to be some guy named Shelby!" I rose to my feet.

"I understand your anger, Heath, but I had no choice," Dad began. "For thirty years, I've been in hiding, living in constant fear. If they knew I was still alive, you and your mother would have been killed."

I didn't know what to think. The impossible dream of being with my father again had come true, and yet I felt like I was in the middle of my worst nightmare. "That crash? I mean, your copter was hit with a laser blast."

And my father told me what had happened, that fateful day...

"Damn! It looks like we only have the one escape-vest on board," Fergy said to Dennis.

"You take it, Fergy."

"Oh no. It's all yours. After all, you're the one with the wife and child. I'm sure my pet hamsters will go on to live quite the life without me."

"Fergy, I'm the boss of this outfit, and I insist."

"Well, there's one problem. I need an XL. This thing won't even fit over my shoulders. Here, put it on—it's crazy out there!"

"So, Ferguson didn't make it?" I asked as we moved together to a nearby bench.

Dad shook his head sadly. "Without the escape-vest, he had no chance."

"What about your body? I know Mom was too freaked out to identify it, but Neville—wait a second; all this time, Neville's known you were alive," I said in disbelief. "Now I get this whole Mr. Shelby thing."

"It's the only way, Nev. If they find out I'm still alive, they'll kill Grace and Heath. I have several flash-messages warning me. You have to help me—I beg you."

"First of all, who are 'they'? And why are they after you and your family?"

"I don't know who they are, and right now, other than the possibility that Ferguson and I discovered something of extreme importance, I can't tell you why they want us dead."

"What did you discover?"

"It's far better for you if you don't know. Look at what just happened to me. Please, Nev, sign the form, so I can get the hell away from here and allow my family to live in peace."

"And thankfully, Custodian Millen was of great help to me. He helped me establish a new identity and set me up in Canada," Dad explained.

"Canada? Is that where you've been living all this time?" I asked, struggling to take this all in.

“That’s correct, Heath. I’ve been managing a large farm out in Calgary, Alberta. Really fine people.”

“After a few years, did you not think that maybe it would’ve been safe to return?”

“I couldn’t risk it. I didn’t know who these people were, or what they discovered on that mountain. All I knew was that they tried to kill me—and my family may have been next, if I stuck around.”

“What made you come back now?”

“When I watched the Anya Ahar hearing and saw the love you had for Riley, it moved me. Even though I did what I did to protect you and your mother, I realized how wrong I was to have taken off.”

“I understand why you did what you did—you did it for us. That’s the kind of man you are,” I responded, my throat tight.

“Oh, believe me, every day I thought about returning. Being away from you and your mother nearly destroyed me. Thankfully, Neville did a good job of keeping me up to date, and even sent me view-files of you guys.”

“So you finally decided to come back as Don Shelby,” I prompted.

Dad nodded. “Don Shelby’s been living in England for the last twenty years, so Neville suggested I take on his identity. I was just waiting for those bastards to be brought to justice before revealing my true identity. I didn’t know how to do it, so I intended to leave this note, addressed to you, on the monument—but now... here we are.” Dad began to cry. “But I’ll gladly walk away if you think that’s best, and you can tell Riley Mr. Shelby had to go back home.”

“Wait a minute. This has been thirty years in the making,” I said gently. “You think I’m going to let you out of my sight? Now that Riley’s had the pleasure of meeting Don Shelby, it’s time he enjoys the pleasure of meeting Dennis Claremont. But first there’s a lady named Grace who’s also dreamt of this day for thirty years.” I looked around. “Hey, since Sharon took the electro home, I guess we’ll have to take one of those long walks... just like the good old days.”

* * *

A reconciliation of another kind was taking place in the HKM.

“Mr. Pix, it’s been a while,” a soldier greeted Cobra as his private jet landed at the HKM central airport. “President Woi has been waiting for you,” the soldier added as he opened the back door of a black grand-electro and ushered Cobra inside.

Zigzagging through narrow alleys before motoring along a series of roads, the electro at last reached a vast military compound surrounded by a high electric fence. The vehicle stopped before a building in the center of the compound, and Cobra and the soldier made their way up to the fifth floor. They rode along a long hallway on a track that moved just above the floor. On the walls, a series of murals depicted the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. They stepped off the rolling track at the end of the hallway to stand in front of a towering set of steel double doors.

Keying a signal into his flash-pad, the soldier opened a panel on the face of one door. A screen appeared. The soldier tapped a code into the screen, and the doors swung slowly open.

“Ah, Cobra, wonderful to see you, my friend,” President Woi said from behind a large marble desk. He pressed a button on his desk and like the rolling walkway in the hall, the floor moved forward, bringing Cobra right to a chair in front of his desk. “A great engineering feat, I must say. Really saves the wear and tear on the legs,” he said with a grin.

Woi rose and sauntered over to a cabinet on one side of the room. He wore a military uniform custom-tailored to his short, thin frame. “We have some celebrating to do,” he added as he reached for a bottle of champagne and two glasses. “I was so relieved to hear your son is going to be fine.”

“Yeah, and thankfully Westgale’s still alive and well... I would have hated for him to have had such an easy way out,” Cobra sneered.

“Well, here’s to a new beginning and the end of an old enemy!” Woi bellowed as both men raised their glasses.

“Now, before lunch is served, let me give you a tour of our enormous treasure chest down in the warehouse,” Woi said, directing Cobra to the wall behind his desk. Mounted on the wall was a forked scepter, hanging above an HKM flag. Woi punched a code into his flash-pad and the wall opened, revealing an elevator. The two men entered and the high-speed elevator dropped them rapidly to a warehouse that stretched the length of the building’s basement.

“So tell me, Cobra, how do you feel about Shadow’s involvement with Jessica Westgale?” Woi asked upon exiting the elevator.

“Well, I never thought I’d see the day when my son’s lust for a woman would become my country’s greatest weapon,” Cobra answered with a chortle. “Or at least its second-greatest weapon,” he clarified as he gazed at bag after bag of heart-shaped green pills.

THE PRESERVATION PLAN

THE VEXTON SERIES
FINAL BOOK

CHAPTER 1

“Open the damn door! Open the damn door! This is an emergency! We need help—somebody please open the door! My wife’s about to give birth!” Dr. Jack Ahar shouted as he pounded the front door of what was supposed to be a hospital. It was a bitter cold morning. The pavement was a giant ice rink, and the streets were strangely silent.

He stepped back in defeat when his wife gripped his arm tightly. “Come on, Maria, let’s head back to the car.”

Jack fought panic. Her struggle was apparent with every heavy footstep. By the time they got back to their vehicle, Maria was shivering uncontrollably. The doctor tried to open the sedan’s passenger-side doors, but they wouldn’t budge. He scurried around the car and tried the passenger door there, then the driver door. “Damn it! They’re all frozen!” he cried, his voice rising in fear.

Maria sagged against the car; Jack eased her to the icy pavement. “Just hold on, honey, I’m here for you.”

* * *

While speaking at Summit University as President Westgale’s executive director, I once referred to America’s War Within as “the perfect dinner gone wrong.” In this incredible country, there is no reason why all of our appetites can’t be satisfied. The problem is, there are so many disagreements over what dishes to make and what

ingredients to use. Too much of this. Too little of that. Too tender. Too tough. And of course the hungry become impatient, as the politicians—or “the chefs of life”—fail to find a way to satisfy the varying appetites of those they’ve been summoned to serve. Maybe there are too many chefs. Maybe the dinner guests should focus on what they *need*, as opposed to what they *want*.

How much government is too much government? Can civility and absolute liberty coexist?

* * *

A lady came running from a nearby building. “Sir, my name’s Anya. Here, take these blankets. There’s a hospital right over there. I’ll get you some help.” She thrust a bundle of blankets into Jack’s arms.

“It’s no longer functioning as a hospital,” Dr. Ahar sobbed as he tucked one of the blankets under Maria and draped another over her contraction-wracked body. “This war will be our final undoing,” he murmured under his breath, his anger growing by the second as he bent over his laboring wife.

Minutes later, he delivered a newborn girl and swaddled the crying baby in the last blanket. He sagged with relief when a passing car stopped to help. Handing off the baby to the driver, who quickly placed her in their car, the doctor turned back to frantically tend to his wife. She lay so still. Stifling a sob, he checked Maria’s vital signs.

“Nooooo!” he wailed. He checked again, and again, his movements urgent, frantic. “This can’t be—no!” he sobbed. “My beautiful Maria.” He wept, wild with shock. His hysteria abated to violent trembling, and he lifted the edge of the blanket covering her body and lowered it gently, slowly, over her face before collapsing to the pavement beside her.

* * *

As I continue preparing for my presidential campaign, the extreme challenges I’ll be facing have become very clear to me. Sure, the

discovery of the VX drug has greatly aided the cause of the PBA. The recent energy deal President Westgale has made with Pinia will enable us to eliminate the debt owed to the Outer Commission, thus restoring our complete independence. However, uncertainty and tension are high throughout the land. I truly believe a *new war* is on the horizon.

My campaign manager rushes into my office. “Nicole, I think you should tune into UCIT,” Beth says.

I comply. The screen displays Gerald Levin standing outside the Militant Alliance headquarters, part of which was recently destroyed by extremists believed to be part of AXE.

“How dare these extremist punks think they can create such mayhem in this country and get away with it?” a furious Levin almost sputters. “And moreover, how dare the Westgale Administration stand by passively and let it happen? These pathetic excuses for life hide under disguises. They set buildings ablaze and run away like the cowards they are.” His scowl deepens with each breath. “They claim they want a voice. They want to be heard. Well, if that’s the case, then take off those masks and face the world like real men and women. I guarantee you that under my leadership, you will be dealt with in the most...”

“This isn’t good. This isn’t good,” I say to Beth as I listen to Levin’s rant. “He’s throwing fuel on the fire.”

As the Peace-Bringers and the Militants prepare to clash in this current political arena, it has become obvious that America’s rebellious youth, with Anya Ahar as their symbol for the rebirth of a new age, have emerged as a third major player.

CHAPTER 2

With Shadow Pix out of the hospital, President Westgale has decided to show him his appreciation for saving his life with a dinner gala at the Freedom Home.

“Nicole Kratz, please meet Shadow Pix,” Jessica Westgale says, quickly suppressing a smirk of—pride? Infatuation?

“Pleased to meet you,” I reply, gazing up at the imposing figure before me. I quickly label him a gentle giant in my mind. Understandably, he’s noticeably nervous, surrounded by America’s leading politicians and military chiefs. Prior to recent events, just getting into America was next to impossible for him, let alone being the president’s guest of honor.

Westgale approaches us. “Well, well, my two *lifesavers* in the same room,” he says with a chuckle, acknowledging Shadow and me with nods. “I’m so grateful to the both of you. Sadly for me, there are a lot of people out there who wish you weren’t so brave,” he says wryly.

“I don’t buy that,” my husband, Lowell, chimes in.

The president laughs. “That’s easy for you to say when you’re the country’s premiere golfer, loved and praised by millions.” His jocularly fades to sincerity. “In all seriousness, this dinner does not come close to repaying the debt I owe to this man,” he says as he places his right hand on Shadow’s shoulder.

My gaze drifts as the small talk continues, and I notice Dr. Ahar waving me over from across the ballroom. I excuse myself and move toward him.

“Did you wish to see me, Doctor?” I ask as I join him.

“I hate to steal you away from the party, but it’s urgent that I speak with you,” he replies, his expression serious. “Would you mind coming to my office?”

“Not at all,” I reply, and he turns and leads the way.

“I’ve been meaning to speak to you since the council’s decision was made regarding Anya, but as usual, I’ve barely had a minute to breathe,” Ahar says as he directs me to a chair in front of his large desk. My eyes are immediately drawn to several photos of Anya and his late wife, Maria, on the credenza behind the desk.

“How are things going with the VX drug?” I ask.

“Honestly, I never thought I’d be part of something so astonishing,” Ahar replies, leaning back in his chair. “The process of turning that mineral into the drug is simple and completely foolproof. And the great thing is that once it’s converted into the drug, its composition can’t be altered in any manner whatsoever.” He leans forward again and says earnestly, “When I think that this miracle was withheld from our society for thirty years, it really crushes my heart.”

“I know what you mean, Doctor. Sometimes it becomes so difficult to trust in humanity, knowing such evil prevails,” I reply. “So, what is it you’ve been wanting to speak to me about?”

He regards me for a moment. “I want to thank you for continuing to support Anya. I realize my daughter will never be free again, but the thought of her being executed... she doesn’t deserve that, Nicole,” he replies. He turns his chair enough that he can gaze back at the photos, and shakes his head. Tears slowly begin to stream down his cheeks. “She’s such a lost soul. Of the five times I’ve asked to see her, only once did she agree to see me, and even then I couldn’t get more than a few words out of her,” he says, his voice thick with emotion. “Her eyes... they’ve become deep, black holes. I’m really terrified there’s no hope for her.”

“And I understand Dr. Durant hasn’t had much success reaching her either,” I say gently.

The doctor sighs and nods. “He told me he’s lucky if he can get a few words out of her, too.”

“I’m so sorry, Doctor.”

Ahar stands up and steps over to the credenza to pour us both a glass of water. “If anyone’s to blame, it’s me, Nicole,” he says as he hands one of the glasses to me, then sits down. “I’ve never been there for her the way I needed to be. Sure, I funded and aided her with her schooling, but obviously that wasn’t enough, and sadly, I was so caught up in my own world that I failed to see that. I’m convinced the way I handled my success set the stage for Anya’s descent into her world of misery.” He stares blankly into his glass as if conjuring a memory from the past.

* * *

“Do you remember Cassandra, Anya?” Jack asked her. It was a week after Anya’s fifteenth birthday. “She sang that amazing song I played for you. The one called ‘Dreamscape.’”

“Yes, I remember,” Anya answered quietly as she studied the glamorous Cassandra Dennison, dressed in a tight-fitting turquoise leather outfit. Jack’s much younger girlfriend also happened to be a celebrity singer.

“Your father told me you really enjoy playing the flute,” Cassandra said.

Anya didn’t respond; she continued to stare at her. Trying to break the awkward moment, Jack quickly changed the subject. “I also told Cassandra that you just won first prize in the New York State High School Science Competition,” he said, beaming. He pulled Cassandra close to him. “I just feel so terrible that I’ll be out of town and have to miss the presentation gala. Now, I told Shannon to make sure she records the event and sends me the view-file,” Jack added, referring to Anya’s nanny.

When Anya eventually learned that the only reason her father missed the gala was because Cassandra was performing in Boston that evening, she was devastated.

* * *

"I hope you don't mind me saying, Doctor, but I don't think you're being fair to yourself," I answer. "As the country's premiere scientist and doctor, you've contributed so much to America."

"Yeah, but at the expense of my daughter's well-being," Ahar responds. As he takes a drink of water, I find myself pondering what he just said. "Since the day I revealed the truth to Anya about how her mother died, it's obvious she's kept her true feelings shrouded," he says solemnly. "And regrettably, the animosity she feels toward me is justifiable. I guess, in a way, living extravagantly helped me camouflage my own sadness and guilt over my wife's death."

"Guilt? Why should *you* feel guilty?"

"I'm a doctor, Nicole. I should have saved her."

"Come *on*, Doctor, you can't do this to yourself. No one could have saved your wife that day. And it surely wasn't your fault that that hospital was closed."

Dr. Ahar reflects for a moment before saying, "I only wish, somehow, I could reach her. It's been so long since I've seen her smile. In her current state, I don't know how any court will see a reason to overturn her death sentence."

"Well, this just might help her case," I say as I take out my flashpad. "So far, besides myself, only the president and Director Perry have been privy to this, but I think it's important you see it as well." I show him the list of substantial charitable donations Anya anonymously made before turning herself in.

The doctor looks at me in disbelief. "Anya made these donations?" he says, his voice cracking.

Once again, he stares into the middle distance as his mind travels back to some memory only he can see.

* * *

"Whoa, if you keep collecting these awards, soon you'll be flying around in a bigger plane than mine," the doctor quipped after she'd been presented with a \$200,000 award for academic excellence at Summit University. He spread his arms, mimicking the wings of a plane.

“Yeah, and when you’re in need of your own luxurious condo, I know someone you can call,” said Meredith, another of the doctor’s much younger girlfriends, who happened to be an aspiring real estate agent. The couple roared with laughter. Anya was far from amused.

* * *

“How did you find out?” he asks, nodding at the information displayed on my flash-pad.

“After I handed in my resignation, I continued learning as much as I could about your daughter, and through some sheer hard work, I was able to trace these donations back to her,” I answer. “I see them as a sign of hope.”

“Will this be made public? Doesn’t it have to be submitted to the court beforehand?” Ahar asks, still looking at the screen.

“No, and I advise holding off until the hearing. It’ll be far more impactful,” I reply.

Turning, the doctor lifts one of the photos of Anya and smiles. He draws a deep breath and exhales. “Will you do it, Nicole?” he asks.

“Do what?” I reply with a raised brow.

“Represent her again.”

“What about Arthur? He’s one of the best there is,” I respond, referring to the doctor’s long-time attorney, Arthur Fine, whom I’d studied under at Summit University.

“That’s true. Arthur’s a fantastic attorney and a good, decent man, but I know Anya sees him as an extension of my life. I highly doubt she’ll respond to him as positively as she might to you.”

I think for a moment, and softly reply, “I don’t know, Doctor. With the election around the corner, and the fact that Anya’s story now has America’s youth questioning everything about this country, this is something I’ll have to really think about.”

Dr. Ahar sighs and nods. “Well, I guess that’s all I can ask. I realize it would put you in an uncomfortable position during the election, but other than those creeps from AXE, you’ve been the only person she’s willing to speak with in quite some time. I sincerely

believe that you're our only hope when it comes to bringing my daughter out of her malaise."

"I promise you I'll give it some real thought."

When I return to the gala, Shadow Pix is speaking from the front of the ballroom. "I'm extremely excited and honored to be welcomed into your Freedom Home. Thank you so much for having me," he says sincerely. The audience cheers with enthusiasm. "I'm also thrilled that the Westgale Administration has accepted the proposal to allow Pinia to supply America with our treasured natural resources. Just as your country's VX drug is changing the face of medicine, experts around the world believe the Pinian fera-bean will forever change the face of natural energy. And we are elated to share this with America." The cheering grows louder.

CHAPTER 3

Before heading back to Pinia, Shadow and Jessica decide to visit his mother, Luanda, at her Manhattan apartment. As Jessica's chauffeur drives the grand-electro through the crowded streets, Jessica senses the anxiety radiating from Shadow, seated beside her in the back of the car. "Are you okay?" she asks him.

Shadow doesn't look at her. He continues staring out the window at the pedestrians and buildings they're passing. "I feel really guilty, Jessica," he replies after a moment.

"Guilty of what?" Jessica asks. She leans forward to look at him.

Shadow turns his head to look at her. Anger hardens his face. "All this time has gone by, and now I find out it was my father who forced my mother to leave her homeland and avoid having contact with me. I should have known... I should have known!" Shadow looks away again, staring out the front windshield.

"How were you to know your father would wield his power in such a corrupt manner?" Jessica asks, resting a hand on his arm.

"I was very naïve. I should have investigated the matter and rectified the situation," Shadow responds with feeling.

"Let's move forward. Now that we've found your mother and she appears willing to reestablish a connection with you, you must embrace the opportunity," Jessica says gently.

The grand-electro slows and stops, and Jessica looks around. They're in a seedy area of Manhattan, and the driver is parked in front of an old, run-down apartment complex.

“Thank you, Douglas. I’ll contact you when we’re done,” Jessica says to the driver, and she and Shadow exit the vehicle.

“Are you certain you want me to join you?” she asks Shadow as they cross the sidewalk to the entrance.

“Of course,” Shadow replies. Smiling, he takes her by the hand.

Just outside the front entrance, a panhandler sits cross-legged against the building. He’s wearing a tattered, bright red bandana and a t-shirt reading *Stalin Lives!* “Hell knows no end—and that’s a good thing, my friends, because it’s where we’re all going,” the man hollers as Jessica and Shadow walk past. Jessica turns and backtracks to give him a couple of dollars. “Thank you, sister,” he says, “I’ll be sure to put in a good word for you.”

She turns back to Shadow, and they step inside. The lobby they enter is cold and damp, the walls grimy and the floor tiles cracked, their grout blackened with tracked-in filth. There are several empty liquor bottles lying beside two empty syringes on the dirty floor to one side of the door. There is no elevator; Shadow leads Jessica to the stairwell, then hesitates and turns to her. She can see the tears welling in his eyes. “To think my mother is living in such an appalling place really tears at my heart,” he says, fighting for composure. Jessica squeezes his hand.

There is a young lady picking up a bunch of clothes in the hallway when they reach the second floor. “You bastard!” she shouts, pounding on the door of unit 206. “If you think I’m going to keep paying for that habit of yours, you’re badly mistaken, jackass!” They sidle past her; she ignores them, intent on hurling invective at whoever’s inside 206.

A few doors down, Luanda is standing in her doorway, arms crossed, listening to the ruckus. She grins when she notices Jessica and Shadow approaching. “Wow, what a surprise!” she says. “Come on in.”

“Does this kind of thing happen often around here?” Jessica asks in reference to the angry woman in the hallway. Shadow glances back, shaking his head in disgust.

“I’m used to it,” Luanda replies, shrugging it off with a sigh. “I just mind my own business and nobody bothers me.”

“I won’t have you living in a place like this, Mother,” Shadow says firmly.

“With Kolton in and out of rehab and my job paying so little,” she says, referring to her husband, “well, this is affordable.” She smiles, but Jessica can tell it’s forced, and her eyes are sad.

“How long will he be in rehab?” Jessica asks.

“I’m hoping he’ll be back home in the coming days,” Luanda answers solemnly. She looks at Shadow. “I think you’ll like Kolton, son. He may be troubled, but he’s a good man. Unlike your father, he actually has a compassionate side.” She smiles. “Please, sit down. I’d offer you a drink, but we can’t keep alcohol in the apartment. How about a coffee?”

“That’d be fine, Luanda,” Jessica replies. She sits on the couch, looking around the tiny apartment. She’s astounded by the number of music books she sees, all neatly arranged on side tables and a bookcase.

“So, what exactly led to Kolton’s downward spiral?” Shadow asks when Luanda returns with a tray holding three mugs of coffee, a sugar bowl, and a small creamer.

Luanda sets the tray down on the coffee table, not looking at them. “Like many Americans after the War Within, he’s had to battle his own personal demons. We’re both trying to look forward, and embrace the future. So I really don’t like speaking about it,” she replies as she hands each of them a mug.

“And how are *you* doing, Mother? I still can’t believe what my father did to you all those years ago,” Shadow says, frowning.

Luanda straightens. “Please, Shadow, forget what I told you the other day. It’s all in the past and there’s no point in creating tension between you and your father,” she pleads.

Shadow sets down his mug and rises to walk over and embrace his mother. “You need not worry. I will deal with this. My father will not treat me as if I’m one of his pathetic minions. And in turn, I assure you, you will always have a loving place in my heart,” he says, his face lighting up with joy.

As she and Shadow prepare to return to Pinia, Jessica takes a moment to call her dad. “We’ll be off tomorrow, Dad,” she says when her father’s face replaces the presidential seal on her flash-pad screen.

“You just make sure you remain safe over there, honey,” Westgale replies. “I must ask you, Jessie: what are your plans, once your mission in Pinia has been completed?”

“To be honest with you, that’s not something Shadow and I have even discussed,” Jessica answers.

“Next to his father, Shadow’s the most important man in the country. Would you be willing to leave everything behind and make Pinia your home?” Westgale asks.

Jessica hesitates for a moment. “I’m sorry, Dad, but I’m hoping for a future with Shadow, and if that means living in Pinia, then yes, I’d be more than willing to make the change,” she replies with conviction.

“Well, if you do, you’ll have to promise me that Washington will be your favorite vacation spot.” Westgale chuckles, but his eyes belie his lighthearted tone.

CHAPTER 4

With the election coming up, I've attempted to learn everything possible about being president of the greatest country in the world. Over the last several months I've also tried to learn everything I possibly can about Anya Ahar. As difficult as it is to believe, how our government deals with this brilliant, yet highly troubled young lady will turn out to be of paramount importance to America's future. First seen as evil, she's become a sympathetic figure: a victim of a failed system. Adding fuel to an already raging fire is the disclosure that General Sims and Barry Kent, a.k.a. Johnny T, lied to the nation regarding AXE's intentions.

I recall the UCIT coverage of the reaction when the disclosure was made:

"Who's in charge of those in charge?" protesters chanted.

"What brings you out here?" Cryptic asked one of the protesters.

"This is a joke. A complete joke," the young lady said, shaking her head in disgust. "To make us think AXE was planning to kill innocent people when they were actually planning to do society a favor."

"So let me get this straight. You're saying that by bombing government animal research labs, this group was doing society a favor?" said Cryptic.

"That's correct, my friend. The people working in those labs don't deserve to live on this amazing planet!"

Strangely, it now appears as if most young adults have become affiliated with this generic brand of rebellion. They're angry, and

demanding change. It doesn't matter if they are a down-and-out street thug willing to set buildings on fire, or a law-abiding, aspiring doctor or engineer. It doesn't matter if they view the AXE doctrine as a guide to life, or see it as useless drivel. The youth of America want a voice. They want to be heard.

Westgale and I meet for lunch at my campaign headquarters.

"I truly believe representing Anya will be a huge mistake, Nicole," Westgale says, regarding me across the table.

"I've given it a lot of thought over the last few days, and it's something I have to do, Mr. President," I reply.

"Will she even speak to you?" Westgale asks. "From what her father has told me, Anya won't even speak to him."

"There's a reason for that, sir."

He looks up from his vegetable soup. "Oh?"

"According to the doctor, Anya's deep feelings of anger stem from Jack's flamboyant lifestyle and the fact he was rarely there for her, growing up. He believes that's what sparked her rebellious attitude and led her to join AXE."

Westgale leans back with a sigh and runs his hands over his face. "Are you not concerned this is going to be seen as a weakness? Pandering to our disenfranchised youth?" he asks bluntly.

"I'm sure many will see it that way. But believe me when I tell you, I don't plan to lose that hearing. Nor do I plan to lose the election."

* * *

This morning I'm picked up by my driver and brought to the airport. I've yet to pay a visit to Vexton, but today that'll all change. Like most Americans, I've become fascinated with this idyllic farming town, which I only knew as the home of Vexton-Tech prior to recent events.

Wyatt Murphy from Vexton Land Protection meets me and my security team when we land in Vexton. He escorts us into his robo-copter and we lift off for Moon Shade Bluff. I'm excited to be visiting what is now being referred to as the eighth wonder of the world.

We fly over lush forest as we approach the mountain, and I lift a hand to shield my eyes from the brilliant sunlight and gaze down at the trees below, gently swaying in unison. I feel a deep sense of serenity. I look up and all of a sudden, there it is: Moon Shade Bluff. Its majesty takes my breath away, and my heart pounds. I immediately think of my dear friend Rosie, who recently lost her life to illness at way too young an age, while fellow human beings kept this medical miracle a secret for three decades.

When we land at the base of the mountain, I step out into the middle of an argument. “I don’t care who you are, you are not permitted within this fenced area,” says the military man in charge.

As I approach, the man he’s speaking to turns around to look at me. “Well, I’m sure *she’ll* be given access,” he sneers, and snickers. Gerald Levin is spewing out his usual sarcasm. He and his MAA associate, Earl Pemberton, are both agitated; I gather that they are being asked to leave the area.

“Don’t fret, Gerald. Soon we’ll be in control of this entire thing,” Pemberton says as he looks directly into my eyes. Throwing their arms up in disgust, Levin and Pemberton turn away and head down the path to be whisked away in their own copter.

When I turn to my right I see Heath Claremont a few feet away. “Heath, it’s wonderful to see you again,” I say.

“Hello, Nicole. Welcome to Vexton,” he replies in his usual friendly manner. “What brings you to our town?”

“I figured, since I’m hoping to become president of this great land, it’d be wise to visit its new pride and joy in person,” I reply, gazing up at the mountain.

“Come on, I’ll bring you up,” Heath says, leading me to his robo-copter.

Minutes later, we’re touching down.

“Wow, it’s so awe-inspiring up here,” I say in a hushed voice as I stand atop Moon Shade Bluff with a cool breeze teasing my hair and a green vista stretching away at my feet.

About twenty yards away from us, several men are performing some type of analysis on the mountain’s surface. “It’s nonstop

activity up here,” Heath says, seeing me watching them.

“Unbelievable,” I say, continuing to watch them. “Do you think we’ll ever figure out how this all came to be?” I ask.

With a subtle smile, Heath shakes his head. “Oh, there’s an awful lot of theories being thrown about, but I highly doubt we’ll ever know the true answer,” he says as he waves to a couple of the workers.

“Yeah, it sure is fascinating. Before coming out here I checked what we refer to as the government’s ‘unsolved mysteries file’ and let me tell you, that database is full of theories,” I reply. “The latest is that this is one of those massive government cover-ups, and this mountain is maintained by some benevolent extraterrestrial power.”

“I think most of the people here in Vexton are looking to the town’s ancient history for the answers,” Heath responds.

“Oh yeah, I see that the *Book of ZeZ* is gaining quite a bit of interest across the country,” I say as I look at the view in wonder. “How tiny we actually are. And how little we actually know,” I murmur. Then I look back to Heath. “I’d be remiss not to ask you how your father is.”

Heath’s eyes open wide and his smile broadens. “Now that he has everything cleared up with the authorities, I’m elated that we’ll finally reconnect,” he says with excitement.

“I can only imagine how surreal it must be for your entire family,” I say sincerely.

He nods. “Yeah, it’s definitely been a whirlwind of emotions. The last time I saw my father, I was ten years old. And now thirty years later, he appears out of the blue. Surreal, but amazing at the same time, to say the least.”

The next stop on my Vexton journey is Talbot Farms. As I exit the grand-electro at the front gate, I notice a burly man approaching. I can barely see his face through the smoke emanating from his old-fashioned pipe.

“Hello, I’m Rusty Talbot,” he says in a gruff voice.

“I’m Nicole Kratz. It’s a pleasure to meet you, sir,” I reply as I wave the smoke away.

“Likewise,” he replies. “Hunter’s waiting for you,” he adds as he takes another puff. He opens the gate for me, then makes his way toward a waiting electro.

The farm is orderly and bucolic, yet modern, with several pieces of high-tech farming equipment visible as I move closer to the main house.

Hunter greets me at the front door. “Nicole, come on in,” he says enthusiastically. “Let me take your coat.” Then he guides me to the living room. “Have a seat.”

“Thanks for seeing me,” I say as I sink into a sofa. “Both your farm and your home have such a rustic, yet modern feel,” I add.

“Well, Dad brings the rustic and I guess I bring the modern.” Hunter chuckles. “I was surprised when your office requested this meeting. Knowing how busy you are, I’m sure this must be important.”

“I saw the recent interview you did with UCIT,” I say, leaning forward.

“I hope the PBA folks aren’t *too* angry with me, but I just expressed my true feelings.”

“Judging by how most of the youth across this country have been acting out lately, it appears you’re not alone.”

“Yeah, and unfortunately some have taken things way too far. Setting those buildings on fire was complete stupidity, regardless of how marginalized they feel. That’s not the answer to the country’s problems.” Hunter’s tone is disapproving.

“Do you have the answers, Hunter?”

He grins before replying. “I don’t know if they’re answers, but I certainly have plenty of ideas.”

“Well, that’s what I want to hear,” I say as I rise from the sofa.

“I don’t understand.”

“Would you be willing to share those ideas?”

“In another interview with Cryptic?”

“No, in my office.” Hunter looks at me, perplexed. “As my executive director... if I’m named president, of course.”

“Executive director?”

I nod. “Correct.”

“But I don’t have a single ounce of political experience,” Hunter protests.

“No, but you do have what the PBA needs: a fresh, young, innovative mind.”

“Wow... you can’t be serious.”

“Like you said, I’m an extremely busy person who doesn’t have time to play games. I’m asking you to join my team. I’ve done my homework on you, and your work at Forever Green is out of this world, not to mention the fact that you saved close to half a million young American lives by discovering those teal-berries,” I say firmly.

“What about Dave Perry?” Hunter asks.

“David has an astute political mind, and I’m hoping he’ll assist me in other capacities, but new blood is needed within the PBA, and I’m trusting you’ll bring us that much-needed shot of youthful energy,” I reply with conviction. “I’m aware you’ve promised to manage your father’s farm, but I’m sincerely hoping you’ll aid me in managing our country.”

Hunter thinks for a moment and then walks toward a picture of him and his father that sits atop the mantel. “Well... I’ve already been able to make some major changes around here, and with the trustworthy farmhands I’ve brought on board, this place is pretty much running itself nowadays,” he says, staring intently at the picture.

“Besides, with Washington being so close to Vexton, it won’t be very difficult for you to address matters when the need arises,” I add.

He turns to look at me. “I don’t know, Nicole. My support for the PBA has been really waning of late,” he says, rubbing his chin. “As far as I’m concerned, making that deal with Cobra Pix was extremely hypocritical. I mean, the guy goes against everything the PBA has supposedly stood for. And there’s the whole Anya Ahar thing.”

“I’m not going to tell you that anything Anya has done is justified, but then again, neither of us have walked in her shoes.”

“What about Pix? I’m still shocked Westgale decided to make a deal with him.”

“I understand your concern, Hunter, but after performing due diligence on Pix and his militia, Westgale and his people weren’t

able to find any damning proof against him. What they did find was that Pix was opposing a very corrupt Pinian government. I'll send you the report for your review."

"What about the threats he made against America and Westgale himself? Are they not of concern to the PBA?"

"Of course they are. But one needs to remember that American forces, under Westgale, justified or not, killed six of his seven sons, so I guess we can cut him some slack on that one. Besides, the generosity of his recent energy deal is a good indication that he's changing for the better," I reply.

"I don't want to offend you, but before I make a decision, I'll need to review that report and I'll also need clarification on your intentions," Hunter says.

"My intentions?"

"If you're hoping I'll simply act as some kind of figurehead appealing to America's youth, I'm not interested. I'd want to be able to make a real tangible difference."

"I came here asking you to join me in my quest to turn around not only the PBA, but this entire messed-up country. And I'm not asking you to do this because of your newfound hero status. I'm asking you, because I believe in you," I say emphatically.

"The last time I checked, the PBA's fifty-three-member Strategic Council didn't have a single person under the age of fifty on it. I highly doubt they'll be very eager to work alongside someone my age."

"Yeah, you're correct. And under my leadership, that will change. My plan is to create a council that will always be partly represented by young adults, much like you. I'll also be creating several youth advisory panels, which I will have *you* overseeing."

Hunter looks at me with wide eyes. "Well, it sounds like you're actually serious about giving a voice to the youth of America. This is exactly what this country needs," he says with a smile. "I'll give you my answer tomorrow morning."

CHAPTER 5

The following morning, much to my delight, Hunter formally accepts the offer to be my running mate. I immediately notify the PBA chairman of my selection and also address the matter with Dave Perry in the presidential lounge.

“Though I was looking forward to continuing on as executive director, I think you made a wise choice,” Perry replies after I explain.

Phew, I'm relieved.

“Hunter's a very impressive young man. I think he'll fit in great with your agenda. And if you ever require my assistance, I'll be there for you in a heartbeat,” he adds sincerely.

I smile. “I'm thrilled to hear that, because I'm hoping you'll consider another position within my administration.”

Perry's eyebrows rise. “I'm all ears.”

“I'd really appreciate you overseeing the VX drug program. If I'm fortunate enough to become president, that program is going to be important to my administration and will require someone with your experience and political acumen.”

“You can count on me, Nicole.” Perry sounds and looks excited. I'm elated.

After my meeting with Perry, I am unsurprised to be summoned by the PBA's newly appointed chairman, Justice Thor Hardy, for a meeting in his office.

“Please have a seat, Nicole,” he says in his usual serious tone, indicating the chair in front of his desk. “How’s Lawrence?” he asks in reference to my father.

“He’s doing well, sir. Thank you for asking.”

“Larry’s one of the good ones,” he says as he sits down behind his desk. “I just heard about his new foundation, and I’ve instructed our finance people to provide a very generous donation.”

“Thank you, sir. I’m sure he’ll be very pleased.”

He leans forward and clasps his hands, elbows resting on the desktop. “Now, you must be wondering why I called you to my office.”

I smile. “Somehow I think it has to do with my appointment of Hunter Talbot as my running mate.”

Hardy sits back with a sigh. “Look, Nicole, I’m not denying Mr. Talbot is a fine young man, and I can’t, nor do I want to, tell you whom to choose as your executive director, but heaven forbid, if something unfortunate were to happen to you, we’d be left with a twenty-six-year-old president.”

“And I’m confident he’d do one heck of a job,” I reply with a confident smile. Then I lean forward and say solemnly, “I understand your concern, sir, but I wouldn’t have brought Hunter on board if I didn’t have complete faith in him.”

Hardy shakes his head and purses his lips before saying, “This whole youth thing... Do you not think you’re getting a little caught up in this current wave of hysteria?”

“Not at all,” I answer. “The people have spoken, Justice Hardy. We must not just govern; we must also learn through listening.”

“Like everyone else, I’m well aware of those mass gatherings young people are holding across the country, and I’m also aware of the fact that they’ve been calling for the release of Anya Ahar, which leads to my next question. Why are *you* so interested in coming to the aid of such a vile young lady?”

“Because I believe in her,” I say simply, then I amend that with, “There’s far more to her than any of us know.”

“How could you possibly believe in such a person?”

“I realize she’s troubled, but I also believe that, with some guidance and understanding, she can easily be rehabilitated and use her extraordinary gifts to contribute to society.”

Hardy still appears skeptical. “And just how do you think you’re going to reach her when the country’s premiere psychologist and her own father have failed so miserably?”

I sigh. “I don’t have an answer for you... I just know I can.”

“Unless you can prove to me that you actually have a chance to win that hearing, I may have no choice but to file an appeal with council, requesting a revocation of your motion being heard.”

I throw pleasantries out the window as my anger spikes. “And if you do such a thing, this association can go searching for another presidential candidate,” I say as I rise and stride out of the room.

* * *

The following morning, while preparing to meet with Anya at the Federal Justice Center, I receive a memo from Attorney General Sutton informing me that a date for Anya’s Judicial Triangle hearing has been set. The memo states that the Outer Commission has declared the hearing a Code Three, which means three non-American judges will preside over the case. It also means the Militant Alliance of America will be permitted to argue against my motion.

In order to properly prepare for the hearing, I’ve asked my former law professor Arthur Fine and his staff to assist me. There is still so much more about Anya Ahar I’ll need to learn, and I’m aware it won’t be easy. Fortunately, the hearing is scheduled to take place prior to the stretch run of the election, so at least it’ll give me a little breathing room.

What do I really know about this person I’ll soon be placing my reputation on the line for, once again? What does anybody really know about Anya Ahar? Other than the fact that she is a scientific genius trapped in a world of personal despair, not a heck of a lot, it appears. Her teachers and classmates from high school and university describe her as being impossible to get to know and socially inept, someone who always presented a cold, empty stare

to the world. One professor from Summit recalled how Anya would always sit in the back corner during his lectures in what was a half empty room. Another said he doubted Anya ever paid attention to his lectures and eventually came to realize that half the time she was aimlessly doodling or sleeping as he spoke. Nonetheless, when her courses were completed, Anya always seemed to achieve a perfect grade.

While I wait for the guards to bring her to the visiting room, I watch a view-file of an interview with Anya's mother, Maria, not long before she died:

"I'm joined by the incredible Maria Ahar, one of this country's all-time great gymnasts, who today has officially announced her retirement from competition," said the excited young sports reporter. "I understand you have a little one on the way."

"Yes, I'm two months into my pregnancy," Maria answered with a pleasant smile.

"Is this a permanent retirement?"

"Most definitely," Maria replied mildly. "I feel I've accomplished everything I can in the sport of gymnastics."

"You're definitely one of the more fascinating athletes this country has ever seen—continuously donating your medals, trophies, and prize money to children's hospitals. What made you choose to do that?"

"It was never my wish to receive accolades. But it is my wish to help others."

"Would you want to see your child follow in your footsteps as a gymnast?"

"Whatever it is my child chooses to do with their life, I just hope they help make the world a better place."

I hear the sound of clanking chains out in the hallway. The door in front of me opens, revealing Anya, with two burly guards on either side of her. She barely reaches their elbows. She appears even more fragile than she did in our prior encounters. The guards slowly escort her into the room and place her before me. Her expression and eyes are empty.

“Hello, Anya,” I say calmly. I look at the guards and order, “Gentlemen, please remove the shackles.”

“Sorry, ma’am. We can’t grant your request. It wouldn’t be following proper procedure,” one of them replies.

“I’m not asking you to. I’m *telling you to* remove the shackles. Please.”

After a moment’s hesitation, they oblige.

“That’ll be all, gentlemen.” I wave them back toward the door. When I turn back to look at Anya, she looks confused, as if she’s wondering why I care.

“I’m here to help you, Anya,” I say. She remains silent, gazing into her lap. “But there’s no way I can, if you’re not going to speak with me.” I get no response. I’m trying to remain relaxed, but I’m becoming frustrated. “Okay, have it your way. I was planning to fight for you, but if you prefer to have your life come to an end, then—”

“It’s a hopeless situation. Look what happened the last time you tried to help me,” she mutters, still gazing into her lap.

Well, at least I got her to speak. “You’re correct, Anya. I failed you in that hearing. But you see, that experience has made me a stronger person, and I’m even more determined to get it right this time.”

She abruptly raises her head and looks me directly in the eyes before speaking. “Did my father put you up to this? Did he ask you to represent me again?”

“Yes, he did, but I wouldn’t be doing this if I didn’t want to, or didn’t believe I could help you. As far as your father is concerned, he loves you with all his heart, Anya. He’s even admitted to me that the extravagant life he led was his way of covering up his own sadness and guilt.”

“I see. And now he thinks he can just wipe away the past and heal his guilty conscience by saving me from being executed,” she says sarcastically. “What I don’t understand is, why do *you* care? Am I a pawn in your political game?”

“You see, Anya, I know that despite your thick shroud of doom, there’s reason for hope,” I reply calmly. “I know the hypocrisy that

fills our world tears at your heart. And I also know that the reason you're filled with such anger is because you know the world *can* be and *should* be a better place."

"You don't know a damn thing about me!" she replies angrily.

At least she's finally displaying some form of emotion. "Oh, I know more about you than you think," I reply as I take out my flash-pad.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Here." I slide the flash-pad over to her.

She studies it for a moment. "How... how did you find out about this?" Anya asks, reading the list of charitable donations she'd made prior to turning herself in.

"When I care about something... or someone, I never leave a stone unturned," I reply. "What *I* don't understand is why you wanted this to be kept a secret. Disclosing this information could very well have changed the outcome of the last hearing."

"I never wanted to receive accolades," she replies, looking startled. "I applied my life to science and medicine because I wanted to do my part to make the world a better place."

For a moment, I'm taken back to her mother's final interview. Through the lenses of her enormous horn-rimmed glasses, I see tears forming in the corners of her eyes.

"I'd like to go back to my cell, please," she says softly, bowing her head. I press the buzzer to call the guards. When they enter, they gently place the shackles on her wrists and ankles then, as if raising a stack of feathers, effortlessly lift her from her seat.

* * *

"How did it go with Anya?" Dr. Ahar asks me as we settle down for dinner in his opulent penthouse condo.

"Surprisingly, I was able to evoke far more emotion in her than I thought I could," I reply as I gaze at the appetizing seafood platter his butler places on the table.

"I had a feeling she'd respond to you. Do you think she'll cooperate with you for the hearing?" Ahar asks as he begins to fill his plate.

“I have no idea what to expect, Doctor. I think it’s best we take it one day at a time. I just need to keep chipping away at her shell.”

He looks at me. “In all honesty, do you think you’ll be able to keep my daughter alive?”

“I don’t mean to be flippant, but I think that’ll depend entirely on Anya and whether she shows the court there’s a reason to *keep* her alive,” I answer while cracking open a lobster tail. “Actually, if she’s willing to work with me, I’m confident I’ll not only get her a stay of execution, but her complete freedom.”

The doctor looks at me, puzzled.

CHAPTER 6

This night, sleep won't come. The thought of that pointless war that led to so much heartache, including the senseless death of Maria Ahar, and the tragic impact it has had on both Anya and her father, continues to fill me with overwhelming sadness. I begin thinking back to the most horrific day of my life, just a little more than twenty-five years ago.

When I completed high school, I decided to follow in my father's footsteps and study law. I studied criminal, constitutional, and environmental law at the country's premiere university, Summit. The Democratic president at the time, Jackson Snyder, had been making incredible inroads in convincing Congress to pass several bills that would help with eco-efficiencies. But like the dilemma faced by President Westgale more than two decades later, in order to facilitate these programs, a large amount of government funding was required. By instituting a number of very strict environmental laws, increasing taxes for the country's leading industrialists, and drastically decreasing military funding, Snyder and his administration believed the American government, after decades of failed attempts and false promises, would finally be able to properly fulfill its role in making America a far more peaceful and eco-friendly place to live.

I'll never forget the sound of that siren while attending class at Summit. It had jarred me right out of my seat. I immediately sensed it wasn't a false alarm or some kind of fire drill. I knew that one was for real.

In the preceding months, the largest military cutbacks and the strictest gun laws this country had ever seen had created mass paranoia among right-wing Americans. The political divide had reached frightening new depths. This led to all kinds of speculation that a political uprising might be in the works.

But how could this happen in America? After all, the country's Constitution provided mechanisms that, if push did come to shove, would prevent such a thing. And then there was the military; it very rarely ever became involved in the dark world of politics. But this had been an unprecedented era, with America feeling increasingly threatened by the HKM, a country of immense wealth and power that was more than capable of destroying it. And the night *the* interview aired on First Source News, that paranoia had become like a giant pitchfork, piercing the heart of the nation.

* * *

“Good evening, America, I’m Carly Taylor and you’re watching First Source News. I’d like to welcome from an unknown location Mr. Kenneth Pahl, the former chief military commander of the HKM. Mr. Pahl, welcome to First Source News.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

“Wow, this is incredible. I understand you’ve asked exclusively to be on First Source this evening to deliver a very serious warning to America.”

“Yes, that is correct. I’m appearing with you this evening to warn America that the HKM is currently planning to destroy the infrastructure of several major American cities.”

“My God... Do you know when and how this is going to happen?”

“I don’t know how it’ll happen, I just know it will—and soon.”

“Is this attack being coordinated by the HKM government?”

“Yes, coordinated and funded.”

“Have you contacted American authorities about this?”

“No, that definitely would not be in my best interest.”

* * *

After the interview, Kenneth Pahl was never heard from or seen again.

The American government found itself in a state of confusion, not knowing how seriously Mr. Pahl's warning should be taken. Was he telling the truth? Did he have his own motive? Was he coerced or bribed to come forward? President Snyder placed the country on high security alert, but to many, especially members of a new far-right movement called the Militant Alliance of America, this was not enough. Although no such attack ended up taking place, it was never determined whether the information Kenneth Pahl provided was or wasn't accurate. Nonetheless, it became a key factor in events to come.

* * *

Reeling, I grabbed my belongings and made my way out of the building as the terrifying words were repeated over the university's sound system: "Evacuate immediately; evacuate immediately."

I hurried down several flights of stairs with other students, all of us scurrying toward the exits. Some I knew very well, while others were complete strangers. On this day, we were all instantly bonded by what eventually became known as the War Within.

"Nicole, are you okay?" a young man asked, stopping me out on the street. It was Andy Pemberton, who also studied law at Summit. Andy and I had known each other since childhood. His family controlled the American energy giant, ERT Power Corporation. It was no secret they were leaders in the recently formed Militant Alliance of America.

"Andy, what is going on out here?" I said fearfully as a dozen or so military vehicles pulled up around the building.

"Come with me. I'll get you out of harm's way," he replied, leading me to his electro.

"Oh my Lord. Your alliance finally went through with it," I gasped.

The order to "Evacuate immediately" was now being broadcast into the streets, booming out of enormous speakers mounted on top of military vehicles. Pandemonium erupted as soldiers strode toward the university, shouting orders. Some of the school's security personnel resisted following the orders and were immediately taken away.

“Oh my God!” I cried as I watched the mayhem unfold, shivering in the bitter cold.

I noticed several distinguished-looking men in long overcoats handing out booklets to the students. To no surprise, copies of those same booklets were piled in the back of Andy’s electro. As we drove away, most of the students were now peacefully exiting the premises, while others stood speaking with the men in the overcoats, skimming through the literature. Then all of a sudden several objects came flying toward the electro, barely missing the passenger side where I was sitting. As I turned to look back, I saw half a dozen students being forcefully apprehended by the soldiers.

Minutes later, we arrived at the Last Frontier, New York City’s preeminent steakhouse. When we exited the electro, a soldier greeted us. “Hello, Mr. Pemberton. Hello, ma’am,” he said as he led us into the restaurant.

It immediately became obvious that the restaurant was not functioning in its normal manner. The room was filled with a large contingent of soldiers, and several men and women in business suits and overcoats, focusing on their flash-pads. All this confirmed my suspicion that Andy knew exactly what was happening. As the soldier led us to our table, we walked by an area that had been cordoned off with a black curtain. Through a break in the curtain I saw a group of men seemingly celebrating. I immediately recognized Andy’s uncle, Earl Pemberton, along with Gerald Levin and Domingo Diaz, Chairman of First Source News, among the group.

“How can this be?” I murmured as Andy and I sat down at our table. I held my hands to my face.

“It had to happen, Nicole,” Andy said matter-of-factly.

“Had to happen!” I responded, raising my head.

“This government went too far,” Andy replied, his voice hard with conviction. “If we didn’t do this, Snyder and the rest of his cronies would have drained the lifeblood from this country and we would have ended up being the HKM’s own little experiment.”

I stared at him in disbelief, shaking my head. “A civil war? Is that the solution, Andy?” I said as tears welled in the corners of my eyes.

“Regrettably, there’s no alternative,” he calmly replied. “This government refused to listen to the people who matter in this country, and now, sadly, we’ll all have to pay a price in order to clean up the mess.”

“The people who matter!” I said, my voice rising. “I guess you’re speaking of the wealthy, like your family and all its influential friends.”

“Oh, come on, Nicole! You speak as if your family’s one step away from the poorhouse.” He snickered.

Sirens wailed outside the restaurant. I reached for my flash-pad to contact my parents to make sure they were safe. There was no signal. “This damn thing!” I hissed. I tried again and again. When I looked up, Andy was grinning, as if he knew something I didn’t.

“It’s not your flash-pad, Nicole,” Andy said. “The signal’s been disabled. It’ll only be temporary,” he added.

One of the soldiers stopped at our table with a platter of sandwiches. “Help yourself,” Andy said as he chose a roast beef sandwich and pulled it from its wrapper. He took a bite and began chomping away, talking around the food in his mouth. “It’s all going to work out. We’ll be fine. Besides, I’ve been telling my Uncle Earl about you, and if you’re interested, he’d like to speak with you regarding a future position in ERT’s legal department.” Smiling confidently, he looked out the window.

“How... how in the world can you be so cold!” I said angrily. I too then looked outside. “Just what in the hell is happening out there?” I exclaimed, watching the chaos. Sirens continued to wail.

“It’s very simple, Nicole. The Militant Alliance of America is rising up to take back this country,” Andy answered. “I guess you could call it the Preservation Plan.”

A loud cheer echoed through the room. I turned to look toward the sound—several soldiers stood before a large flash-screen. “Turn up the sound,” Andy called eagerly.

I froze in shock. There was the White House in flames, barely recognizable. I recognized the voice of First Source News anchor Carly Taylor, describing the scene.

“Hold on... I’m now receiving official word that the battle on the White House grounds has already concluded, with President Snyder and his executive committee in full retreat. As shocking and appalling as this may seem to some, with the continuous threats from the HKM, this may go down as the most important day in American history. I think they’ll now get the message that America is not to be messed with,” she said calmly as images of a burning White House continued to flash across the screen.

“I’m learning that the Militant Alliance of America is also currently seizing other prominent government properties across the land. They realize there’ll be resistance, but they are predicting that within a month or two, they will have accomplished their goal. Hopefully, casualties will be minimal. It’s amazing to think how the nation’s leading industrialists and our military have come together to create this powerful alliance—I guess you could say they’ve emerged as our liberty fighters. God bless America,” she concluded with a glowing smile.

Seconds later, an elated Earl Pemberton appeared at the front of the restaurant. “Let’s see Jackson Snyder try to take this from my hands!” he shouted as he held up an antique rifle he’d removed from the wall. Gerald Levin and the others smiled and cheered. Domingo Diaz, the man behind First Source News, was now nowhere to be seen. “Hey, everyone, sweet blue-eyed Carly said it best when she called us America’s liberty fighters!” Earl hollered.

I was sickened. How could they be so excited about something so horrendous? I couldn’t bear it any longer so I got up, grabbed my coat, and prepared to leave.

“Nicole, why don’t you stick around and join the celebration,” Andy said, tugging on my coat.

“Our country is being torn apart, and you expect me to celebrate? Are you out of your mind, Andy?”

“Well, at least let me have one of the soldiers take you safely to your apartment.”

“I guess I don’t have much choice,” I replied in a huff.

Instead of heading back to my apartment, I decided to pay my parents a visit. I needed to be with them and ensure they were okay.

On the way, I witnessed street after street lined with military vehicles. Every few blocks I saw angry civilians confronting the soldiers. Some were being apprehended. Sadly, I also witnessed some lying in the streets, badly injured or dead. It was a scene that would forever haunt me.

When I arrived at my parents' house I was relieved when Mom opened the door and gave me a hug. "I'm so glad you're okay, honey," she said as tears streamed down her cheeks. "I can't believe this is happening in our country. It's just so terrible," she cried.

In the living room, Dad sat on a sofa in front of his flash-screen, watching the news and shaking his head in disbelief. "Come here, my dear," he said, waving me over to him. He set his glass of vodka and orange juice on a side table and put his arm around me as we watched the news. I'd never seen him so distraught.

"How... how in the world did this happen, Dad?" I asked.

"It's all been brewing for quite some time, Nicole," Dad said sadly.

"Being Attorney General, you must know how the government is planning to respond?"

He sighed. "It's a battle that can't be won. Some of our local police forces are doing the best they can, but they're going up against the military."

"Are you telling me the entire American military is on board with this uprising?"

"Sources from my office have informed me that we're looking at about eighty-five percent. We're in the midst of establishing a peace coalition to see if we can slow the MAA's momentum."

"Oh my God! What is going to become of this great country?" I cried.

Dad had no response. He simply shook his head, ran his hands over his face, dropped a few more pieces of ice into his glass, and refilled it.

I turned off the flash-screen and closed my weary eyes.

* * *

Upon the War Within's conclusion, and a year after the Militant Alliance's failure to properly reshape the country, a shattered

America was in dire need of rescue. The country's economy and political infrastructure were in peril. Nationwide, morale was at an all-time low. Thankfully, with the exception of the HKM and Pinia, the world's major countries came to the rescue by forming a commission to oversee America's reformation. The Outer Commission immediately began developing the New Order Treaty, under which America would be governed, with the idea of protecting the country from itself and avoiding a repeat of the War Within. Although to most Americans the notion of the Constitution being tampered with was unconscionable, there was no choice.

CHAPTER 7

I enter the living room early in the evening to find my fifteen-year-old daughter, Tiffany, sitting on the sofa, reading a book. “Hey, Tif, what are you reading?” I ask.

“*The Book of ZeZ*,” she replies, showing me the cover. Because of her recent interest in the mysteries of the universe, I’d bought her a copy while in Vexton.

“So, what do you think?”

“It’s fascinating,” she answers, barely able to lift her eyes from the page. “I love the part about when these birdlike demons tried to fly over Moon Shade Bluff and the Moon Lords destroyed them with lightning bolts.” She sets the book facedown on the side table and says, “If you ask me, Moon Shade Bluff is definitely a healing temple.”

“Well, I didn’t ask, but thanks for enlightening me anyway,” I respond with a chuckle, then turn as Lowell and Tiffany’s thirteen-year-old sister, January, enter the room.

“Hey, Mom, when we live in the Freedom Home, will I be allowed to decorate my room the way I want?” Tiffany asks out of the blue.

“If you are, they’ll have to change the name to the Freaky Home,” January quips.

Tiffany sneers at her. “At least my walls won’t be pink and covered with pictures of cute little bunnies.”

“Okay, girls, that’s enough,” Lowell says with a laugh. “If you keep this up, *I’ll* be the one decorating both your rooms—and trust me, you wouldn’t want that.”

“Now, now, let’s not get carried away; the election is—” My flash-pad buzzes. It’s Hunter.

“Nicole, I think you’d better tune in to UCIT,” he says anxiously.

“What’s going on, Nicole?” Lowell asks as I turn on the flash-screen.

“Central Park... Look at them,” I say in a hushed voice. What appears to be thousands of people dressed in black, all wearing balaclavas, have gathered peacefully around a flagpole bearing a giant American flag.

“My Lord. It looks like five times the number of the prior gatherings,” Lowell says.

Seconds later, in unison, those gathered pump their fists into the air, and for the next minute or so they chant, “Free Anya! Free America!” Then, simultaneously, at the count of three, everyone gathered removes their mask.

“Wow—unbelievable,” I exclaim.

The camera pans across the gathering, then closes in. I see young Americans of every ethnicity and color. There appears to be an equal number of males and females. Seconds later, the group separates into smaller groups, once again chanting, “Free Anya! Free America!”

“This should be interesting,” Lowell says as Cryptic begins moving through the crowd. The robot’s green eyes shift from oriental to occidental. Its chest displays a flashing neon image of the Statue of Liberty.

“Excuse me, ma’am. May I have a moment of your time?” the robot asks a young lady with a shaved head who’s wearing an excessive amount of purple eyeliner.

“Ask away,” she replies excitedly.

“Who am I speaking with?” Cryptic asks.

“My name is Monica.”

“Would you mind divulging your age?”

“I’m twenty-two.”

“What brings you here to Central Park on this splendid evening?”

“I’m here to celebrate the coming of a new age.”

“A new age?”

"Yeah, America's rebirth."

"Would you kindly enlighten me?"

"We are tired of being dictated to, of being told how to live. To our government and our corporate leaders: you don't speak for us. You're not America! This country belongs to its people!" Monica says with passion, staring into the camera. *"We will continue to send out our message until we are heard and America is a country that permits all of its citizens to have a voice."*

A large crowd is gathering around her and Cryptic.

"When you say 'we,' are you referring to AXE?" the robot asks her.

Monica looks blankly at Cryptic. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"After your last two gatherings, AXE's supposed leader, a young man referring to himself as Blackheart, immediately came out and claimed responsibility for setting buildings ablaze."

"Those crimes had nothing to do with our peaceful demonstrations," Monica insists. *"For some reason I guess this Blackheart guy and whoever committed those crimes wanted the authorities to believe otherwise."*

"So, are you telling me you and the rest of these people are not affiliated with Blackheart and AXE?"

"Obviously I can't speak for this entire group, but I know I'm here of my own accord. I'm here representing the youth of America. I'm not here in the name of anarchy. This is a peaceful movement and we're growing by the day. Soon, our government will have no choice but to give a voice to the youth of this country."

"That's right," a tall, skinny young man chimes in as Monica drifts away into the crowd. *"Strength in numbers,"* he adds.

"And what is your name?" Cryptic asks the young man.

"Lance. My friends call me Lanny," the young man replies.

"Tell me, Lanny, what is it you and your friends expect from your government?"

"A voice. I'm nineteen years old. My peers and I don't feel relevant. Just consider who makes all the decisions in this country."

"So, this all comes down to giving the youth of America a voice?"

“That’s the main reason we’re here, robot man,” Lanny replies. “We’re also demanding accountability. We’re sick and tired of hearing about corrupt government officials, and powerful corporations that believe they have a right to place business before ethics.”

I’m hanging onto every word this young man says, and wishing I could go down to that park and shout out my platform.

“Your request to free Anya Ahar—is there a general feeling among this group that the AXE doctrine should be recognized as a guide for your ‘new age’?”

“It’s not about AXE or the doctrine,” Lanny insists. “In fact, I haven’t even read the doctrine, nor do I intend to. That being said, that doctrine has every right to exist—it’s called free speech. It’s what used to be regarded as the First Amendment.”

“And Anya Ahar?”

“Her story is tragic. This government needs to right a wrong and give her back her freedom, which she so rightly deserves.”

“Are you not at all concerned by the fact that she manufactured helcin for the purpose of one day possibly using it against the American government?” asks Cryptic.

“Why is that any different from what the world’s arms manufacturers are doing as we speak? She never personally used that poison as a weapon.” Lanny shifts forward and leans toward Cryptic, shoulders hunched, hands open, palms up, as if pressing his point home. “Look, if I learned my mother had died—or I should say, was killed—by our government in such a horrific way, I’m certain I too would want to be protected. Our society owes it to her to set her free.”

“And what if the government doesn’t listen to your plea? Will that mean your peaceful demonstrations will turn violent?”

Lanny steps back and says proudly, “This government will have to listen to us. Like I said, our strength is in our numbers. Similar demonstrations are currently taking place right across the country.”

“I have one last question for you. Why the dark and threatening appearance, if these gatherings are meant to be peaceful demonstrations?”

“Well, that was all about gaining the attention we deserve. After all, the perception of evil can be a very powerful weapon.”

“There you go, Nicole. It sounds like your platform will be garnering quite a bit of support,” Lowell says.

“Yeah, but I just can’t rely solely on young America for support. I’ll have to reach the other side of the spectrum as well, if my campaign is going to be successful,” I respond.

* * *

In Champ Sutton’s office at the Freedom Home, he and President Westgale are watching the demonstration. “This movement is like an unstoppable force, becoming more powerful by the minute,” Westgale says as the flash-screen displays images from other rallies across the country.

“Ah... here we go,” Champ says, reading a message from one of his staff. “It looks like UCIT is about to air another view-file from our friend, Blackheart.”

“Damn it!” Westgale hollers. “I personally told those idiots that from now on we need to review these view-files before they go to air.”

“There’s nothing we can do, sir. We have to remember that when the Outer Commission set up UCIT, its goal was to eliminate all forms of censorship,” Champ explains.

“You don’t need to remind me, Champ,” Westgale murmurs. “I’m not a fan of censorship, but thank God the day is soon approaching when we won’t have to answer to that damn Commission, and live by that shambolic treaty.”

Seconds later, the view-file appears on the flash-screen. In what looks like the same basement he had spoken from before, Blackheart appears, once again dressed in black and sporting a balaclava.

“Hello,” he says. “I’m sure you know me by now. If you don’t, my name is Blackheart.” He snickers. From within his balaclava, brooding eyes peer into the camera. “As you witnessed today at Central Park and across the rest of the country, the revolution is well underway, my friends. In this insurgency, there is no place for injustice! We will stand as one, united by—”

With a report like that of a gunshot, the window behind him breaks. "What the hell—oh no!" he shouts, scrambling back, out of range of the pickup.

A powerful explosion rips through the room, and the screen goes black.

"What in the world was that?" Westgale says, staring stunned at the screen for a moment. He and Champ exchange glances.

Westgale's chief of security, Gil Robichaud, bursts into the room. "Did we kill this guy, Gil?" Westgale asks as he rubs his hands over his face.

"I know Bradley Peters and his team have been trying to track the guy down, but to my knowledge they had no idea who he was. And besides, they were under strict orders to inform my office if they did have any leads," Gil replies. He then proceeds to contact Bradley on his flash-pad and put the call up on the room's flash-screen.

"I know nothing about this, sir," Bradley answers when questioned by Gil.

"Is it possible one or a group of your men went rogue and killed him?" Westgale asks Bradley.

"There's no way, sir. When my grandfather placed me in charge of this operation, I made sure to recruit only our top agents. But I'll look into it." Bradley ends the call.

Westgale looks at Champ and Gil with a raised eyebrow. "Hmm... if it wasn't us who took this guy out, then I can't help but wonder if it was the MAA that did."

* * *

Twenty minutes after the Blackheart view-file ended in the likely death of its subject, the UCIT Network returns to Cryptic, now standing in front of the Statue of Liberty, its eyes flashing red and blue, an American flag displayed on its chest.

"On behalf of UCIT, I wish to inform the American people that the airing of today's shocking event was simply the result of uncensored news," the robot announces. "We do not apologize if you were offended, and will continue to present America with the unfettered truth.

“Please note that, at this time, both the PBA and MAA have refused to comment on this matter or claim responsibility,” the robot says in its monotone voice. “Other than information obtained in an interview I conducted with him in Los Angeles and the view-files he sent to our network, the only thing we know about this extremist who referred to himself as Blackheart is that whatever’s left of his body has been decimated beyond recognition.”

CHAPTER 8

Since the day Blackheart made himself known to the public, law enforcement agencies across the country had been attempting to uncover his identity. The person they hoped would provide answers was one of the creators of AXE, Morris Johns. Unfortunately, he'd contracted a serious illness while in prison, so Gil had been unable to interview him until now.

"I'm very glad to hear you're feeling better, Morris," Gil says as he meets with the man at the Federal Justice Center.

"Yeah, somehow I don't think you came here to bring me chocolates and flowers," Morris sneers. "So what is it you want?"

"Information."

Morris snickers. "Wow, I'm going to have my lawyer demand you guys put me on your payroll." He regards Gil for a moment. "I get it. You still don't have a clue who Blackheart is, so you've come running to me."

"You're correct. We don't know a thing about this guy, but we *do* know something about your father. It looks rather certain that his dealings with Edgar Fryman are going to land him in prison for quite some time," Gil says matter-of-factly.

Morris leans across the table to growl, "And do you actually think I care about what happens to my self-serving, ostentatious imbecile of a father? As far as I'm concerned, both he and his company can go to hell."

Gil is undefeated. “I’m well aware of the resentment you feel toward your father,” he says calmly. “I’m also well aware of the love you feel for your sister. And regrettably, it appears she’ll be taking the fall along with him.”

Morris sighs. “Jackie’s a good person. She’s the only decent executive in that entire greedy corporation. She’s not guilty of anything, other than being the daughter of an idiot.”

“Yeah, it’s unfortunate that she’ll have to face the consequences of that ‘idiot’s’ crooked ways. I really feel for your mother—her husband and both her children locked away. That’s just plain—”

“Okay. I get the point,” Morris interrupts. “I’ll tell you what I know, as long as you promise Jackie doesn’t go to prison.” He sighs and flops back in his chair. “Don’t you guys ever get tired of this game?”

Gil offers a tight smile. “It’s called leverage, Morris. Now you have a deal—providing, of course, what you tell me turns out to be true. So, after all the questioning we did with you guys pertaining to AXE, please tell me why it is that you and Dwight Wagner felt so obliged to protect Blackheart.”

“Blackheart was never a part of AXE. When I met him he was involved with an extremist group out in LA called the SOH.”

“The Spirit of Hades?”

“Yeah, those are the guys. Before we began AXE, Dwight and I attended a couple of their meetings.”

“In the hopes of joining?”

“That’s right. At first we gave it some thought, but after seeing what they were about, we got the hell out of there.”

“Why?”

“Well, let’s put it this way: with AXE, Dwight and I wanted to *reshape* America. These guys, their goal was to *destroy* it.”

Morris describes elaborate view-files created by the Spirit of Hades that he’d seen—files describing the future bombing of the Statue of Liberty, the presidential jet being shot down by laser blasts, President Westgale and the Lady of Honor being electrocuted and beheaded, and the Freedom Home burning to ash as the White House had done all those years ago.

The revelation chills Gil to the bone. “After LA Justice was tipped off about them, they instantly shut the operation down. What else can *you* tell me about them?” he asks.

“From what I witnessed, it appeared to be quite an operation. Highly financed and technologically advanced.”

“Do you know if they were domestic or international?”

“That, I couldn’t tell you. They were extremely guarded. At the meetings Dwight and I attended, Blackheart was the only person who spoke.”

“So, was he the group’s leader?”

Morris shakes his head. “No, he was like some kind of spokesman. There was some other guy who was directing Blackheart. I’m certain he was the leader.”

“Were you able to see any faces, or were they all wearing those stupid ski masks?”

“Yeah, they all wore masks, but they weren’t ski masks,” Morris says. “They looked like some kind of fencing mask, very high-tech.”

“Now, did you have any further contact with Blackheart or anyone else from the group, once they shut down the operation?” Gil leans slightly forward.

Morris exhales and leans back in his chair. “That’s when Blackheart came to us. He’d heard we were starting AXE, and he wanted in. He even went so far as to get the AXE insignia tattooed across his chest.” He lifts one eyebrow and snorts with disgust.

“But you didn’t let him in?”

“Dwight was all for it, but I sure as hell wasn’t. This guy was a complete lunatic. And you have to remember, I already had my hands full with Dwight. Anya wanted nothing to do with Blackheart, either. So we gave Dwight an ultimatum. Either you can accept our funding *without* Blackheart, or you can run off with him and start your own group.”

“And how did he feel about being left out?”

“He didn’t put up a fight, but he did tell us he was planning to start his own extremist group out on the West Coast. So, after you

guys brought us down, I guess that's what he did out in LA, and he called it AXE because of all the attention *we'd* received."

"Do you have any idea who would have wanted this guy dead?"

Morris snorts a laugh. "Probably quite a few people. And after seeing firsthand that group's sheer contempt for this country, I'd think you guys were right at the top of the list."

* * *

Upon returning to Pinia, Shadow and Jessica learn that Cobra has planned an extravagant "welcome home" party in honor of Shadow. Invited are all the high-ranking members of the Iron Lotus and their families, along with many of the country's elite.

"Are you going to go public regarding your mother?" Jessica asks Shadow as they prepare for the gala.

Shadow's fingers slow on the shirt he's been buttoning. "I think it's very important to keep it out of the public domain," he replies solemnly. "This country sure doesn't need any more turmoil." Jessica nods her understanding. "The Iron Lotus is now in power, and I have no intention of bringing my father and his militia down. I refuse to resort to his ways. Let's do our best to enjoy this evening, and then I'll deal with him."

The event is being held at the theater where Cobra first met Luanda. Over the years, Cobra had developed the property into a multifaceted complex, including a beautifully appointed banquet hall.

When Shadow and Jessica arrive, Shadow is greeted with a hero's welcome. It's not every day that a Pinian saves the president of the United States. "Hey, Jessica, I hope your father remembers he owes us one," jokes Theodore, military commander of the Iron Lotus. The small crowd gathered around them laughs.

"Don't worry, Theo, I'll make sure his office sends you an autographed American flag," Jessica quips back.

After dinner, the guests make their way to the theater. The evening begins with a performance by Pinia's sensational eighteen-year-old acrobatic dancer, Isabella. The crowd gasps as she performs her stunts, displaying incredible skill and concentration.

“Smooth as silk,” Jessica whispers to Shadow.

“Utter perfection,” Shadow agrees.

After a brief intermission, the crowd returns to watch a play titled *The Mighty One*, which pays tribute to Pinia’s sacred legend, the Sortar Dragon. When the curtain opens, the first scene begins with a young, wide-eyed child discovering a mysterious-looking fluorescent stone in a dense forest.

“Isn’t that Ulu on the stage?” Shadow whispers to Jessica, recognizing the sweet young child who’d endeared herself to Jessica and her fellow aid workers.

“Oh wow, it is,” she replies with a smile.

They both turn as Cobra slides into the seat beside Jessica. “I had my staff arrange this entire event the day I learned Shadow was going to be okay,” Cobra says proudly. “You’ve done such wonderful work with the children; they’re so smart and adorable,” he adds to Jessica.

At the conclusion of the play, the crowd reconvenes in the ballroom for dance, drink, and dessert. Theodore approaches and says to Jessica, “I had the opportunity to spend some time with your fellow aid workers while you were tending to Shadow in America.” He offers Jessica a glass of Cobra’s homemade white wine. “Very impressive young men and women. The future of America appears to be in very capable hands.”

“Thank you, sir. I think a new America is on the horizon,” Jessica responds, her voice confident.

“Well now, here’s to a new America,” Theodore says with a wide grin. He raises his glass, and Jessica and Shadow touch their glasses to his.

The guests are invited back to the theater to end the evening. Cobra takes the stage. “I hope everybody has had a wonderful evening!” he roars. “Let’s hear it for my incredible son, Shadow Pix!”

Shadow rises from his seat in the center balcony and waves to the crowd. They respond by giving him a standing ovation.

“I’d like to present our final act of the evening,” Cobra announces. “Please welcome to the stage an orchestra that has

deservedly garnered praise from across the globe. They call themselves Shades of Night.”

Shadow is deeply affected during the performance, which conjures memories of his mother. He remembers how she played the piano for him at bedtime, which had erased his childhood fears of the night and sent him off into a peaceful sleep.

As the orchestra concludes with “Starlight Serenade,” Shadow squeezes Jessica’s hand as his body starts to shake with silent sobs. She leans over and gently whispers, “It’ll be okay, Shadow.”

Later in the evening, at Cobra’s palace, Shadow realizes the time has come to confront his father. “Father, will you join me for a cup of tea?” he asks, his heart pounding. He leads Cobra into the main den, where he’s had one of the servants leave two cups of tea. Cobra looks closely at him and Shadow looks away, trying to conceal his uneasiness.

“I hope it wasn’t too much for you this evening, Shadow,” Cobra says before taking a sip of his tea, regarding his son carefully.

“No, it was a wonderful evening,” Shadow replies, staring into space as he gathers his thoughts.

“If you don’t mind me saying, you don’t seem to be yourself, son.”

“I’ve just been doing a lot of thinking about my trip to the US,” Shadow replies, lifting his cup and staring into it.

“I understand you were honored at the Freedom Home. I’m sure it must have been quite an event. You must have met some very important and interesting people,” his father says.

Shadow meets his father’s eyes. “Actually, the most interesting person I met in America wasn’t even at that event. In fact, they weren’t even from America.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, she was from Pinia. Her name is Luanda,” Shadow answers, feeling his face heat up.

Cobra abruptly sets his cup down on the side table next to his chair. His face tightens. There is a beat-long pause before he asks, “Your mother?”

Who else? Shadow thinks angrily, and he can no longer feign calm. “How could you be such a heartless man?” he blurts.

Cobra holds up his hands. “Whoa... what are you talking about?”

“You know damn well what I’m talking about,” Shadow growls, glaring at his father. “How could you be so cruel!”

“Wait a second.”

“Don’t deny it. I’m not one of your little puppets, Father.”

Cobra sighs and studies Shadow. “She gave me no choice, son.”

“Oh, what was she going to do? Bring down your empire with her music?” Shadow sneers.

Cobra leans toward Shadow and says earnestly, “Listen to me, Shadow. I did everything for that woman. I gave her a life she could only once dream of.”

Shadow leaps up and whirls to confront his father. “Yeah, and then in a flash, because of your giant ego, you turned that dream into a nightmare by ordering her to leave the very country she was born in—her home.”

Cobra’s face darkens with anger. “She brought it all upon herself. That clueless bleeding heart thought I’d actually turn my back on my father for her. She didn’t deserve to walk on Pinian soil!”

“Well then, I guess I don’t deserve to either,” Shadow says, his voice taut. “Once I tie up the US energy deal, Jessica and I will be out of here—for good! And don’t worry, I won’t tell our people how cruel you really are.”

“So you’re just going to turn your back on your father and your country for a mother who’s a mere stranger. A person you don’t even know anything about,” Cobra replies, punctuating the last sentence by sweeping his arm up.

“That person brought me into this world,” Shadow says. He stares at his father as if seeing him for the first time. “The more I think about it, I realize you’re the one I truly know nothing about.”

“Well, I’m sorry you feel this way, Shadow,” Cobra sneers, hands on his hips. “Now that we’ve attained our goal and gained complete control of this country, it’s a real shame you’re choosing to abandon ship.” Again he flings his hand out.

“That’s your problem, Father: your sickening desire to control... to control everything and everybody.” Shadow whirls and stalks out of the room.

* * *

After Shadow exits, Cobra heads toward the palace’s front hallway. When he comes to the wall photos of his six deceased sons, he stops and gazes at them. Opening his arms, eyes closed and head tilted back, he murmurs, “The day will soon come... the day will soon come.”

The following morning, when Cobra and Theodore meet at the Iron Lotus’s military headquarters, Cobra is in high spirits. “Everything is running perfectly, Theo. My father was so correct when he used to tell me there’s nothing more beneficial in battle than gaining the blind trust of your enemy. The energy deal is in place, and Shadow’s become quite a hero in the US—which bodes very well for us. Soon he’ll be flying off into the sunset with his American dream girl. It’s absolutely perfect,” Cobra sneers.

“And what about that imbecile, Blackheart?” Theodore asks.

“He’s been dealt with. Our American associate took care of him as planned. Remember, Theo, for this plan to be successful, we must ensure the Peace-Bringers remain in control of that poor excuse for a country,” Cobra replies, handing Theodore a data chip. “This contains the details for your final visit to the HKM. President Woi will be notified upon your arrival.”

“And the green hearts?” Theo asks.

“Soon the shipments will begin arriving,” Cobra replies, sitting back in his chair and swinging his feet up onto his desk.

* * *

When Theodore arrives in the HKM he’s immediately brought to President Woi’s presidential palace. After being cleared by security, he’s escorted into Woi’s lavish den.

“Ah, come on in, Mr. Theodore,” Woi says from the front of the room. He seems preoccupied by a view-file playing on his flash-screen. “This is my grandson, Oliver, recently winning our national junior fencing championship. My daughter just sent it to me,” he says with his eyes glued to the screen.

“You must be very proud,” Theo responds, glancing at the screen.

“To tell you the truth, a competition such as this is way too docile for my liking, and certainly isn’t something that’s ever going to fill me with true pride. With all of that protective gear, this is surely not real dueling,” Woi answers, aimlessly twirling a forked scepter. “Now, if you want to learn about real dueling, you need to go back in time to when warriors would engage in combat on horseback, and use their sabers to slash their enemy to pieces.”

Theo moves closer to the screen. “Those masks they’re wearing; they look like the same masks Cobra supplied to that Spirit of Hades gang out in Los Angeles,” he says.

“Well, that’s because they are,” Woi says, and laughs harshly.

CHAPTER 9

“Are you sure about leaving?” Jessica asks Shadow. “After all, Pinia’s always been your home.”

“I don’t *want* to leave, Jessie; I *have* to,” he says sadly as they spend their final evening in Pinia sitting by a crackling fire.

“I’m actually going to miss this place, and of course the children,” Jessica says, looking up at the stars.

“By the behavior of the children earlier today, it’s obvious how much they’re also going to miss *you*,” Shadow says as he pulls Jessica close to him.

“I feel really comfortable about leaving Trevor in charge of the team. He’s really developed into quite a leader. He certainly understands the children, and they’ve taken a real liking to him.”

The next day, they travel back to the US, and a few days after that, after settling into Jessica’s New York City condo, Jessica watches Shadow pulling on his coat, her head cocked to one side in uncertainty.

“Are you sure you don’t want to call her first?” she asks.

“I’d much rather surprise her,” Shadow answers with a smile.

“Fine,” Jessica says, throwing up her hands before reaching for her own coat. “Since the reservation is for seven, we should get moving.”

When they arrive at Luanda’s apartment building, they hear shouting and pounding from the second-floor hallway as they’re climbing the stairs. As they step into the hallway, they see a police

officer pounding on the door of unit 215, the apartment across the hall from Luanda's unit.

"This is the police! Open the door!" the officer shouts.

"That's it," Shadow says in disgust as they walk toward Luanda's apartment. "I'm so glad we'll be getting her out of this hellhole." Ignoring the officer, he knocks on his mother's door. There's no answer. He drops his hand and sighs. "You were right, Jessie; we should've called."

"Here, let me call her," Jessica replies as she pulls out her flash-pad.

Before she can make the call, Luanda appears at the end of the hall carrying bags of groceries. Shadow and Jessica head toward her.

"Let me take those from you, Mother," Shadow says, reaching for the bags.

"Wow, this is quite a surprise," Luanda says with a smile as she relinquishes the bags. "I thought you'd already left for Pinia."

"We did, and we're back—back for good," Shadow replies with a smile.

"Back for good?" Luanda says, shocked. She frowns. "But Pinia's your home, son."

"It *was* my home."

Luanda regards him for a moment, then sighs. "Oh, Shadow, I've caused you so much grief."

"You couldn't be more wrong, Mother," he replies softly. "By opening up to me and telling me how my father forced you to leave Pinia, you opened my eyes to reality. My father only cares about the person he sees in the mirror." He turns businesslike. "Now, let's get these groceries put away so we can get to the restaurant on time."

"Restaurant? Oh my, you guys are filled with surprises," Luanda exclaims. "I love you so much," she says as she hugs Shadow.

"That's not our only surprise," Jessica adds.

"Tell her, Jessie," Shadow says.

"Well, Luanda, soon you won't have to worry about all this yelling and police officers banging on doors," Jessica says, glancing back at the ruckus in the hallway before closing Luanda's apartment door. "We were able to secure a unit for you in the building where I live."

Luanda gapes at her for a moment. “Oh my, I could never afford to live in such a place,” she says, then she looks at Shadow. He responds with a wide smile. “No, Shadow, I won’t let you. I mean, I don’t expect you to—”

“Nothing would make me happier than to do this for you, Mother,” Shadow insists. “Nothing.”

* * *

“Your daughter’s arrived from New York, sir,” Westgale’s secretary informs him.

“Send her in, Susan,” he replies, rising and moving around his desk to meet his daughter as she enters his office.

“I can’t believe this!” he exclaims as he and Jessica embrace. “Your mother’s waiting for us in the lounge.” He steps back. “Wow, this is amazing. How in the world did you convince Shadow to come and live in the US?”

“I think you’d better have a seat, Dad,” Jessica says, frowning.

“What is it, Jessie, aren’t you happy with the decision?” Westgale says as he sits down on the couch. Jessica sits in the armchair across from him.

“Of course I’m thrilled to be home, but I must tell you *why* Shadow decided to leave Pinia,” Jessica says, and tells her father the story Luanda told them.

“Whoa... he forced her to leave her own country?” Westgale says when Jessica finishes. “He threatened to kill her family if she didn’t comply?” He shakes his head.

“That’s correct,” Jessica replies.

“How long have you known about this?” Westgale says, rising to his feet, brow puckered in concern.

“We found out when Shadow was fighting for his life.”

“So, are you telling me Shadow never knew about this before?”

“Yeah, all these years, he had no idea. And when he found out, he was furious and decided he no longer wanted to live in Pinia.”

“Are you certain Luanda Rollins is being honest with you guys about this?”

Jessica nodded. “When Shadow confronted Cobra, he admitted it was true.”

“Bah, you know I admire Shadow, but darn it, Jessie, I’m concerned about you being caught up in such a messed-up situation,” Westgale says, placing his hand on Jessica’s shoulder. “Who else knows about this?”

“According to Luanda, Shadow and I are the only people she’s told.”

“I just hope that’s true. What about her husband?”

“She says she doesn’t intend to tell him. In fact, it’s something she despises speaking about.”

Westgale drops his hand. “Damn. Here we’ve been telling the American people that Cobra isn’t the ruthless tyrant he’s been made out to be, and now I learn this,” Westgale says, scratching his head. “Every night—every night I question whether making that deal with him was the right thing to do. If the public ever found out about this...”

“It happened many years ago, Dad. From what I witnessed in Pinia, I think Shadow’s influence has actually rubbed off on Cobra, in a positive way. I think he’s a changed man.”

“That’s what I so admire about you, Jessie,” Westgale says as he sits back down. He smiles at Jessica and laces his hands behind his head.

“What’s that, Dad?”

“Your innate ability to bring calmness to any situation, regardless of how turbulent it may seem.”

* * *

In the Freedom Home’s press room, Champ Sutton sits glaring directly into the UCIT camera. At a nod from the cameraman, he begins his announcement.

“Recently, our nation witnessed a young extremist who referred to himself as Blackheart being murdered by an explosion. This individual claimed responsibility for four recent arsons. We have now learned his identity. His name is Mason Unger, twenty-four years of age, an American citizen who was born in and was still living in Los Angeles at the time of his death. I will now turn

the podium over to our Administration's chief of security, Agent Gil Robichaud."

Gil steps up to the podium as Sutton backs away from it. "Thank you, Attorney General Sutton. An investigation into Mr. Unger's murder is currently underway. At this time, we have no suspect or direct motive. What we have been able to determine is that in the past, Mr. Unger belonged to an extremist group in Los Angeles that referred to themselves as the Spirit of Hades, or SOH. This was a well-financed and technologically savvy group determined to see the destruction of America.

"We do not know if they were a domestic or international group. Once Homeland Anti-Terror became aware of SOH, the group was somehow warned, and they shut the entire operation down.

"I must stress that we firmly believe Mr. Unger was never a member of the AXE extremist group and was acting on his own with the assistance of some hired accomplices. By linking their own extremist crimes to AXE, he and his cohorts were attempting to ride on the coattails of AXE's infamy. They were also trying to make it appear as though they were part of the recent mass rallies being held throughout the country. Let me stress: they were not."

* * *

The press conference prompts an urgent meeting of the Militant Alliance of America's executive committee at its headquarters.

"So tell me, Ivan, have I been making an idiot of myself in front of the country, condemning these mass gatherings?" Gerald Levin says, directing his anger toward the MAA's own chief of security.

"We were misled, sir. All the data my team collected, including several tips from the public, seemed to indicate this Blackheart character was leading the charge. Someone really wanted us to believe that was the case," Ivan answers, shaking his head in disgust.

"Damn!" Gerald yells, slamming his fist onto the table. "This is really going to set us back. We'll now be lucky if we get *five* percent of the youth vote," he adds, taking a deep breath and slowly regaining his composure.

“Yeah, but when Nicole Kratz officially announces to the public that she’s decided to once again represent Anya Ahar, our Peace-Bringer friends will be lucky to get five percent of the over-thirty vote. I’ll take our position over theirs any day,” asserts Earl Pemberton.

* * *

The day has come to announce to the public that I’ll be representing Anya in the Judicial Triangle. While the UCIT crew makes last-minute preparations to broadcast the announcement in front of the Federal Justice Center, I’m joined by Hunter.

“Are you sure about this, Nicole?” he asks nervously.

“I wouldn’t be putting myself in front of the country in a few minutes’ time if I wasn’t,” I reply confidently.

And indeed, a few minutes later, I begin speaking calmly, but firmly. “My representation of Anya Ahar in the Judicial Triangle is about attaining some form of justice for a young lady whose mother, upon giving birth to her, was taken from this world in a most horrendous and unforgiving manner. And who was guilty of this egregious act? We were! A society so driven by madness that we didn’t think twice about turning hospitals and other government buildings into makeshift prison camps!

“Since Anya’s heartbreaking story was made public, it has touched the hearts of many Americans, both young and old. It has prompted us to both lament the past and fear for the future. Her indiscretions were a product of our ignorance, and for that we must make amends by showing compassion and forgiveness. Young Americans across the country have made it abundantly clear how they feel, demanding that both Anya and America be freed from injustice.”

Now it’s time to drop the bombshell. “In the upcoming hearing I will not only be requesting that Anya Ahar be granted a permanent stay of execution and life in prison; instead, I will be requesting, under a strict set of guidelines, her release from prison.”

With every word, I feel a rush of elation. “It is time for young Americans to matter. If I am fortunate enough to become your next president, I guarantee you: *you will matter!*”

At the conclusion of my speech, I relay the fact that Hunter Talbot has been named as my running mate, and also speak of my plans to incorporate youthful representation throughout my administration.

With its eyes flashing between red and blue, and its chest displaying a neon Eye of Providence, Cryptic makes its way toward the podium. “How do you answer to the fact that you want to set free a young lady who has engaged in some very serious crimes?” the robot asks. “Does this mean you believe we should excuse every criminal who claims their tragic past has led them to commit crimes?”

“No, not at all,” I reply.

“Then why are you making an exception for Anya Ahar?”

“I’m not here to speak to the specifics of Anya’s case. I will do that in the Judicial Triangle,” I say firmly.

“Are you not concerned this coddling of Anya Ahar and America’s disenfranchised youth will lead the majority outside of that demographic to turn their backs on you as a presidential candidate, and the PBA as a whole?”

“I give the people of this country far more credit than that. This is about bringing all Americans together, regardless of age. And that means creating a government that is reflective of that concept,” I state.

* * *

The response from Gerald Levin follows immediately on UCIT. During a gala hosted by Earl Pemberton and his family, celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of ERT Power Corporation, Levin unleashes a vicious verbal tirade.

“As I listened to every preposterous word out of Nicole Kratz’s mouth this evening, I kept telling myself, ‘This is a nightmare and soon I will awake.’ How she can stand in front of the American people and tell us she is going to walk into the Judicial Triangle and ask not only for Anya Ahar to be granted a permanent stay of execution, but be set free and permitted to reenter society, it’s complete lunacy!

“Anya Ahar has not only admitted to manufacturing helcin, the poison used to kill General Vance Gibson, she also has admitted to

being a leader of a domestic terrorist group, the same group that had planned to blow up six government animal research labs. That's not all; she also assisted in creating a doctrine filled with hatred against the American way of life.

"Nicole Kratz has said we must show Anya Ahar compassion and forgiveness. I find it very interesting that in Miss Ahar we have a scientific genius, yet she doesn't appear to know the most basic difference between right and wrong!" Levin says, his voice rising. The veins in his temples are bulging now.

"Don't fret, my friends; the Militant Alliance of America is here for you. We will lead this country properly, and not allow a deranged terrorist to escape her deserved penalty of death."

* * *

Westgale has called me to the Freedom Home. I'm directed to the main conference room, where he is waiting. I've known President Westgale long enough to sense his imminent fury. It doesn't happen very often, but when he gets angry, his very light complexion turns crimson red.

Before I have time to be seated, he attacks. "What in the hell are you thinking? Released from prison?" he shouts, pounding the table. "You told me you wanted a chance for a permanent stay of execution—not complete freedom!"

I study him a moment, allowing him time to settle down. "I understand your concern, sir, but the people of this country have spoken. And if I'm going to be their leader, I'm damn well going to listen to them," I say firmly.

He shakes his head. "I can't believe they got to you. You're pandering to a group of self-entitled greenhorns who are so lost in their own insecurities that they will go to any length for whatever attention they can get. You know as well as I do that wisdom comes with age and experience, and so does importance and privilege, Nicole. They'll have their turn. When their hair starts graying, their bodies start aching, and their skin starts wrinkling, they'll be the ones doing the dictating," Westgale states, his voice heavy with scorn.

“I thought you understood me better than that, sir. I’m not pandering. I’m strictly standing up for what I believe in. Anya Ahar is a victim. A victim of hatred and greed, stemming from the idiocy of a political divide and that damn war.” The words soar now. “It’s time for change, Mr. President. And yes, it’s time we listen to our youth, and give them a voice. I think it’s vital. Why, Mr. President, as a society, is it okay for us to dictate to our country’s youth how they should live their lives, without their actual input? And then when they rebel, we shake our heads in disbelief!”

I’m glad to see the president’s demeanor is slowly growing calmer. His face, so recently flushed red, is now fading to pink. *Thankfully, he’s listening.*

“And tell me, Nicole: how do you expect this to all work out when your little ‘scientific genius’ is being so defiant with everybody?” he says calmly.

“I’m starting to reach her, sir. I know I am,” I reply confidently. “All I ask is that you trust me. You’ve done some wonderful things for this country, and it’s my goal to continue where you left off.”

“Well, you’re now within reach of the torch, my dear. I just hope it doesn’t burn you along the way.”

I admit Westgale’s concerns are warranted, as I’m well aware of the massive political risk I’ll be taking by representing Anya in the Judicial Triangle. I also realize that my open-mindedness toward the country’s disenfranchised youth could very well serve as a form of political suicide. But I have a plan. A plan to bring this country together again and ensure that no political divide ever brings about the horror we felt all those years ago.

CHAPTER 10

Before most of my time will be occupied with Anya's hearing, I realize it's vital for my presidential campaign to gain as much momentum as possible. I've been traveling so much the last few days that it's been difficult sometimes to remember where exactly I am. While Gerald Levin's been busy getting his message out on the West Coast, my focus has been on the east. This evening is my third in a row speaking at Summit University in New York City.

Before I take the podium, Jessica Westgale approaches me backstage. "Wow, Nicole, you're really packing them in," she says, looking out at the audience from behind the curtain.

"Jessica, I'm glad you're here. This is excellent timing," I tell her. "My father's been wanting to speak with you."

"Oh?"

"Hold on, he's right over there," I say as I wave him over to us.

He finishes up a conversation with the dean of the school and comes over.

"Hey, Jessica, how was your trip home?" Dad asks her.

"For such a long flight, and considering the fact that flying sure isn't one of my favorite pastimes, I'm just glad it went as well as it did," Jessica replies in her usual cheerful manner.

"Congratulations on the incredible work you performed in Pinia. What you and your team have accomplished is very impressive," Dad tells her.

"Thank you, sir. It really means a lot to me to give back."

“I realize that, and that’s why I’d love for you to head up my new foundation.”

Jessica hesitates a moment. “You’ll have to forgive me, but being out of the country for so long, I’m not familiar with your new foundation.”

“It’s the Lawrence Kratz Foundation. Its purpose is to assist recovering addicts and ex-cons by providing education, guidance, and financial assistance. We’ve already received substantial backing from many of the country’s largest corporations and philanthropists. Nicole was originally going to take the helm, but as you can see by the crowd of people here today, she’s become preoccupied with other things,” Dad jokes.

“Well, it sounds like a fantastic cause, and another great way to give back,” Jessica replies.

“I can’t think of anybody better for the job.”

“I have to second that,” I add.

“So, what do you say, Jessica?” Dad asks. “Will you at least consider it? I could have my secretary send the details over to you tomorrow morning.”

“Great. I’ll give it some real thought,” Jessica says.

“Take a few days to mull it over, if need be.”

I leave Jessica and Dad to firm up the details and peek through the curtain. I’m thrilled to see another outstanding turnout. When I take to the podium, the crowd breaks into a roaring chant of “Nicole for prez!”

From the second I take the stage, it feels as though my supporters and I are riding a giant wave of emotion together. When I look into their eyes, I can see their hearts. They’re hurting, yearning for change, craving to be heard. They want a new direction. A new age.

I spend the next forty-five minutes telling them how I will deliver that.

Afterward, when I meet with my campaign team in the dressing room, their faces are sullen and the room is disturbingly silent. “I received the recent poll numbers just as you took the stage,” says Beth. “It’s not good, Nicole.” She looks dejected. Though I’m not

surprised, considering the PBA's turmoil in recent months, actually hearing the news hits me hard.

"There's no hiding from the truth. Let's hear the numbers, Beth," I say, trying my best not to display my worry.

"The MAA is leading us fifty-seven percent to thirty-two percent, with eleven percent undecided." This draws a collective gasp from the team. I need to take charge.

"People, we must remain positive. Sure, it's important that we heed what these numbers might tell us, but we can't let results such as these dampen our spirits to the point they hinder our efforts moving forward," I say firmly.

Seated to my right, Hunter begins dissecting the numbers. "The age factor really appears to be in play here," he says with a pained expression. "We're getting absolutely killed when it comes to the thirty-five and older demographic. On the other hand, we're completely dominating the other side of the spectrum."

"Look over here," says Beth, directing our attention to a flash-screen. Cryptic is interviewing famed civil attorney and long-time PBA supporter Gloria Lee.

"Are you surprised by the just-released polling numbers?" the robot asks, displaying the numbers on its chest.

"Absolutely not," Lee replies, glowering. "I'm actually surprised the PBA is as high as thirty-two percent. Nicole Kratz's campaign has been an outright disaster."

"Since you were one of the potential candidates who backed out once Ms. Kratz entered the picture, do you have any regrets?"

"Definitely," Lee says with a short nod. "I'm certain both Justice Malone and myself would have fared much better. In fact, I think there are loads of people who would have fared better."

"Do you think it's all this pandering to the youth of America that has set her back?" Cryptic asks.

"Actually, I think bringing some youthfulness to our government is a very valid and wise idea," says Lee.

"So when you refer to her campaign as being 'an outright disaster,' what is it you're referring to?"

“How she can stand in front of the American people and tell them it’s her wish to free Anya Ahar... Well, it’s extremely baffling and disturbing to me, as I know it is to most of my esteemed associates and the majority of the public.”

“Do you feel she’s letting her sympathy toward Anya cloud her judgment?”

“Certainly. I can’t think of another reason why she’d feel so compassionate toward a young lady who displays such contempt for our country.”

CHAPTER 11

When people in this country speak of past American presidents, the name “Jackson Snyder” usually stirs up mixed feelings. To PBA followers he is considered a true hero, a Democratic president who steadfastly stood up for his beliefs. Referred to as the War Within President, he has remained somewhat reclusive ever since his administration was so ruthlessly taken over by the Militant Alliance of America. Having been his Attorney General, Dad always spoke of President Snyder with great admiration. I was fortunate to have met him on a few occasions in my younger days, and found him to be gracious with his time. I was pleased that he was interested in hearing about my studies, as well as my thoughts on the current state of the country. When I met him for the second time, which was about two years later, I was amazed that he remembered everything about our prior conversation. That is something I’ll never forget.

Among the current politicians who revere President Snyder is President Westgale. Westgale not only admires Snyder, he has patterned his own presidency after his. Everything from his political agenda to the design of his office are influenced by Jackson Snyder.

Now seventy-one years old and widowed, he lives on a farm in West Virginia. Since the day his presidency abruptly ended he has refused to comment on both past and present politics. I remember President Westgale attempting to contact him on several occasions, only to be denied. Several other presidents have received the same

response, and so has the UCIT Network which, although it has aired features on his time in office, has never been granted an interview.

Thus I was surprised to hear from his son, Warren, that his father is willing to meet with me. I'm elated to have the opportunity to speak with a man I admire so greatly. The timing couldn't be better, since I'm planning to spend the next few days campaigning in the southern part of the country.

When my driver pulls the electro onto the property, Warren is there to greet me. "It's a pleasure to meet you," he says, leading the way to the house.

"Likewise," I reply.

"I'm really pulling for you in the upcoming election. Your political views remind me so much of my father's. It's what this country so badly needs."

"I'm a great admirer of your father. I'm really honored he's agreed to meet with me." As part of my preparation for Anya's hearing, I'm hoping Snyder will shed some light on how hospitals throughout New York State were converted into detention centers during the War Within. My research has told me that there were actually hundreds of people negatively impacted by the closing of those hospitals: some more than others, like Dr. Ahar and Anya. What my research has failed to tell me is how and why those hospitals were converted into PBA detention centers. I thought about asking my father, but I've learned over the years that even the mere mention of the War Within makes him extremely anxious, which does nothing for his heart condition.

"Actually, I was quite surprised that my father agreed to meet with you," Warren says. "Since the War Within, his interest in politics has been nonexistent. He's really found his peace of mind, out here on the farm."

"That's understandable," I say, admiring the picturesque scenery.

"My family lives in this house here," he says, indicating a rambling red brick house with beautifully crafted arched windows. "And this is where Dad resides," he adds as we turn to our left. "Please, go ahead. He's waiting for you."

“Thank you, Warren.”

I approach the walk. This house, built with the same red bricks and arched windows, is a smaller version of his son’s.

“There she is,” Snyder says as he opens the door, greeting me with a wide smile. “Come on in, my dear. Make yourself at home.”

“Thank you, sir. As I was telling your son, I’m truly honored by this,” I say as I settle onto the living room sofa. I notice several antique radios and telephones placed throughout the house, which seems devoid of flash-screens, flash-pads, and other modern devices. I wonder how he keeps current. Then again, he probably doesn’t care to.

“You should be very proud of yourself, young lady. One step away from taking the captain’s seat. It looks like those big dreams you told me about years ago are soon going to come to life,” he says as he presents a tray of coffee and biscuits before sinking into an easy chair across from me. Time has not been kind to him. His once rugged features are now fleshy. He has bags under his eyes, and with each movement, pain flashes across his face.

“I am very proud, sir. I’ve worked very hard to get here, but I’ve also been very fortunate to have support from President Westgale, and of course my amazing father.”

“Speaking of your father, how is he enjoying his retirement?”

I blow air through my lips. “Yeah. Technically he’s retired, but with the new foundation he recently created, he’ll probably be busier than he’s ever been.” I tell him about the foundation.

“None of that surprises me. The one thing I’ll never forget about Lawrence is how focused he was on his work, and how compassionate he was,” Snyder says, smiling. “So, how can I be of assistance to you? I must warn you that if you’re looking for political advice, you’ve come to the wrong place. That game has long passed me by.” He chuckles. “Now, if you want some advice on how to grow scrumptious fruits and vegetables, well then, I’m your man.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, sir,” I reply, laughing. “Actually, I’m here to learn some specific details about the War Within. Since the Outer Commission placed a ban on the dissemination of information pertaining to the war, learning what really occurred is a challenge.”

“As it should be. I’ve always believed it’s best to look ahead. Digging up the details of that dreadful period can only bring heartache for everyone.”

“I agree,” I reply, “but there is one thing I desperately need to know.”

“Well, if I’m able to, I’ll gladly help,” Snyder replies as he dips a biscuit into his coffee.

“I was hoping you’d enlighten me regarding the hospitals in New York State—why they ended up being converted into detention centers.”

“Ah.” He nods slowly. “This must relate to the upcoming Anya Ahar hearing.”

“Yes. Are you aware of her story?”

“Somewhat. I try to avoid most current affairs, but I must say I find that particular story fascinating.”

“Because I’m representing her, it would help me to learn how and why the decision was made regarding those hospitals.”

Snyder sighs, looking pained. “I’m not trying to tell you how to go about arguing your case, but like I said, I think it’s wise to not revisit that horrid period.”

“Believe me when I tell you the last thing I want to do is relive that bloody war, but for me to be successful in that hearing, I have no choice,” I answer, studying Snyder, who is definitely on edge. But why? “With all due respect, sir, is there something you’re afraid to tell me?”

He takes a deep breath and slowly exhales. “Well, as much as it pains me to do this, I think it’s in your best interest to know the truth.”

“I need the truth, sir. I really do,” I reply, trying to keep my voice even.

“My Administration was well aware the MAA had been formed, and we feared an attack was imminent. We also knew that no matter how hard we tried to fight back, we were going to be taken over, so our key members quickly began putting together a plan to create the Peace-Bringers Association,” Snyder begins.

“I’m aware of all that,” I reply.

“But are you aware that it was your father’s idea to convert those hospitals into detention centers? There was even an official document that he signed off on. And I backed his decision.”

I’m in shock. My heart begins to pound like a drum. “Oh my Lord,” I finally sigh. “I take it that includes Green Light Memorial?” That was the hospital Dr. Jack Ahar and his wife Maria were denied entrance to on that dreadful day.

“I’m sorry, Nicole. I hate laying this on you, but it’s the truth.”

“I can’t believe this,” I say. I bury my head in my hands. “Why wouldn’t he have told me about this?” My voice comes out muffled.

“It was one of those decisions we all regretted,” Snyder says gently.

I drop my hands and look at him. “And what became of that document?”

“When the White House was attacked, more than ninety percent of everything was destroyed,” he says somberly, “except for the contents of my office area.”

I catch my breath. “Is that where the document was stored?”

“Yes.”

“So, do you still have it stashed away somewhere?”

Snyder shakes his head. “I wish I did, but regrettably, it was taken from my office.”

“How do you know that?” Disappointment makes my question sound harsher than I’d intended.

“I was there when it was taken. Several men wearing long overcoats and carrying flash-pads and briefcases stormed in and began taking everything they could get their hands on, including that document,” Snyder replies. He seems nervous, as if he’s reliving the moments in his mind. “I never informed your father that this happened.”

“Now I know why whenever I or anyone else brings up the War Within, Dad becomes all worked up and quickly changes the topic.”

“It was war, Nicole, and in war, decisions are usually a product of fear and panic... which is why I find being Jackson the farmer far less taxing than being Jackson the president.”

While flying to New York to discuss this matter with Dad, I'm lost in thought. It feels like the wind has left my sails. Questions keep racing through my mind. Does the MAA have possession of that document? If so, are they planning to use it during the hearing? How will I be able to stand in the middle of that triangle and fight for Anya, knowing very well my own father was the person who ordered that hospital to be closed?

Damn it! I was so confident I could win this hearing. Now I don't even know if I have a right to take part in it. All this, just when Anya's beginning to open up to me. Just when, little by little, I'd felt as though I was pulling her out of her emotional abyss.

"Your father told me to inform you he'll be by shortly," Mom says as I settle in at my parents' house. "Is everything okay, Nicole? You seem rather stressed."

"I'm sorry, Mom, but I have a lot on my mind," I reply.

She chuckles. "I wonder why that doesn't surprise me. In all seriousness, you be careful, honey. I realize the position you're in, but too much stress can be very unhealthy."

"Thanks, Mom; I'll do my best to take things in stride."

"Hey, before your dad comes home, would you give me your opinion on some paint colors? I've finally decided to make some changes around here."

As I stare blankly at the various sample files on Mom's flash-pad, I try my best to hide my anxiety, but she knows me too well. "All right, Nicole, are you going to tell me what actually has you so uptight? You know you can always confide in me."

I try to compose myself as I take a deep breath. "I'm okay, Mom... I like this group here; I don't think you can go wrong with any of—"

"Nicole, sorry I kept you waiting," Dad says as he enters the living room. "I just finished meeting with Jessica, and I'm glad to tell you she's accepted my offer," he adds happily.

"I'm glad to hear that," I reply solemnly.

Dad instantly notices I'm subdued. "What's going on, Nicole?" he asks, studying me closely. "What is it that's so important?"

“Can we please take this into your office?” I ask.

“Of course,” he answers with a raised brow, and leads the way. Mom watches us curiously.

Once inside, he closes the office door behind us. “My Lord, Nicole, I’m afraid to ask... how did it go down south? You seem so preoccupied. Did something happen on the campaign trail to bring you down?”

“Actually, for the most part, it went rather well. But then there was West Virginia.”

“What happened in West Virginia?”

“I met with President Snyder.”

“Jackson? I’ll be darned. What made you go see him? I’m surprised he agreed to meet with you.”

“I’m so glad he did. It was very enlightening,” I reply.

“How so?”

I pause and take a deep breath. “How come you didn’t tell me?” I ask gently.

“What... what didn’t I tell you?”

“Green Light Memorial. The hospitals. I know it was you who was responsible for turning them into detention centers. How could you not tell me you signed off on that order? Did you not think that I was going to eventually find out?”

Dad appears startled. He takes a deep breath of his own and then exhales. “I thought about telling you; believe me, I did.”

“Were you not concerned I’d learn about it from another source? After all, it’s such a key issue in Anya’s hearing.”

“To my knowledge, President Snyder is the only person who knows I signed off on that document. Besides, it was probably buried in the White House rubble.”

“But it wasn’t. The MAA confiscated it from Snyder’s office.”

“My Lord. I had no idea... But I wouldn’t fret, honey,” he assures me. “I’ll bet that document’s been long forgotten.”

“I just wish you would’ve told me.”

Dad sighs and rubs his hands over his flushed face. “I’m sorry, Nicole.”

“Anya’s entire case revolves around the fact that hospital was shut down. Her mother died because of it.”

“And it’s downright terrible that she did. But nobody, and I mean *nobody*, wanted anything like that to happen,” Dad answers sincerely. He continues in a sympathetic tone. “Do you think I *wanted* to shut those hospitals down? That war made us all do some crazy things.”

“What if they have the document and expose it? I’m dreading not only what it will do to Anya’s chances, but also the impact it’ll have on my presidential bid and your legacy of excellence.”

“I agree. It’ll be devastating on all fronts. If you wish, I’ll gladly go public with the truth before it comes to that. And distance you from the entire story.”

“I can’t let you do that. There has to be another option,” I say, deep in thought.

“Regrettably, I think it might be our only recourse, honey.”

“No, I can’t let you do it,” I insist. “I’d rather defend your honor in the triangle—if it comes to that.”

“Is that your flash-pad buzzing?” Dad asks.

“Yes, it is,” I reply as I reach for the device. “Whoa... this is interesting,” I say as I check the message.

“Who’s it from?” Dad asks.

“Andy Pemberton. He’s asking me to meet him at the Last Frontier in an hour.”

“Brr. It’s a chilly one out there,” Andy says as we meet in the lobby of the steakhouse.

“Mr. Pemberton, your table’s ready,” the hostess says, and leads us through the restaurant.

“My Lord, Andy, this is the very same table we sat at the day the war began,” I say, painfully recalling that dreadful afternoon.

Andy smiles and chuckles. “And now it looks like the two of us will soon be fighting our own war in the Judicial Triangle. Unless of course you’ve come to your senses and have decided to back away from this charade.”

“I had a feeling they were going to put you up against me.”

“It’s actually an honor to be going up against somebody of your caliber. But what I can’t believe is that you’re willing to risk your entire reputation, not to mention your political future, on a terrorist. Oh, and don’t give me this ‘she’s merely an innocent victim’ garbage. The woman’s pure evil.”

“Did you invite me here to antagonize me? Or is there actually a purpose to this meeting?”

“I don’t know about you, but I’m starving. I think a nice juicy rib eye will do the job,” Andy says as he regards the menu in front of him.

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“Nicole, I can’t antagonize you no matter how hard I try, and I’ve learned that from experience. Even in the playground: those sand castles you made—all us other kids used to be so envious. It even reached a point where I was convinced you were using some kind of magic sand. I mean, the imagination and detail you put into those things—true works of art. Then of course at Summit, I remember thinking how well I did on an assignment, and then you’d sit there with that big smile as the professor congratulated you on your perfect score.”

“Okay, please tell me where you’re going with this, Andy,” I insist.

He looks at me with a sly grin as the waiter pours us each a glass of wine. That grin—it’s the same grin he’s had since he was a kid. It’s one of those grins that’s sometimes hard to read—it’s not clear whether he’s being friendly, or he’s mocking you. “Please, Nicole, I’m paying tribute to your brilliance.”

“I appreciate your kind words... I think. But I’ve always preferred looking ahead to dwelling on the past.”

“Good, because the real reason I invited you here is to make a deal regarding Anya Ahar.”

“Oh?”

“The last thing any of us wants, or this country needs, for that matter, is this ridiculous hearing.”

I’m caught off guard. “Well then, let’s hear what you have to offer.”

Andy leans forward and studies me a moment. “We’re willing to grant Miss Ahar a permanent stay of execution.”

“And, what’s the catch?”

“It’s very simple. Life in prison with no chance of parole.”

“For someone who just finished praising my so-called ‘brilliance,’ someone who has known me almost my entire life, you really don’t have a clue what I’m about,” I say, controlling my indignation.

“Take the deal, Nicole, and end this farce. Or else this time, I guarantee you, I finally will build a better castle... and unfortunately, I’ll also be bringing your father down in the process.”

“My father?”

“Yeah, it’d be so sad to see such an honorable man’s reputation be so tarnished,” he says as he places a piece of paper in front of me.

The nightmare has come true. There it is: my father’s signature. I remain calm on the outside, but in truth, I’m a nervous wreck as I read the document. I slowly look up, and that grin has returned to Andy’s face. This time I’m certain it’s the mocking kind. “The MAA gives you our word that America will never learn it was your father who ordered the closure of those hospitals, if you accept our proposal.”

I scowl at Andy. “You can take your proposal back to your uncle and Gerald Levin and tell them that no matter how hard you try, you’ll *never* get the best of me,” I say. I get up and stalk out of the steakhouse.

Later that evening, Dad contacts me via his flash-pad. “How did it go with Andy?” he asks.

“Like we feared, he has the document. He proposed a deal.”

“Let me guess: he’ll give you a chance to save your good ol’ dad’s reputation if you back down.”

“Exactly.”

“Well, I just hope to God you didn’t give in.”

“No way. Giving in just isn’t my thing. Someone very special taught me that a long time ago.”

CHAPTER 12

“Her playing is outstanding. Technically strong, but she also plays with incredible feeling,” Terence Dwyer, director of the Dwyer Academy of Music, says to Shadow and Jessica as Luanda auditions for a teaching job.

“This is one of my original compositions,” Luanda says as she continues to play with unbridled passion.

“That was extraordinary. Breathtakingly beautiful,” Dwyer exclaims when she finishes. “I’m glad you contacted me, Jessica. I’ve been attempting to fill this position for quite some time. Welcome aboard, Luanda,” he calls out.

On the way back to the apartment, Luanda can’t contain her excitement. “Wow, thank you, Jessica. To be able to teach at Dwyer is a dream come true.”

“You earned it, Luanda. Terence was very impressed with you,” Jessica replies.

“And he wasn’t just impressed with your musical ability and knowledge. He also told me he thought you handled the sample class with real professionalism,” Shadow adds.

They enter the building and cross its luxurious lobby. “Every time I walk by this fountain, I’m just so taken by its beauty,” Luanda says with a smile as she gazes appreciatively at a golden sculpture of seraphim angels flying above a lavender waterfall. She looks back to Jessica and Shadow. “I can’t believe this is happening to me. I owe so much to the both of you.”

She's invited them to dinner. After enjoying an array of appetizers, they settle down for the entrée. "This is absolutely delicious, Luanda," Jessica says as she takes a bite of spinach mushroom quiche.

"Cooking isn't a real passion of mine, but Kolton, he just loves creating all kinds of new dishes. He actually showed me how to make this quiche," Luanda replies.

"Speaking of your dear husband, is he going to be joining us this evening?" Jessica asks.

Luanda smiles and nods. "Yes. In fact, he's planning to pick up dessert for us," she says, her smile widening. "I'm so happy for him. His rehab counselor told me he's been showing great improvement on a daily basis."

An hour later, Luanda receives a message from Kolton informing her he's on his way. "So, it looks like we'll finally be able to meet the lucky man," Jessica says.

"Once you meet him, I think you'll realize that *I'm* the lucky one," Luanda replies.

"When and where did you meet?" Shadow asks.

"I met him a little more than two years ago. Actually, he came to me for piano lessons. He hoped learning to play the piano would help to relieve his stress. I think it actually worked, somewhat."

"Well, kudos to him for fighting so hard," Jessica says gently.

"The crazy thing is, just when it looks like he's found the light, he reaches for the bottle and descends back into his world of darkness," Luanda replies, her eyes downcast.

"I can only imagine how difficult it must be for you," Jessica says.

"When you care for someone as much as I care for Kolton, you fight the battles with them. I'm really hoping, this time, he'll finally win the war," Luanda says thoughtfully.

Moments later, following a gentle knock on the door, a booming voice calls out, "The guest of honor has arrived!" Luanda quickly rises, beaming, and goes to open the door. "Hello, my darling," Kolton says. Luanda moves forward to give him a kiss. "I hope everyone likes a good old-fashioned chocolate cake," he adds, holding up the box.

Shadow studies him for a moment. He immediately notices the burn scar on his right cheek. Luanda had said it was the result of a workplace accident.

“I’ve heard so much about both of you,” Kolton says when Luanda introduces him to Jessica and Shadow. “Wow, this place is incredible,” he adds as his gaze sweeps across the apartment. He looks to Shadow and Jessica. “Thank you for what you’ve done. When I get back on my feet, I promise to somehow return the favor.”

“I received some great news today, Kolton. I got the job at Dwyer Academy,” Luanda says joyfully.

“Whoa, that is good news. I knew they wouldn’t be able to resist bringing you on board,” Kolton responds as he gives her a hug.

“Well, I wish I could take the credit, but Jessica’s the one who made it happen,” Luanda says, looking at Jessica.

“Oh, that’s not true,” Jessica protests. “Let me tell you, I know Terence Dwyer, and there’s no way he would’ve hired you if he didn’t believe you were the right person for the job.”

“I’m sure he must’ve immediately felt the passion you feel for your music,” Kolton says as he begins serving the cake.

“Even as a child, that was always obvious to me,” Shadow says.

“And it’s always a wonderful thing to be able to follow one’s passion in life,” Jessica adds.

“It sure is,” Kolton replies. “Although for me, following mine didn’t work out so well.”

“Oh? How so?” Shadow asks.

“Well, at a young age I became fascinated with creating things, and discovering how everything came to be,” Kolton says. “Let’s just say I was a curious little bugger. By the time I was a teenager I’d become very interested in things like alchemy and modern chemistry. That eventually led to me studying pyrotechnics and explosives. As I was becoming quite advanced in the field, one of my instructors got me a job with the country’s leading weapons manufacturer, Direct Aim. It happened not long before the War Within. And after only six months, I was promoted to a senior position.”

* * *

“Come on in, Kolton,” said Direct Aim’s managing director, Van Smithson. “Have a seat, young man.” He indicated a chair in front of his desk.

Kolton sat down, nervously wondering why this meeting was taking place.

“So, let me start out by asking you how you’ve enjoyed your first six months at Direct Aim,” Smithson said.

“Very much so, sir,” Kolton replied. “I’m grateful for the opportunity.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Smithson said in his gravelly voice. “Many of our employees don’t last more than six days. We’re very demanding around here, and with good reason. Here, read this.”

He slid his flash-pad across his desk to Kolton.

“It’s only a matter of time before those HKM parasites attempt to bring about our end,” he said angrily while Kolton read a First Source News report. “As a country, we must be prepared. And it’s us, Kolton, as the backbone of the US military, who must continue to innovate. That’s why I called you here today.”

“I’ll gladly contribute however I can, Mr. Smithson.”

“Great, because I want to follow through with the development of the zap-grenade design you’ve been working on. I see great potential there.”

“I don’t know, sir; it’ll take quite a bit of time and a lot of resources to see that through.”

“That’s why I’m promoting you to head up your own development team. I’ll be giving you nine months and sufficient funding to complete the project. Think of it as your baby,” Smithson said with a sinister laugh.

* * *

“Come on, Kolton, don’t do this to yourself,” Luanda abruptly interjects. “This is supposed to be a joyous evening.”

“It’s okay, Lu, I’ve got it under control. Besides, my counselors have told me that sometimes it’s cathartic to be open and face my

demons straight on,” he answers calmly. He continues, “Well, when they promoted me, it was like a dream come true.” He pauses and takes a deep breath. “At times I had as many as twenty people working under me. And all that time—”

“Please, Kolton,” an anxious Luanda calls out. “I don’t want you doing this. We’ve agreed to leave all that in the past.”

“Okay, you win, my darling.” Kolton sighs. “You’re right. This should be a joyous evening. That’s all in the past.” With a sudden burst of energy, he exclaims, “Please, play for us, Luanda.” He gestures toward the piano.

* * *

“Hey, Nicole, I think you’d better check this out,” Beth says as she places her flash-pad on my desk. “Central Park on Saturday. Judging by these messages, they not only want you to attend, they’re requesting you lead the rally.”

“Whoa, they’re expecting thirty thousand.”

“And that’s not all,” Beth adds. “There’s at least another ten rallies being scheduled right across the country in the coming days.”

“Well, get the rest of the crew together, and let’s get ready to do some traveling.”

Thankfully, it’s a splendid afternoon. A light dusting of snow covers the ground, and the barren trees appear majestic under a large golden sun. The air is cool, but comfortable. As was the case when I viewed the prior gatherings on UCIT, I remain in awe of the diversity of this massive group. What has really captured my attention is the contingent of middle-aged people who have now joined in.

The atmosphere is highly festive, with various styles of music playing. People are dancing and singing, others are mingling around bonfires. I meet with the organizers in a cordoned-off area. There is a large contingent of event security. My own personal security team is also on site. Some surround me, and some are incognito, scattered throughout the park. I spend time greeting and speaking with

members of the crowd. Their words of encouragement are very satisfying. The predominant message is clear: please do whatever it takes to fix this current mixed-up state of affairs.

It's early evening, and my time has come. A large crew scrambles to prepare the stage. Several mammoth flash-screens are set up around the park, along with several stacks of specialized lights. One of my senior advisers pulls me aside to wish me good luck. A rush of adrenaline guides me to the podium. The crowd begins to chant in unison, "Free Anya! Free America!" There's certainly no way I'm about to interrupt. After a minute or so, the crowd breaks into a thunderous cheer. The sound is deafening.

I immediately become concerned when I look to my right and notice a group of young men dressed in military-type clothes, just standing there, gazing around the grounds. It's eerie. There has to be at least twenty of them, and they are being met with all kinds of nasty stares from the crowd. I'm dreading where this could lead.

Through my flash-pad, I immediately alert Mitch, the leader of my security team. He informs me that security has been monitoring the group closely for the last fifteen minutes, and they're prepared to take action if need be. I can't help but think back to that tragic day when JD Wren set himself on fire while I was speaking at the Field of Honor. Nevertheless, the show must go on.

"Hello, my fellow Americans. Thank you for allowing me this incredible opportunity to address you this evening," I bellow at the top of my voice. I'm granted their immediate attention. "You have spoken, and I have listened. And together we will lead America into the future." My words are met with more thunderous applause. I keep the group of extremists in the corner of my eye. Nervously, I continue. "They say 'youth is wasted on the young.' Well, the time has come to put that adage to rest.

"Gerald Levin would like to have you believe America is in a state of extreme peril. Believe me when I tell you this is simply not true. The VX drug plan and the Pinian energy deal are without a doubt the two greatest events in this country's recent history. Soon the return of our complete independence and the reinstatement of

our sacred Constitution will help us recapture what it truly means to be American.”

I notice the extremist group is now in the center of the audience, facing me. The tension is mounting, but I won't relent. Trying to avoid making eye contact with them, I draw a deep breath, but before I can continue, one of them hollers aggressively, “And what about the military? Are you going to continue chopping it to pieces?”

The crowd jeers. Members of both my personal security team and the event's security staff are now on high alert, ready for action.

This outburst puts me on edge, but I calmly reply, “Thank you for that question, sir. It is a very important one.” I repeat the question through the sound-blast, then provide my answer. “I won't stand here and deny that the Westgale Administration has been doing exactly what you just said. And I will tell you as the Administration's former executive director, those cutbacks *were* necessary. But through the efficiencies that will be reaped from the VX drug plan and the Pinian energy deal, I'm thrilled to announce that as president, I will have the opportunity to reinvest in our military, and I will.”

When I finish my response, the extremists appear satisfied by my answer and peacefully turn away. *Phew, what a relief.*

“In the coming days, I will be entering the Judicial Triangle in an attempt to right a wrong. Maria Ahar should never have died out on that icy street, that cold winter morning. Where she should have been was in the warm confines of Green Light Memorial Hospital, lovingly holding her newborn daughter, Anya, in her arms. Even my own father, the Honorable Lawrence Kratz, was a victim of this broken system. As US Attorney General at the time, it was he who was forced to make the decision to close several New York State hospitals, including Green Light. It is a decision he regrets to this day. It was a decision that stemmed from the madness of war—a war that forced even the most compassionate of our citizens to compromise their deepest beliefs. Through goodwill and proper governance, we must ensure such a tragic event will never happen again. God bless you.”

As I turn away from the podium, I'm whisked down a path cleared by my security into a waiting grand-electro. The crowd erupts into a frenzy. As we head off, I hear the resounding chant of "Nicole for Prez!"

When I tune in to UCIT on the electro's flash-screen, I watch Cryptic approach a middle-aged lady.

"Hello, ma'am. What brings you out here this evening?" the robot asks.

"I think Nicole Kratz has hit on something that is long overdue," she replies before sipping from a cup of hot chocolate.

"Are you not concerned that people of your age group and older will think she's pandering to some kind of young persons' revolution?"

"It's that way of thinking that will always keep us divided. We need a president with an open and fresh mind to help this country continue to be the greatest country on earth. Nicole Kratz is that president. I'm also thrilled to know Hunter Talbot will be by her side. I'll always be grateful to that young man. For God's sake, his teal-berry discovery saved my granddaughter's life."

"Do you not think the office of the country's executive director and seats on the Strategic Council should be reserved for those who are more seasoned?"

"I used to think that way, but look where that has got us. We must change with the times. I think it's so very important that our government represents all adult age groups accordingly."

"That's it. This is the kind of thing the campaign needs," Beth says to me in the back of the electro as we watch the interview.

"Hopefully, we'll be able to continue gaining momentum," I reply as we begin preparing our itinerary for the rest of the rallies.

I'm truly humbled by the support I'm receiving right across the country. And fortunately, support is beginning to come from all ages. But will it be enough? When we return home from the final rally, my team meets at our headquarters. Together we wait for the new polling numbers to be announced. "There's no doubt in my mind we're closing the gap," Hunter says as he paces the floor. "Did you

see that response in Los Angeles? The amazing thing is, a third of those people had to be over the age of forty.”

“We have to be careful, Hunter,” I reply. “Just because they attended those rallies doesn’t mean they’re on board with us. Ah, here we go,” I say as UCIT appears on the flash-screen.

The usual dissonant sound effects precede the arrival of Cryptic. “Good evening, America,” the robot says in its monotone voice.

“I can’t wait until the country can get rid of that damn machine. It’s given me the creeps since I was a kid,” Beth says, attempting to lessen the tension in the room. It’s not working.

“I’m here to announce the results of the most recent national poll in relation to the upcoming federal election,” the robot says. “The current leader at forty-four percent is Gerald Levin representing the Militant Alliance of America. Nicole Kratz, representing the Peace-Bringers Association of America, is at thirty-seven percent, while nineteen percent of Americans are undecided.”

“It’s an improvement, but obviously it’s not enough,” I say to my team. As usual, Hunter begins analyzing the details from UCIT’s view-file page.

“If I were Levin I’d be rather concerned. He dropped thirteen percent,” Hunter says as he continues studying the screen.

“Yeah, but we only rose five percent,” Beth responds.

“Like I thought, the undecided voters are going to be the key to this entire election,” Hunter adds.

“Have faith, Hunter, we’ll eventually win them over,” I respond, attempting to convince myself.

* * *

With concern running deep at the PBA, Thor Hardy calls the president to his office for a meeting. “We had it, William. We had it locked up. With the VX drug and the Pinian deal, there was no way we were going to lose,” Hardy says in frustration. “Now because of this bloody obsession Nicole has with that damn extremist, we might as well just hand the keys of the Freedom Home over to Levin.”

“I understand your concern, Thor, but at least the most recent numbers are showing an improvement,” Westgale replies, trying to bring some calm to the conversation.

“An improvement? As of now, only thirty-seven percent of Americans are on our side. And once that damn hearing begins, that number will probably be cut in half.” Hardy takes a deep breath and slowly exhales. “Can’t you get through to her, Mr. President? I know how she looks up to you. I fear it’s our only hope. She needs to be done with Anya Ahar.”

“Have you seen those gatherings? The numbers are growing daily. In essence, Nicole’s doing what any good politician is supposed to do: she’s listening to the people,” Westgale says with conviction.

“Are you telling me you’re on board with her? That you’re okay with setting free a woman who manufactured helcin, planned to blow up six buildings, and helped to create a venomous doctrine that goes against all this country stands for?”

“A woman who did these things because our messed-up system of governance killed her mother,” Westgale answers, his voice rising. “And if the people of this nation see her tragic story as the reason for change, then it’s time we listen.”

“So, are we just going to give in to every public rallying call from now on?”

“Believe me, Thor, I was every bit as angry as you when I heard what Nicole had in mind, but as I’ve watched these recent events unfold, I’ve come to realize how this story has opened the eyes and touched the hearts of so many.”

“My Lord, William, for every person Anya Ahar’s story has ‘touched,’ I would say there’s five times as many people who are appalled by everything she stands for.”

“Give Nicole time, Thor. I have complete faith in her. There’s no doubt in my mind she’ll turn this around.”

“I’m sorry. I know how much you think of her, but this is complete lunacy,” Hardy says as he places a piece of paper on his desk. “And what I find the most disturbing is the *reason* she’s doing this.”

“The reason?”

“Come on, Mr. President, you can’t be that naïve. This is all about redeeming herself,” Hardy responds, removing a gold pen from its holder. “I saw the look in her eyes when I announced my decision in the triangle, preventing her precious Anya from being allowed to search for that cure,” he adds, pulling the paper closer to himself. “Heck, she even resigned from your Administration right afterward.”

“So you think she’s doing this in vain?” Westgale snaps back. “You don’t know a damn thing about Nicole!”

“Maybe I don’t. But I do know a thing or two about reality. And the reality is, Nicole Kratz is going to bring down this entire association, and I won’t be going down with the ship,” Hardy says as he applies his signature to the piece of paper. “And now it’s *my* turn to resign, effective immediately.” He slides the paper over to Westgale, who studies it.

Westgale lifts his gaze back to Hardy and says quietly, “It’s a shame you feel this way, Thor, because I’m confident Nicole Kratz will be the greatest president this country has ever seen.”

CHAPTER 13

“This is going to be very damaging to our integrity,” Westgale says as he informs me of Thor Hardy’s resignation as chairman of the PBA. “Thor’s been an integral part of this association since its creation.”

I nod as the implications churn through my mind. “I’m sorry to hear he decided to resign,” I say. “I knew he was disappointed in my platform, but—”

“Oh, he was a little more than disappointed... He was furious. Thankfully, the perfect replacement is totally on board with your agenda.”

This nudges the insecurity out of the mix. “Justice Malone?” I say with a hint of eagerness.

“Yes. I spoke with Phillip a few hours ago, and he’s thrilled with the opportunity. Director Perry and I will be recommending him to council in the coming days. I’m certain they’ll vote in his favor.”

“I want to thank you for continuing to place your trust in me, sir. You don’t know how much it means to me,” I say with a rush of emotion.

“And for the sake of not only this association, but this entire country, I hope that trust isn’t misplaced.”

This evening is the one and only occasion where I’ll be in a face-to-face debate with Gerald Levin. The setting is the Prestige Hotel’s ballroom. The moderator is Cryptic. The in-house audience is composed of American citizens who were randomly selected by

UCIT. They've been ordered to remain completely silent during the event. Outside the ballroom, hundreds are gathered around the property, watching on flash-screens, while millions watch on the World Connect.

After Cryptic formally begins the proceedings, we're both allotted two minutes to present our case for being president. We then spend the next hour or so vigorously debating the usual topics, such as the economy, the military, the environment, technology, and energy.

Now it's time for the fireworks as Cryptic asks us to explain to America why we believe our opponent isn't presidential material. Since the PBA is the current governing power, it's my choice whether or not to speak first. I defer.

Gerald takes a sip of water and looks directly into the camera. "I have great respect for Nicole Kratz," he begins. "I find her extremely intelligent, and I believe she cares deeply for America. Unfortunately, she's been so immersed in the culture of the PBA and the Westgale Administration that I'm afraid her judgment, or lack thereof, when it comes to important political issues is completely laughable. The fact that she is in full support of Westgale's Pinian energy deal tells us everything we need to know. Yes, my friends, she's willing to make deals with dictators. My America doesn't make deals with dictators. In fact, during my first day in office, I will have that deal terminated.

"My America also doesn't embrace and show compassion toward domestic terrorists. Ms. Kratz's obsession with aiding Anya Ahar is extremely disturbing. The worst part of all is that she's using this as a political device. When she witnessed those recent mass gatherings of our disenfranchised youth, and heard their ludicrous rallying call demanding Anya Ahar be set free, she followed the wave, seized the moment, and saw it as a way to gain mass popularity with our country's youth. In my America, a president is a strong and determined leader—not a follower."

"Ms. Kratz, please tell us why you believe Mr. Levin is not presidential material," Cryptic says.

“Hmm... Anya Ahar, a political device? I’m sorry to disappoint you, Mr. Levin, but I actually think of Anya Ahar as a human being. Troubled? Yes, but nonetheless a human being. And a brilliant human being, at that. A young lady whose psychological trauma stemmed from the tragic death of her mother during the very war that *you* and your cohorts created.

“Now, you are correct when you suggest a president must be a strong leader. But in the end, as we’ve discovered throughout history, a leader can only guide his or her followers to where they *want* to go. And the only way this can be done is by listening, shaping a direction, and then guiding. Is it realistic for Mr. Levin to stand here and tell you how you should feel, as if you’re his own personal robots? Of course not. I guess in his America, human emotion should be suppressed, and the country’s youth are to be controlled and not heard. In his America, only society’s elite matter.

“And yes, even though I was not part of the Westgale Administration when the Pinian energy deal came to fruition, I do fully support it. I’m well aware of the careful thought and analysis that went into the deal, and I plan to continue moving forward with it if I’m privileged enough to lead this country. It’s a monumental international deal that will enable us to regain our full independence.

“I find it interesting that Mr. Levin claims his America doesn’t make deals with dictators. If I recall correctly, is this not the same person who set up shop in the HKM to manufacture his treasured consumer robots? In *my* America, there’s no room for hypocrisy.”

“Now it’s time for both candidates to answer one question from the audience,” Cryptic says as it turns around to face the crowd with its chest displaying a neon map of America. “Is there a Laura Foster in the audience?” the robot asks.

“Yes, over here,” a lady in her thirties calls out.

“I believe you have a question for Nicole Kratz,” Cryptic says.

“Yes. While I’m on board with your political agenda and feel you’d make an outstanding president, I still remain very uneasy about why you believe a person like Anya Ahar deserves to be free.

If you are successful in accomplishing that goal, how would I then explain this to my children?”

“Thank you for the question, Laura. It’s a very important one,” I say as I remove the sound-blast from the podium and move closer to the audience. “I hope you and the rest of America will understand that since I’ll be representing Anya Ahar in her upcoming Judicial Triangle hearing, I’m somewhat limited in what I can and cannot say at this time. However, I’d like to make it very clear that I would not be making this request if I believed Anya Ahar posed any threat whatsoever to our society, or if I didn’t believe she’d end up being a great contributor to our society. If I am successful in having Anya freed, it will happen through our current justice system, and I think that’s the most important thing your children need to know.”

“Thank you, Ms. Kratz,” Cryptic says. It calls on a middle-aged man to question Gerald Levin.

“Mr. Levin. How can you denounce the Pinian energy deal when it now appears to be our only hope of paying off the debt owed to the Outer Commission?”

“Great question, sir,” Gerald says, then pauses to gather his thoughts. “I recommend all Americans visit our MAA view-file page. On there you will find the detailed plan we proposed to the Westgale Administration some three years ago. That very plan, if implemented, would easily have paid off that debt without having to resort to doing business with a dictator such as Cobra Pix. Sadly, President Westgale didn’t even have the decency to respond. And when they tell you the Pinian deal is the only current hope, they are misleading you. Many of the strategies in the plan we proposed can still be utilized to meet that deadline. Those, in conjunction with our proposed international VX drug program, would easily enable us to pay off the debt. I, along with my business advisers, would gladly sit down with the Westgale Administration and provide assistance, if they so wish.”

Cryptic turns to me. “Would you care to respond, Ms. Kratz?”

“Sure,” I reply, attempting to remain calm. “As the former executive director to President Westgale, I can tell you why we

didn't respond to the MAA's proposal. It was an insult to both the PBA and America. This farce of a plan showed complete disregard for our environmental laws, and of course provided great long-term financial incentives for none other than ERT Power. It also called for an increase in the sale of armaments to foreign interests, the elimination of the World Harmony Program, and a massive depletion of our space program. And as far as their 'international VX drug program' is concerned, it would mean three-quarters of our supply would leave the country. That is completely unacceptable, especially when a solution is already in place."

When the debate ends and I exit the stage, Beth tells me she has some upsetting news. "Lay it on me, Beth. For all I know, Gerald Levin could already be all over this," I say.

"It relates to the hospitals, and the fact your father's the person who ordered them to be closed."

I nod, not surprised. "I was worried how the public would react."

"Actually, the public has accepted the news extremely well."

I stop and look at her. "Then what's the problem?"

"It's Dr. Ahar. He just returned from Europe and he's demanding to meet with you. He's furious."

"Well, I can't blame him. Please set something up."

Hunter rushes into the hotel foyer, immediately getting my attention. "Wow, it's quite a gathering out there," he says, attempting to catch his breath. "Thank God security's out in full force."

"Are most with us or against us?" Beth asks.

"From what I can gather, it's fairly even," Hunter replies. He gestures at a flash-screen on the wall near a seating area, and we move to it to watch.

I catch my breath. Outside the Prestige Hotel, it's clear that tension has been building. Now it threatens to boil over as supporters on either side begin waging a verbal war:

"Get it through your thick skull: Nicole Kratz is supporting a terrorist!" a middle-aged man shouts at a young woman.

"Why's she a terrorist? Because she wrote a doctrine describing her vision of America. That's called free speech," the young woman replies.

“Listen, princess, that demented little extremist you’re so fond of tried to blow up government buildings and kill innocent people,” the man shouts back getting right in her face.

“Get a life, buddy,” she snaps back.

Suddenly, a young man comes between them. “Hey man, the people who work in those buildings treat animals in the most inhumane ways imaginable. AXE would have done us all a favor if they’d blown those buildings to kingdom come,” he says matter-of-factly.

Others quickly join the fray. Several small skirmishes break out. Security moves in.

“So, what do you make of all this?” Cryptic asks a man wearing a yellow raincoat, standing away from the ruckus.

“It’s so sad,” he says, shaking his head. He looks around and raises his voice. “People, we should be rejoicing.”

“Rejoicing? For what reason?” Cryptic asks politely.

“We’ve recently witnessed the coming of a higher power and we’re focusing on the stupidity of politics?” he replies.

“I take it you’re speaking of the Vexton Gleam?” Cryptic asks.

“Right on, my friend.” The man becomes animated. “It’ll probably shock the country to hear this, but there were several shimmering turquoise lights seen in forest areas across the country that night.”

“How do you know this?” asks Cryptic. “Are you some kind of mystery chaser?”

“Actually, until recently, I worked for the National Space Department, investigating unsolved mysteries.”

“Did you quit?”

“Of course; I’m way too honest.” The man zips up his raincoat and tightens his rain cap before abruptly walking away.

The UCIT camera pans the unruly crowd, and the picture fades to black.

“What was with that guy?” Beth says, perplexed.

“I don’t know. But that’s the first I’ve heard of this,” I reply with a raised brow.

At the Freedom Home, Executive Director Dave Perry was watching the same newscast. He reaches for his flash-pad even as the mysterious man in the yellow raincoat walks away from the robot.

“Hey, Red, did you see that guy who just appeared on UCIT?” he asks Major Redford Cunningham, Director of National Space, when he connects. “What in the world was that all about? Please tell me he was just some kook.”

“I’m looking into it, sir,” the major answers, his voice gruff with concern. “I’ll be by with some answers for you in the next half-hour.”

“Come on in, Red,” Perry says as he waves the major into his office twenty minutes later. “Can I get you a coffee?” he asks as they settle in.

“Thanks, but I think I’ve already had my fill of coffee for today,” replies the lanky grizzled aeronautical engineer.

“So, what were you able to find out about our friend in the raincoat?” Perry asks.

The major groans and runs a hand through his silvery hair. “He’s for real,” he answers. “His name’s Noah Robbins. And yes, he did work as a case analyst in Unsolved Mysteries.”

Perry stands and begins pacing. “Was he being truthful?”

“According to our records, he was,” Red replies, his tone cautious. “The case file indicates that, including Vexton, there were sightings reported from fourteen different locations across the country that night. And like Robbins said, they were all in forested areas. Most of the flash-messages came from campers and a few were from pilots.”

“And you guys did nothing about it!” Perry shouts, glaring at Cunningham.

“The case file concluded that these people were witnessing some kind of astronomical phenomenon. Nothing that would warrant an investigation,” Cunningham says, running his hands over his face. “But after the Vexton story came to light, those events should’ve been revisited. There’s no excuse for this kind of oversight, and I’ll

be addressing it first thing tomorrow with the department's leader. I guarantee you, this won't happen again, sir."

"Well, it definitely won't happen again under his watch, because by tomorrow morning he'll be searching for another line of work."

* * *

"And they just ignored this?" I say when Dave Perry breaks the news to me.

"That's correct. They simply pushed it aside into some file and forgot about it," Perry answers.

"Well, not being a part of the Administration any longer, I'm well aware it's not my place to give advice..."

"Don't be silly, Nicole; your input is always appreciated."

"I think it'd be wise to investigate the areas where those sightings took place. Heck, maybe we'll discover more of that glittering strata." I chuckle.

"Hmm, that just might be worth a shot," Perry replies.

CHAPTER 14

There it is. That damn clanking sound, coming from the hallway.

Moments later the door opens and the guards bring Anya into the room. They begin to remove the shackles. “I’d rather you not,” she says to them.

This isn’t a good sign for me. But I smile. “It’s okay, gentlemen. If that’s Miss Ahar’s wish, then so be it,” I say.

Exchanging confused glances, they exit the room.

“Are you being defiant toward me, Anya? Is that what that was?”

“Please don’t take it personally. I just don’t want to be treated differently from the other prisoners,” she says, looking me in the eyes.

“That’s okay. Have it your way. Now, with your hearing getting closer, we’re really going to need to bear down.” She continues to study me, unblinking. “Is everything okay, Anya?” I pause, waiting for her reply. Nothing. “If there’s something you need to tell me, please come out with it. If I’m wasting my time being here, let me know,” I say calmly but firmly. Through her thick lenses, I see tears forming in the corners of her eyes. My curiosity is now at an all-time high.

Trembling slightly, she offers a subtle smile. “Thank you... thank you,” she says softly. It’s as if the words have oozed through blocks of ice. The ice melts and tears begin to stream down her cheeks.

“What are you thanking me for?” I ask, perplexed.

“I heard your speech—the one you gave in Central Park. Thank you.”

I hand her a tissue. “Did you hear the entire speech?”

“Yes... and I was extremely moved.”

I’m relieved to hear this, but I’m also somewhat puzzled, considering what I revealed. “And you’re not angry with me, knowing it was my father who was responsible for that hospital being closed?”

“No. I don’t blame your father for what happened. He was simply part of a broken system. And I’m so elated, so grateful that someone like you is finally willing to try to fix it.”

“That’s my plan, Anya. And I want to begin that journey by helping you. But I’ll need your complete honesty and cooperation,” I say firmly.

She shrugs and sighs. “I can’t let you do it. There’s absolutely no way we’ll win in that courtroom,” she says, her voice a resigned monotone.

“That’s not true. All you have to do is be yourself and stop pretending to be the malicious young woman that you’re not. And your father—he needs you to give him a chance. This is killing him.”

“Please, Ms. Kratz; honor my request. This country needs you far more than it needs me. And my father... he has everything he needs.”

“He’s not the man he was. He realizes how neglectful he was toward you in the past, and he wants so desperately to be able to change that,” I say earnestly. “And America—it needs the both of us, Anya. Are you aware of the impact your story has had on this country? And it’s not just the young. The number of people calling for your freedom is growing daily. Your story has made this entire country reexamine itself. Heck, I know how much it has even helped to open *my* eyes to reality.”

“Let it go,” she snaps. “I will not partake in such a useless endeavor.”

“If you do that—”

“All I ask of you is to please let me meet my fate peacefully.”

“And all I ask of *you* is to think about this, and let me help you walk out of here,” I plead.

Anya bows her head and presses the buzzer to call the guards to take her back to her cell. “Don’t waste your time on me, Ms. Kratz. Make America what it should be.”

She leaves with the guards, and I'm left feeling engulfed by waves of sorrow.

* * *

"You have to believe me, I had no idea it was my father who ordered the closure of those hospitals," I say to Dr. Ahar as we meet in his office. "And I apologize for not contacting you in Europe before I made the news public."

Dr. Ahar slowly shakes his head. "I can't believe it, Nicole. I know your father. How could such a good, decent man have done something so callous?" He scowls. "I guess when President Snyder publicly referred to the War Within as an event so atrocious it turned even the kindest souls into architects of evil, he was absolutely correct."

He looks at me and draws a deep breath. "I'm sorry, Nicole. I just keep thinking of what should have been. The joys of a family, together..."

"I understand, Doctor," I reply. My eyes are drawn to the photos behind his desk.

"Nicole, are you okay?" he asks. "Nicole."

"Ah! Sorry, Doctor," I answer as my mind snaps back to the moment.

"So, how was your follow-up meeting with Anya? Were you able to make any progress?" he asks.

I shake my head sadly. "She wants no part of that hearing, sir."

"Whoa, wait a second. Are you telling me my daughter has resigned herself to being executed?" Ahar begins to tremble. "Why? What on earth happened? You told me you thought you were getting through to her."

"I know I was getting through to her, but that's where the problem lies."

"I don't understand."

"I know this seems crazy, but Anya's doing this because she knows my situation. She so badly wants me to become president."

"All the more reason for her to want you in her corner—why wouldn't she?"

“She doesn’t think we’d stand a chance in the hearing, and that in the end it’ll crush my presidential hopes.”

“Oh my... We can’t let her do this, Nicole,” Ahar says, his tone urgent.

I shrug and lift my hands. “It doesn’t look good, Doctor. She was very strong in her position. I doubt anything will change her mind.”

“I can’t let my beautiful daughter die—something must be done!” he cries. He flops into his chair and puts his head in his hands.

I move around his desk and stop behind his chair to rest my hands on his shoulders. “I’m not giving up on this yet. You have my word.”

“I believe you, Nicole... Now please, I need to be alone,” he says, his voice choked with emotion.

Before exiting the room, I glance back. He is weeping.

CHAPTER 15

With the number of undecided voters now at twenty-two percent, it's become apparent that this election is anybody's game. While I was on my recent whirlwind tour to speak at various rallies, Gerald Levin had been lying low. But today he has surfaced. Brave Land Stadium, home of Levin's Washington Androids, is filled to capacity as he prepares to speak. The event is expected to be one for the ages.

Marching bands open the festivities, followed by a sensational performance by the remarkable Magic Marcus, who for the climax of his show makes lifelike figures of me and Westgale vanish into thin air. *Very creepy, indeed.* Next comes a performance by the Soaring Pretzels, a combination acrobatic act and percussion ensemble whose stunning physical feats and booming jungle drums work the crowd into a frenzy. Then after the crowd is given time to catch its breath, a red, white, and blue robo-copter lands on the rotating stage in the middle of the stadium.

Earl Pemberton exits the copter. "My Lord, it is incredible to see so many friends of the MAA here today," he says, raising his hands in the air, backing away from the podium, cheering with the audience. The look in his eyes takes me back to the first day of the War Within, when at the Last Frontier steakhouse I saw that same scheming glare. It is the look of a hungry jackal preparing for the kill. As the UCIT camera scans the crowd, the chairman of First Source News, Domingo Diaz, is seen high above in a private box, chomping away on a rack of spare ribs. I'm surprised the blood from his fangs isn't dripping down on

those below. Once he realizes he's being captured on camera, he immediately attempts to shift out of view.

Pemberton steps back to the podium. "It is a great honor to present the leader of the Militant Alliance of America, and this country's future president, Mr. Gerald Levin!"

Levin appears, strutting from a tunnel toward a waiting black and silver robo-cycle. Dressed in a black designer suit and sporting an American flag tie, he begins shaking hands and flashing his phony smile before he gets on the cycle and is whisked along the front aisle to the stage. The camera flashes back up to Domingo Diaz, who can be seen fervently waving an American flag and chanting "Gerrrrrald" with the rest of the crowd. Again, he attempts to duck out of view.

Anger consumes me. This is a man who brags about running his media empire in the most unbiased manner possible, who claims he never has and never will cater to any political interests. To think *The Source you can rely on for the truth* is this company's slogan. I shake my head.

"The journey is just beginning, folks," Levin exclaims. "What an incredible journey it'll be. And I'm looking forward to being the person to lead you on the path back to prosperity." The crowd hangs on every word. "Kiddy hour with the PBA is over. It's time to get down to the real business of reshaping the greatest country on earth!"

He spends quite some time outlining his political agenda, which features a drastic lowering of taxes, a complete restructuring of the military, the elimination of the World Harmony Program, the abolition of pretty much all of the country's gun laws, and installation of an international VX drug program and an international energy program led by Earl Pemberton and ERT Power. "These programs will easily eliminate the debt owed to the Outer Commission by that looming deadline, without us having to resort to doing business with a dictator like Cobra Pix. I have formally extended an invitation to President Westgale to discuss this matter, but as expected, he has yet to respond." The crowd boos loudly.

"I find it very interesting that the Pinian energy deal was sealed as Jessica Westgale and Shadow Pix were falling in love. How sweet is

that?" Levin says with a devious grin. "It's like a modern-day Romeo and Juliet." The crowd roars with laughter. "However, in all sincerity, I do hope the final outcome isn't so tragic."

He pauses and waits for the crowd to settle before he continues. "Nicole Kratz," he says with a smirk, and jeers fill the stadium.

I knew it was only a matter of time until I became his target.

"The PBA's very own queen of the bleeding hearts. What a joke. Isn't it ironic that the same person who helped develop the ridiculous World Harmony Program is now attempting to divide *America*? She keeps insisting that she wants to give a voice to young America, but her narrative, if anything, actually feeds the insecurities of the disenfranchised. As I look around this stadium I'm honored to see thousands of young faces. I spoke with many of you before this event commenced, and I think it's safe to say you have more important things to do with your lives than parade around crying out for a terrorist to be freed from prison." A mad rush of excitement sweeps through the crowd. The chant of "Gerrrrald" is deafening.

"Now, I'd like to call Earl back to the stage and welcome him as my official running mate."

The chant quickly changes to "Earl! Earl!"

Beside Gerald, Pemberton gives the crowd a military salute.

"I realize most of you are probably thinking Earl and I are just two boring billionaires who stay at home at night counting our money. Well, I have news for you, friends—we also know how to have a good time!"

Several robo-cycles flashing with neon lights come speeding out of the stadium's tunnels and onto the field to perform death-defying stunts. When a spectacular display of fireworks lights up the evening sky above the stage, the crowd is whipped into a frenzy. The finale sees red, white, and blue blasts form the name *GERALD*.

"Leave it to Gerald Levin to put his name up in lights," Hunter quips as my team and I watch the over-the-top presentation in our headquarters.

"I've heard he's quite revered in Vexton. Is that true?" Beth asks Hunter.

“It all depends on who you ask,” Hunter answers. “Many see him as arrogant and insecure. But there’s no denying he’s a great salesman.”

“Well, let’s just hope the people of America aren’t buying what he’s selling,” I say, watching the spectacle with disdain.

* * *

The next morning, the always friendly and humorous Justice Phillip Malone pays a visit to my campaign headquarters. “Well, this is a pleasant surprise,” I say as he walks through the office checking out the photos on the wall.

“Tell me, Nicole—I know this might be a crazy question—but does Lowell ever grow tired of winning?” he says, chuckling as he looks at photos of my husband celebrating recent World Golf Championship victories. “I would assume he might start becoming rather bored, if he just keeps rolling over the competition like he’s been doing.”

“Oh, even he realizes every king loses his crown at some point. So I guess he appreciates wearing that crown for as long as he can,” I reply humbly.

“And there are the little darlings,” Malone says, gazing at a photo of my daughters. “Now, what’s it going to be for them, golf or politics?” he asks.

“Well, at the moment it looks like they might be heading in entirely different directions,” I reply. “Tiffany wants to be a writer, and January’s love for animals has her hoping to one day be a vet.”

“I’m sure whatever path they choose, they’ll make you and Lowell very proud,” he responds, settling into the chair across from me.

“Regardless of what they choose to do, we just want them to be happy,” I say with a smile. “So, how are you enjoying being the PBA’s new chairman?”

“Hopefully I’ll at least last a little longer than my predecessor.” He laughs.

We discuss several PBA matters before getting to Anya.

“I feared she’d do this,” I say when Malone informs me Anya formally revoked her right to the Judicial Triangle hearing.

“I’m sorry, Nicole, but as long as she refuses to be a part of the process, there’s nothing that can be done. And now that Dr. Durant and the two other doctors who have diagnosed her don’t see her as being insane, I’m afraid she’ll have to face the penalty of death.”

We say our goodbyes and Justice Malone exits my office.

“I’m sorry to bother you, Nicole,” Beth calls to me over the intercom. “There’s a lady here in the foyer who says it’s vital that she speak with you.”

“This is definitely not a good time, Beth. Has she told you her name?”

“She told me she’d like to remain anonymous.”

“All right. Once she’s been thoroughly checked by security, bring her in.”

Minutes later, Beth escorts the mystery lady into my office. I study her a moment. She appears to be in her fifties. Wearing a hood and large sunglasses, it’s obvious she’s trying to disguise her identity. “That’ll be all, Beth,” I say.

Beth leaves and closes the door behind her.

“Thank you for seeing me. I’m Carly—Carly Taylor,” the woman says. I can tell she’s nervous.

“Carly Taylor? As in First Source News, Carly Taylor?”

“That’s me,” she replies, and removes the hood and glasses. She looks worn out, with dark circles under her eyes—a far cry from the glamorous news reporter who’s been so deeply ingrained into American culture. “I apologize for the secrecy, but once you hear what I’ve come to tell you, I’m sure you’ll understand why I’m being so cautious.”

What in the world could this be about? “Well, I must say, you’ve really piqued my curiosity.” I pause. “Sorry for being so blunt, but I don’t recall seeing you anywhere in the media since you left First Source News.”

“And after you hear what I have to tell you, you’ll understand why,” she says.

“Oh?” I reply. *I’m all ears.*

“While watching that MAA circus last night, it really hit me, how misguided I was to have once been the face of First Source News,” Carly says. She grimaces. “It sickens me.”

“I remember watching many of your broadcasts, especially around the time of the war, and you sure seemed quite enamored with the Militant Alliance of America,” I say firmly.

“That was then. I’m not the same person I was all those years ago. I didn’t know any better. You see, both my father and mother were paranoid about the government; they did whatever they could to instill an extreme militant ideology into me and my brothers. By the age of ten I was firing guns on a shooting range—I can still recall being terrified by the damn recoil every time I fired off a shot.”

“How did you end up at First Source News?”

“Actually, I went out on my own at sixteen, and lost touch with my family.”

“What made you do that?”

“I was pregnant and decided to have an abortion. I felt terrible about it, but at the time I believed it was my only recourse.”

As I look into her eyes I can feel her anguish, even after all these years. “That had to have been challenging, to be out on your own at sixteen.”

“For the first few years it was a real battle, but with the help of a few of my friends I hit the beauty pageant circuit and started to become recognized. I was offered several modeling and acting jobs, but turned them down to work for Domingo at First Source News.”

“And how did that come about?”

“His staff used to scout the pageants for girls who had ‘the look,’ and I guess I had it. Domingo would refer to us girls as ‘eye candy for the masses.’”

“And that was it? You mean to tell me he brought you on without any training or experience?”

“Once he took me under his wing, he had one of his people teach me the basics for a couple of weeks, and that was it.”

“I guess it went well for you, since you ended up being his number one news anchor.”

Carly sighs. “Ah... the only reason I became First Source’s lead anchor was because I became Domingo’s mistress.”

“With all respect, Miss Taylor, the story of your life is very interesting, but I still have no idea why you’re here.”

“I’m here because I believe it’s imperative that you win the election. Gerald Levin and Earl Pemberton will destroy everything that’s great about America.”

“So, I see your political views have changed since your days at First Source.”

Originally revered for its highly impartial and direct news presentation, First Source News became, by far, the dominant news station of its time. With that popularity, Carly Taylor emerged as a larger-than-life personality. She appeared to be the perfect combination of brains and beauty.

As First Source continued to flourish, something peculiar occurred. Little by little, the network progressively moved further and further toward an extreme right-wing agenda. And when Jackson Snyder became president and began conveying his political vision and plan to America, the network became downright vitriolic, with Carly appearing more than willing to do her part.

“Like I said, back in those days, I didn’t know any better. I was desperate. I’m ashamed to have been Domingo’s little puppet. I’m ashamed to have had anything to do with First Source. I hated all the glitz... There I’d be, about to relay some awful news story under fancy lights, with the sound of pop music ushering me in.” She looks pained.

“Is there something important you need to tell me?”

“Yes. It’s so important, in fact, that if it’s made public, I’m sure it’ll lead you to victory.”

I sit up straight. “I’m listening.”

“Do you remember the interview I conducted with Kenneth Pahl, the HKM’s former chief military commander, just prior to the war? The one where he warned America that the HKM was on the verge of attacking our country?”

“The interview. Of course; it was a moment in history that’ll never be forgotten.”

“Well, as you may recall, First Source News claimed that Pahl contacted the network unannounced, from a secret location, strictly of his own accord.”

“Are you saying that wasn’t the case?”

“I’m certain it wasn’t the case.”

“And how is it you know this?”

“The network had a huge party that very evening.”

“Well, I’m not surprised; that was a blockbuster exclusive interview. I’m sure Domingo and his associates must have been on cloud nine after such good fortune.”

“Yeah, but you see, that party was planned a couple of days prior to Kenneth Pahl supposedly contacting the station.”

“What exactly is it you’re trying to tell me?”

“I’m certain Kenneth Pahl was bribed into doing that interview.”

“By Domingo?”

“Oh, Domingo was more than willing to do his part, but I’m certain the true orchestrators were Earl Pemberton, Gerald Levin, and their wealthy friends.”

I lean forward. “To further the cause of their newly established Militant Alliance?”

“Yes, with the idea of ensuring their personal fortunes weren’t going to be affected by Jackson Snyder’s political agenda. I know for a fact those guys would have done anything to have had Snyder removed from office. And Pahl was their perfect conduit, a former HKM military leader and the bearer of very important information—falsified information that would send our country into a panic, including our military.”

“Wait a second—you’re telling me they not only set up the interview, but you believe Pahl was lying.”

“There’s no doubt. The HKM was making loads of money off America at that time. Why would they want to destroy us? If any country was on the HKM hit list, it was Russia.”

“Can you prove what you’re telling me?”

“My word should be proof enough. I was the number one news anchor at that damn station. I saw it all. The backroom payoffs, the—”

“But did you see a payoff being made to Kenneth Pahl?”

“No, I didn’t. But I did see both Earl and Gerald, among others, pay off Domingo to either create or bury other stories for their own benefit.”

“I understand, but do you have any documents or view-files proving these things happened?”

“Unfortunately, Domingo and his staff made certain everything was kept under wraps, but I can recall at least a half dozen situations that greatly aided either Pemberton and ERT Power, or Gerald Levin and *his* business endeavors.”

“And I take it it’s your wish to go public with this.”

“I want nothing more. So many times during those years, I lied to this country. Now it’s time for me to make amends and reveal the truth.”

“Would you be willing to be interviewed by the attorney general?”

“Just let me know when and where.”

“You do understand that if you go public with these claims, these guys are going to fight back like mad dogs, and expose everything they can about *you*?”

She draws herself up. “Let them. I have nothing to hide.”

“I hope you also understand Attorney General Sutton’s office will have to perform their due diligence on you before he brings you in.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything less.”

As much as I want to believe this story could be impactful, and put a large dent in support for the MAA, I feel uneasy. Carly appeared to be passionate and sincere, but I’m concerned there may be more to her than meets the eye. That being said, I can’t just let this go.

When the Outer Commission was formed, the first action it took was to create a comprehensive report on the War Within. The report’s main purpose was to attempt to answer the basic, but important question: what was at the root of that ugly war? At the top of the list of answers was political divisiveness created and fuelled by media manipulation. The *messengers* were shaping the *messages* to fit their political and corporate agendas.

Since under the New Order Treaty, the nonpartisan UCIT is entrusted with all matters related to federal politics, the proper channels must be followed. If Attorney General Sutton believes there is merit to Carly's claims, he can then make a request to UCIT to cover the story. If UCIT agrees to interview Carly, she will be protected against all forms of potential legal action. This is highly significant, because she's making claims against three of America's most powerful men.

I send a detailed report to Sutton.

* * *

"I don't know, Champ," Westgale says, in the emergency meeting Sutton has called with the president. "As Domingo Diaz's former mistress, she might simply be out to seek some sort of revenge."

"According to Nicole's report, Miss Taylor emphatically stated this is political and not personal. Nicole believes she was being truthful," Sutton replies. "At least until Gil completes his research into her life, I think we should give her the benefit of the doubt."

"Wow... if we could only substantiate her claim regarding Kenneth Pahl, it would destroy these clowns," Westgale says as he stares intently at the report.

"Hopefully, the American people will take her at her word."

CHAPTER 16

“Come on in, Gil,” says Champ Sutton. “I really appreciate hearing back from you so soon.”

“I had my entire staff on this for the last two days,” Gil replies as he takes a seat across from Sutton.

“So, is there anything we need to be concerned about regarding Miss Taylor?”

“I’m glad to say there isn’t. At least with regards to what *we’ve* been able to determine. Let’s see... she did have an abortion at sixteen. The record is clear on that. Married and divorced twice. It doesn’t appear she’s had any trouble with the law. Since leaving First Source, she’s worked at several different jobs in the hospitality industry... Yeah, it looks like the info she provided to Nicole checks out,” Gil responds as he submits the report to Sutton’s flash-pad.

“And financially?”

“There doesn’t appear to be any red flags. However, as expected, since leaving First Source she’s definitely been forced to lead a far less excessive lifestyle.”

“Great work, Gil. I’ll give this a thorough going over, and unless I find something of concern, I’ll be making the formal request to UCIT.”

Gil takes a deep breath and exhales. “I don’t want to speak out of turn.”

“Go ahead, Gil. You know how I value your input.”

“I just can’t get my head around why, after all these years, she suddenly comes running to Nicole with this information.”

“Since the moment Nicole told me about this I’ve been thinking the same thing. And we’d be totally ignorant not to consider all the possibilities here—including the idea we’re somehow being set up to look like fools,” Sutton says with a raised brow. “But then again, if what she’s telling us has merit, the PBA will reap the benefits. It’s a risk we need to take.”

* * *

The UCIT analysis team is quick to assess the matter, and votes to allow Carly Taylor to be interviewed by Cryptic.

The interview takes place in a remote park somewhere in New York State. Carly’s choice. The specific location is undisclosed to the public. She sits on a bench as large snowflakes fall from the evening sky. They look like floating moths, caught in the spotlights surrounding her. As the UCIT camera slowly pans in, the tomb-like silence of the location seems a far cry from the glitz that used to bombard the airwaves when Carly came into American living rooms all those years ago.

Although it’s been almost twenty-six years since she’s been in front of a camera, she appears poised and as professional as ever. Her former glitzy and perky presence is now replaced by a refined, calm maturity. It’s ironic to see this formerly glamorous woman who brought such energy and interest to television news now being interviewed by an unemotional, utilitarian machine.

“Good evening, Miss Taylor,” Cryptic says, positioned directly in front of Carly. “I’m sure most Americans are wondering why you’ve decided to speak about your time at First Source News, considering it’s more than twenty-five years after the fact. Would you kindly explain?”

“It’s about revealing the truth. The truth needs to be told. I believe First Source’s former bias, extreme right-wing reporting, was the largest factor contributing to the War Within. Of course, it’s also the reason that you exist.” She stares pointedly at Cryptic, then resumes, her voice rising.

“Every time I hear Gerald Levin trying to come across as ‘a man of the people,’ it sickens me. I saw firsthand how he, Earl Pemberton, and many of the country’s other leading industrialists used their wealth and power to control the media.”

“Would you kindly provide us with a specific example where Gerald Levin did such a thing?” the robot asks.

“The one that comes to mind involved a massive stretch of farmland he owned in Cleveland, Ohio. An environmental group secretly contacted First Source about severe soil pollution in the area. My boss, Domingo Diaz, promised them he’d run the story, but he only did so after alerting Levin, who sold the property before the news was made public for five times what it ended up being worth after the story was aired.”

“Can you prove this?”

“No, but I was there for the celebration. Let’s just say Gerald Levin was rather appreciative. Domingo ended up receiving a luxury yacht.”

“Can you see how you having been Domingo Diaz’s mistress could lead people to thinking there is more to this?”

Carly shrugs. “People are entitled to think whatever they want. I’m simply telling the truth.”

“Are you aware of any indiscretions in relation to your most well-known interview, which took place with former HKM Military Commander Kenneth Pahl?”

Carly takes a deep breath, then slowly exhales. “To this day, I’m certain Kenneth Pahl was bribed into doing that interview. At the time of Jackson Snyder’s presidency, Gerald Levin and Earl Pemberton were among those who controlled the news leading up to the War Within. The day Kenneth Pahl told the American public that the HKM was planning to attack America, the majority of citizens in this country, including our military, needlessly became immersed in fear, much to the delight of the MAA.”

“What are you basing this on?” asks Cryptic.

“Being so entrenched in world news at the time, I never saw any signs the HKM was targeting America. Russia, but not us. Of course,

there was a period where First Source News did everything it could to make it appear the HKM wanted to destroy America."

After Carly provides a few more examples of the corruption that prevailed at First Source News, she concludes the interview with a final statement. "I solemnly apologize to the American people for having aided the powers that be at First Source News in helping them carry out their agenda of blatant deception. I take full responsibility for my actions."

Minutes after Carly's interview, Gerald Levin releases an official response, via a view-file to UCIT. He's standing in the front hall of the MAA's headquarters. Dressed in his usual impeccable manner, he appears relaxed as he begins to speak. *"Good evening, my fellow Americans. As was made evident by the flagrant lies told by Carly Taylor to the UCIT Network this evening, the game of politics remains vicious, especially when your opponent realizes you cannot be defeated in a legitimate manner. I'm extremely disappointed, but not surprised, that the Peace-Bringers of America have resorted to such an unethical approach. I am even more disappointed that such untruths were permitted to be presented on the UCIT Network. Don't fret, my friends, the true spirit of America will soon be resurrected."*

"Ha, he put this all on us, just like I thought he would," I say, shaking my head as I turn to Hunter.

"Oh... I'm seeing that Domingo Diaz is scheduled to answer to Cryptic in an hour's time," Hunter says, consulting his flash-pad.

"Hmm, that should be interesting. I just hope this doesn't backfire on us, Hunter," I say, revealing my concern.

Hunter looks at me with a grim expression. "Without any tangible proof, this ends up being word against word," he says. "Honestly, do you believe Carly Taylor?"

"I wouldn't have sent the report to Champ Sutton if I didn't," I reply with conviction. "None of what she said surprises me."

"Hey, isn't that Times Square?" Hunter asks as our attention returns to the flash-screen.

“It sure is,” I reply as Cryptic appears on the screen, slowly maneuvering through the hustle and bustle.

“Sir, may I have a moment of your time?” the robot asks a burly, casually dressed middle-aged man.

“Sure, what can I do for you?” the man replies.

“Who are you supporting for president?”

“Gerald Levin.”

“I’d like to know how you feel about Carly Taylor’s claim that Levin and his wealthy associates often bribed the media for their own benefit.”

“Meh, who really knows if that’s actually true? And even if it is, hey, they’re powerful businessmen in a dog-eat-dog world. They do what they need to do. Levin still has my vote, no doubt about it,” the man says.

Cryptic then makes its way toward another man and poses the same questions. “Of course Gerald Levin has my vote,” the man says as he tightens the belt of his designer leather overcoat. “I’ll bet any money Carly Taylor is the person on the take. She’s done nothing since First Source News, and it’s obvious she’s craving attention. I guess she misses the spotlight, and the money.” The man laughs. “This is all part of a typical political smear campaign. Believe me, Gerald Levin is the person who will bring this country back to richness.”

Suddenly a woman who appears to be in her mid-twenties enters the scene. “I’m sorry, but these people are out of their minds!” she exclaims. “How can they not see Levin is a complete fraud? First there’s the Vexton-Tech scandal, and now this news comes out. How could anybody in their right mind want to see this man run our country? Free Anya! Free America!” she adds before heading off to rejoin her friends.

“It’s what it is, Hunter,” I say, watching Cryptic continue on through the crowd. “I guess those who support Gerald Levin will stand by him no matter what. And those who don’t will never trust him.”

“Here’s the Diaz interview,” Hunter says, nodding toward the flash-screen.

Now sixty-eight years of age, Domingo Diaz remains majority owner and chairman of First Source Media, but he is no longer involved in its day-to-day operations.

On this evening, as he makes his way toward a podium in the foyer of First Source’s corporate headquarters, Domingo appears to be his usual charming self. He stops to shake hands with a couple of his executives, then leans in and says something to them. They laugh in response, as if they’re supposed to. After running a comb through his mane of silver hair, he adjusts his red silk tie and steps up to the podium.

“I’m extremely disappointed by what has transpired this evening. I’ve always considered Miss Taylor to be an integral part of the First Source family. That she has decided to fabricate such horrendous lies is very disturbing,” he says vehemently, his expression stern. “From the day I created this company, I’ve prided myself on its moral integrity. I’d hoped that by now Carly would have received the help she needs. In all honesty, I’m saddened by the fact she remains so troubled.

“I’ll now take some questions.”

Standing about six feet in front of the podium, Cryptic’s bright red, flashing eyes match Domingo’s tie. “When you say Miss Taylor ‘remains troubled,’ what exactly are you implying?” the robot asks.

Domingo clears his throat and takes a deep breath. “While she was working at First Source I would often find her sitting alone in the cafeteria, just blankly staring into space. By the time the lunch hour ended, the plate of food in front of her had barely been touched. One day I joined her at her table and gently asked her if something had been troubling her. It took some effort on my behalf, but she finally opened up to me. Before she could utter a word, she began bawling her eyes out.”

“Did she tell you why she was so upset?”

“It was guilt. Even though it’d been several years prior, she still felt immense guilt over having aborted her child. I remember her crying out, ‘I’m a murderer—I killed my child.’”

“Was this before you had the affair with her?”

“Yes. I did my best to help her deal with her emotions. My marriage was going through a rough period at the time, so I guess in a way, we were there for each other.”

“What brought an end to the affair?”

“She was becoming very difficult to be with—very distant, emotionally torn. And then when I insisted she seek professional help, she became quite upset with me. At that point we both agreed to end our relationship.”

“Was it amicable?” asks Cryptic.

“I thought it was, but after what she’s now resorted to... I guess I was wrong.”

“Would you say you are close to Gerald Levin and Earl Pemberton?”

“Those gentlemen are two of the most powerful men in America, and I run the country’s most powerful media company. It goes without saying that our paths frequently cross,” Domingo replies. “However, for no reason did I, nor would I, ever compromise First Source’s integrity. Without integrity, a media company is nothing but phony, an empty shell,” he adds with conviction.

* * *

“Listen to that liar,” Carly Taylor says as she watches from the back of a grand-electro.

“You did a fantastic job, Miss Taylor,” the man sitting beside her replies as he adjusts the high-tech fencing mask he’s wearing. He reaches for a black leather bag and hands it to her.

“It wasn’t very difficult. I simply told the truth,” Carly replies as she opens the bag and gazes at the five million dollars within. She begins to count the money. “Those bastards and their sickening lust for power are to blame for that war, and I won’t sit back and watch them do it again.”

“I’m just glad we were able to provide you with the proper incentive to come forward. Now that you’ve been suitably rewarded, you’re free to get away from all this hypocrisy and enjoy your life in Germany, as you expressed was your wish. The arrangements have all been taken care of,” the man says calmly. He consults his flash-pad, ensuring the presence of the private plane scheduled to transport Carly.

“I hope you don’t mind, but there’s something I’ve been wanting to ask you,” Carly says hesitantly.

“Yes.”

“I know how much telling the truth and bringing these guys down means to me, but why is it so important to you and whoever it is you’re working for that I do this?”

Within the mask, the man sighs. “It’s simple, Miss Taylor—we too think it’s in America’s best interest if Gerald Levin fails in his presidential quest.”

The grand-electro pulls onto the tarmac and up to a plane idling before an airport hangar. A man waiting at the bottom of the steps comes forward to escort Carly. As she starts climbing the stairs to the plane, the man in the grand-electro removes his mask and again reaches for his flash-pad.

“Hello, Theodore,” the man says. “I’m just letting you know everything went according to plan.”

“Excellent. Cobra will be very pleased,” Theodore replies. “Let’s just hope this evening’s news will greatly benefit our friends at the PBA.”

CHAPTER 17

“It’s great news, Nicole!” Hunter shouts as he sees me in the foyer of our headquarters. “We’re now at forty-seven percent and Levin’s dropped to forty-one percent.”

“I guess Carly Taylor’s word meant something after all,” I say, my preoccupation with Anya tempering my excitement.

His face falls.

“Whoa, I thought you’d be far more enthused.”

“Oh, don’t get the wrong idea, I’m thrilled to hear the news,” I assure him. “But I’m afraid how this whole thing surrounding Anya is going to play out.”

* * *

“I want to thank you for the generous donation. I promise we’ll put the funds to good use,” Dane Conroy, the director of New York’s Finley Rehab Center, says to Jessica. “And I must tell you, your speech today was very enlightening.”

“It’s a pleasure to be able to help out,” she replies, walking beside him down the hall from his office.

“I was overjoyed to learn Judge Kratz had set up the foundation, and even more thrilled to learn *you’d* be heading it up for him. I must tell you, I really enjoyed my time working for your father,” Dane says, referring to a past study he coordinated for the Westgale Administration on addiction.

“Yes, my father was very pleased with the analysis your team performed,” Jessica replies as they enter a common area looking out over the grounds. “The information was of immense value.”

Dane warms to the topic. “That’s the thing, Jessica. The only way we’ll find solutions is to continue studying the problem. I’ll always remain committed to helping these people,” he says as he looks around the common area, where men and women are relaxing with books or chatting with one another, “but I hope there comes a day when they won’t require my help. Now, I understand you personally know one of our subjects: Kolton Rollins.”

“Yes,” Jessica says as Dane opens a glass door and ushers her outside.

“I’m glad to see he finally found his way out of this place,” Dane says. They saunter along a crushed gravel walkway, their shoes crunching over the loose stones. “But due to circumstances I’m not at liberty to disclose, my team has recommended that he continue to see our psychologist on a weekly basis.” Dane turns to her just before they reach the street. “I’m disappointed that he hasn’t consented to do so. I’d just hate to see him relapse. Perhaps you and Shadow would be wise to address the matter with Luanda, and try to get her to convince Kolton to change his mind.”

“I’ll do what I can, Mr. Conroy,” she assures him as her car pulls up to the curb in front of her.

When Jessica returns home she immediately discusses the matter with Shadow. “I don’t want to interfere, but Finley’s director is concerned Kolton will relapse if he doesn’t continue to receive therapy... And what was all that stuff the other evening about Direct Aim?”

Shadow shrugs. “I don’t know, Jessie. I tried to address it with my mother, but just mentioning the subject really stresses her out, so I didn’t want to push it. She thinks it’s vital to Kolton’s well-being that it’s left in the past.” He exhales heavily. “But I’ll try again.”

That evening, Shadow sits down for a heart-to-heart conversation with his mother.

“Actually, Kolton wants to continue receiving therapy, but just not with Finley’s psychologist,” Luanda says when Shadow expresses his and Jessica’s concerns.

“How about if Jessica arranged it so he could see the man considered to be the best psychologist in the country, Dr. Evan Durant?”

Luanda’s eyes widen. “That’d be incredible,” she exclaims. Then she pats his hand and reveals, “Kolton thinks very highly of you, son. In fact, it’s because of him I went to visit you that day in the hospital. *He* was the person who convinced me to do so. I’m so glad I listened to him.” She leans forward and kisses him on the cheek.

* * *

Much to everyone’s relief, Kolton agrees to see Dr. Durant, and he returns from the initial appointment to announce that he’s much more comfortable with Durant than he ever felt with the Finley psychologist; so much so that they’ve already set up a weekly schedule, and he’s eager to get started.

“Please, tell me about your sister, Indiana,” Dr. Durant says as he pours Kolton a glass of water during their second appointment.

“Indy... she was incredible.” His gaze grows distant as he remembers. “So intelligent. I’ll never forget her buying me my first chemistry set as a birthday present,” Kolton says with a fond smile. “There’s no doubt she could’ve been anything she wanted to be. The fact she dedicated her life to helping children with special needs proved just what a compassionate person she was.”

“And Victoria?”

“Vicky and Indiana were so close. When Vicky saw what a caring person her older sister was growing up to be, it had a major impact on her. It definitely inspired her to pursue nursing.”

“And what about you, Kolton? What inspired you to work for Direct Aim and develop weapons?”

“I wanted to do my part to help ensure America was protected. All we kept hearing at the time was that the HKM was on the verge of attacking us. And I would’ve done anything to stop those bastards from bringing harm to this country,” he replies, his tone vehement.

“Instead, our country ended up bringing harm to itself, and your sisters were among the many who paid the price,” Durant says gently. “Please, have a drink of water, take a deep breath, and tell me how your sisters died.”

Kolton nods and after a moment, complies. “They were killed on the fourth day of the War Within...”

* * *

“Hey, Indy. Is Vicky with you?” Kolton asked as he waited for his sisters at New York’s Ruby’s Deli.

“Yeah, she’s here with me now,” Indiana answered.

Vicky grabbed Indiana’s flash-pad. “Hey, little brother; can’t wait to see ya!”

Kolton smiled. “My, oh my. When did you get in, Vic?”

“About two hours ago.”

“How long do you plan to stay?”

“I’m here until after New Year’s.”

“Fantastic. I’m looking so forward to seeing you.”

“Hey, what about me?” Indiana said with a laugh, taking the flash-pad back from her sister.

Kolton chuckled. “Oh, come on, Indy, you know that goes without saying.”

“We decided to enjoy this gorgeous winter day and walk to the deli,” Indiana said. “We’ll be there shortly. I hope you got a window table.”

“Of course, I made certain of that,” Kolton replied. “And the special is your favorite, Indy.”

“Corned beef on a hot cheese bun?” Indy asked.

“With those delicious pickles on the side. Now, you ladies just make sure you get here safe and sound. Thankfully, it looks like things have finally started to calm down out there,” Kolton said, looking out the window into the streets.

“Yeah, we’re just about to pass Precinct Five and everything seems rather—”

A powerful blast roared over the flash-pad, followed by a series of rapid, loud pops and frantic screams.

“Indy, Vicky—are you there?” Kolton shouted repeatedly. He rushed outside and looked down the street, hoping desperately to see his sisters approaching. “Oh my God!” he screamed as he saw clouds of smoke in the distance.

Fighting panic, he hailed a taxi. “You’ve gotta take me to Precinct Five,” he cried to the driver.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t think I can do that, sir. I just received a message over my radio that the MAA has attacked the precinct,” the driver told him.

“Please, sir. I beg you,” Kolton almost sobbed. “My two sisters were in the area when those explosions went off.”

“All right. This could cost me my job... but I’ll do it,” the cab driver replied.

When they reached the area, Kolton learned that along with nine New York City police officers, Indiana and Vicky were dead.

* * *

“I’m so sorry, Kolton,” Dr. Durant says. “I understand how devastating reliving that memory must be for you. But when you developed those grenades, did you ever think they’d be used against fellow Americans, let alone your sisters?”

“Of course not,” Kolton snaps. “I had no idea those bastards at Direct Aim were working with the MAA,” he adds.

“Right. When you developed those grenades you were doing it with the most sincere intention: to protect America, and that included your sisters. You had absolutely no control over things during that shameful war. Do you understand?” Durant asks.

Kolton nods and takes a deep breath. “It’s taken me forever, but yes I do, Doctor.”

“When you look at the glass in front of you, are you wishing it was filled with whiskey rather than water?” Durant asks.

“That’d be very selfish of me, considering the support I’ve received from my wife in overcoming my issues. I love her way too much to go back to the hell I was living in,” he replies with conviction.

After seeing Kolton for a third time, Dr. Durant meets with Luanda, Shadow, and Jessica. “After I read his case history, I was somewhat concerned. But I’m thrilled to tell you he’s made incredible progress.”

“Do you think there’s a chance he’ll relapse?” Luanda asks nervously.

“I’m sorry, but that’s an impossible question to answer, Mrs. Rollins. However, I believe Kolton has finally come to terms with the idea that he wasn’t responsible for the deaths of his sisters. And I also believe it’s your love that has made him see the light.”

CHAPTER 18

“They were incredible, Mother,” Shadow says after watching a showcase performance put on by Luanda’s music students.

“Well, it’s no surprise; they have an amazing teacher,” Kolton quips.

“Oh, come on, Kolton. The students deserve the credit, not me,” Luanda says, blushing.

“According to Terence Dwyer, you’ve found a way to really motivate your students like he’s never seen before,” Jessica adds.

“I’ve simply done my best to help them express themselves as individuals through their music,” Luanda says humbly.

“Kolton, I want to thank you again for agreeing to speak at the foundation’s upcoming events,” Jessica says, smiling as the topic shifts to the Kratz Foundation. “I just hope it’s not going to be too stressful for you.”

“Actually, I’m looking forward to the opportunity. And because of this lovely lady beside me here, I’m glad to announce that the word ‘stress’ is no longer in my vocabulary,” Kolton says as he embraces Luanda.

* * *

After a comprehensive meeting of Westgale and his executive committee discussing all aspects relating to the Pinian energy deal, the UCIT crew arrives for a press conference to be given by Energy Secretary Harrison Deacon.

When the pudgy, ruddy-faced Deacon steps in front of the camera he appears extremely relaxed, smiling from cheek to cheek like a jolly uncle. “The most important aspect of this incredible deal is the fact that the fera-bean biofuel and the other natural resources we are bringing in from Pinia will have no negative impact whatsoever on our natural environment, our land use, and our food security,” he exclaims. “Also, due to the biofuel’s unique composition, we will no longer need to worry about nitrous oxide emissions contributing to global warming.”

Meanwhile, in an office down the hall from where Secretary Deacon’s speaking to the nation, Professor Kinsley is meeting with Director Perry.

“I still have no idea what it was that actually took over our skies that evening, but this is excellent news, Director Perry,” the professor says as he explains that the glittery pebbles found under the surface of a grassy hill in Boise, Idaho, match those that were discovered at Moon Shade Bluff.

“Whoa, that is incredible!” Perry replies. “And the other thirteen locations?”

“Unfortunately, even with all our advanced equipment, only one of those locations is immediately accessible to begin excavating. The other dozen sites are extremely complex and will take quite some time to evaluate, probably months,” Kinsley says. “I’ll be submitting a plan to Secretary Gibson.”

* * *

As Dr. Ahar and his lab director are reviewing Kinsley’s findings, he receives a flash-message from the warden of the Federal Justice Center. He starts trembling as he reads the message that Anya has asked to meet with him. *What could this mean?* he wonders. *Hopefully she’s changed her mind, and is willing to fight for her freedom.* The visitation is scheduled for 10:00 a.m. the following day.

For Jack Ahar, the night passes as slowly as the minutes on a schoolroom clock. Abandoning the sleep that will not come, he sits in

his apartment staring at photos of Maria and Anya, his memories taking him back to a few days before his wife died and Anya was born.

* * *

“I can’t believe it, Jack. Soon we’ll be able to hold our little baby girl in our arms,” Maria said, lightly tapping her belly and then looking at Jack with a sheepish grin.

“Whoa... did I hear you just say ‘baby girl’? Maria Ahar, I thought we made a deal,” Jack replied with a laugh.

“I couldn’t help it. I had to know.”

“When did you find out?” Jack asked, still smiling.

“This morning,” Maria replied softly. “Dr. Henderson told me everything is looking great.” She bowed her head to hide a frown.

“Then what’s with the long face?” Jack asked.

Maria turned her head to regard the flash-screen in the corner of the room. Her lower lip quivered, and she finally sobbed, “I’m afraid, Jack. What kind of life will our daughter have, with this country destroying itself?”

They silently watched a clip showing a series of MAA military vehicles patrolling eerily silent suburban streets in cities throughout the country. Jack shook his head and grabbed the remote to shut off the screen. Then he embraced Maria.

“We’ll get through this, Maria,” he said to the woman in his arms. “This country always prevails.”

“Just promise me one thing,” Maria said looking into Jack’s eyes.

“Sure; you name it,” Jack replied.

“Promise me that if something were to ever happen to me, you’ll always make certain our daughter’s properly cared for.”

“Oh come on, Maria,” Jack replied, gently brushing the hair from her eyes.

“Just promise me,” she pleaded.

“You have my solemn word,” Jack answered as he pulled her closer and gently kissed her forehead.

* * *

When Dr. Ahar arrives at the prison, Anya is already waiting for him in the visiting room. “Gentlemen,” he says, acknowledging Anya’s guards. They move to the exit, glancing back at Anya as they leave.

“Good morning, Anya,” the doctor says, trying to keep the anxiety from his voice.

“Father,” she replies, her tone and face emotionless. She barely blinks.

“Please tell me you’ve changed your mind, and you’re going to let Nicole fight for your freedom.”

“I’m sorry to disappoint you, but that’s not why I asked you here,” says Anya.

“Then *why* am I here?”

“So I can say goodbye,” she replies.

Those words freeze the doctor’s movements for a moment. Then he drops into a chair.

“I’m prepared to meet my fate,” she adds, remaining emotionless.

Dr. Ahar begins to weep. “What do you expect from me?” he cries. “How many times can I tell you I’m sorry?”

“You have nothing to be sorry about, Father,” Anya answers, looking her father in the eyes. “You’re simply part of a broken system. I love you. Now, all I ask of you is to let me die in peace, and be with my mother,” she adds, remaining stoic. She presses the buzzer to summon the guards.

Her father places his head in his hands and continues weeping.

Forewarned that this meeting would be taking place, I felt it wise to be on the scene. By the time I enter the visiting room, the doctor is alone and listless. “Doctor, would you like to talk about it?” I say softly.

He doesn’t respond, just stares into space. Then suddenly he lets out a heavy sigh. “It’s over, Nicole. She’s prepared to die, and there isn’t a damn thing you or I or anyone can do about it,” he says. “We have no choice but to let this go,” he adds, rising abruptly and moving toward the door.

“Doctor, can I—” He’s gone before I can finish.

A young man appears in the doorway after Ahar leaves. He has bright orange hair and is dressed in a form-fitting black and white checkered suit. “Hello, I’m Guardian Macdonald,” he says in a voice with a British accent.

“What can I do for you?” I reply.

“Ms. Kratz, it’s a pleasure to finally meet you. It’s not every day I get to meet a hero. I’d ask for an autograph, but I’m much too shy,” he says with an annoying laugh.

Westgale told me about this guy, and how annoying he can be. He wasn’t kidding. He already reminds me of one of those obnoxious salesmen trying to sell me something that I’ve no interest in.

“I’m hoping you’ll be able to join me and a couple of important guests for lunch today at the Prestige Hotel,” he says.

I look at him curiously for several seconds. Despite my annoyance, I accept his invitation. “I’ll be there.”

When I arrive at the Prestige, one of Macdonald’s underlings leads me into the dining room. As he did for his meeting with Westgale, he’s reserved the entire dining room. A curtain has been set up in front of the back half of the room to ensure privacy. When the underling leads me around it, I’m surprised to find Westgale and Gerald Levin sitting at the table with Macdonald.

“Great. Everybody’s here,” Macdonald says as he stands and pulls out a chair for me to be seated. “I hope everyone enjoys Italian. I’ve ordered the chefs to cook us up some spaghetti and meatballs.” He gazes across at the three of us. “Wow, talk about being surrounded by power,” he adds sardonically, then begins typing something into his flash-pad.

“Would someone please tell me why the hell I was taken away from my busy schedule?” Gerald Levin demands.

“Yes, it would be nice to know why we’re here,” Westgale adds.

“You elitists; always so uptight. I know, time is money—and of course there’s never enough time in the day. But you people should seriously learn to ease up a little. Enjoy the finer things in life—like this,” Macdonald adds, looking up at the servers as they arrive with the food. “Let’s enjoy,” he says with a wide

smile as he tucks his napkin into the front of his lime green cashmere turtleneck.

“Now, as to why we’re here,” he says, twirling the spaghetti around his fork and then effortlessly shifting it to his spoon. The rest of us stare at him, oblivious to our own plates of food. “I’ve called you all here to address a very important matter... Anya Ahar,” he says just before placing the spoonful of spaghetti into his mouth.

“You mean to tell me you had me dragged down here because of that deranged anarchist?” Gerald shouts, tossing his fork onto his plate.

“Now, now, Mr. Levin, settle down and pay attention. That so-called ‘deranged anarchist’ happens to be the most talked about person in America—even more talked about than the three of you,” Macdonald says, before annoying us all by slurping his spaghetti.

Where the hell did they find this imbecile? “Oh, you’ll have to excuse Mr. Levin,” I say with a snicker. “It’s difficult for him to accept that there’s currently someone in America more popular than he is.” *I couldn’t resist.*

As expected, Levin scowls at me.

“What is it you need to tell us?” Westgale calmly asks, attempting to defuse the tension.

“It’s now official. Anya Ahar’s execution date has been set,” Macdonald answers, plunging a fork into a meatball.

Although I knew this was inevitable, actually hearing it leaves me feeling very sad.

“I’ll be darned. There is a God after all,” Gerald exclaims. “I hate to be so insensitive, but it’s about time she’s put out of her misery.”

“You cold, heartless bastard!” I shout, unable to control my anger.

“Oh, Nicole, let go of the ridiculous obsession you have with that little demon,” Gerald scoffs.

“Do you think this is something to celebrate? This news will cause mayhem right across the country,” I say.

Macdonald continues to enjoy his spaghetti, appearing amused by our verbal sparring. He sets down his fork and spoon, and chews and swallows another meatball before saying, “We at the Outer

Commission share your concern, Ms. Kratz, and therefore we feel it's wise to allow Anya to address the public via an interview with UCIT. We believe it'll help calm the waters," Macdonald says before taking a sip of wine.

"I'd be shocked if she agrees to that," I respond, shaking my head.

"She already has. I personally spoke with her, and it's something she's actually looking forward to," Macdonald replies.

"I can't believe this," Gerald says in frustration. "Why in the world should a criminal who's on death row be permitted to address the country? Have you people lost your minds?"

"Well, unfortunately for you, Mr. Levin, you have absolutely no say in the matter," Macdonald answers smugly.

Immediately following the meeting, I go to Dr. Ahar's office to relay the news.

"I guess it was just a matter of time, Nicole," he says, unsuccessfully fighting back his tears. "When is she going to speak?"

"Tomorrow evening," I answer.

"Oh my Lord," he responds, shaking his head in disbelief. "I want to thank you for all the compassion you've shown my daughter. You've done so much."

"I just wish I could've done more," I say softly.

"To think here I am, performing an analysis on a new drug that will enable the average human to live to 120, and soon my daughter will be dead before her twenty-sixth birthday."

"I'm so sorry, Doctor. I wish there were words I could say to ease your pain, but..."

"Like I said, you've done everything you could. We have to find it in our hearts to move on... And you, my dear, have an election to win."

* * *

When Dr. Ahar arrives home he switches on the hallway light and heads aimlessly into his dark living room. Still in his wet winter coat and boots, he sinks into his easy chair. He thinks back to the dreadful

day his wife died in the middle of that icy road. He thinks of what could have been... what should have been. Over and over he relives the day in his mind, each time hoping the outcome will be different; it never is. In his mind he sees that yellow blanket lying across his wife's lifeless body. He recalls the sound of baby Anya's cry. It was as if the baby could sense something was wrong. He'll forever remain haunted by the memory of coming home with his newborn, and having to arrange his wife's funeral at the same time.

Suddenly his mind snaps back to the present and he reaches to turn on the lamp on the table beside him. Eventually he's successful, but not before knocking over the remnants of last evening's frozen food dinner and a glass of brandy.

He slowly stumbles to the hallway closet, where he retrieves a file box that is labelled *Anya's Stuff*. With an unsteady hand he reaches into the box and removes several old medical and science books, several of which he himself wrote. There are also several magazines featuring articles on Maria. As Jack peruses the magazines, he discovers a sealed envelope in the middle of one of them. *What could this be?* He takes the envelope out and places it on the table in front of him, staring at it intently. *Should I or should I not open it?* The battle plays out in his mind.

Finally, curiosity gets the best of him and he sits back down in the easy chair and slowly opens the envelope. Inside is what appears to be a poem. It's titled "No-One." Jack begins to read.

NO-ONE

*Drifting through a field – The wind tells me I'm real
Phantoms in the trees – Swaying in the breeze
I take up a small space – In such a giant place – Clinging to
my faith
When someone is a no-one
I gather forgotten flowers – I make a bouquet
I reach out to the phantoms – But even they turn away
Drawn to a flowing stream – The ripples ignite a dream
A swan taking flight – I control the night*

*Nomads seize the land – Under my command
But suddenly the dream fades away
And I lose my grip on faith
I take up a small space – In such a forsaken place
When someone is a no-one*

The doctor picks up the glass lying on the floor and throws it across the room, smashing it against the wall. He looks at the shards of glass and is instantly reminded of the broken promise he'd made to the woman he so dearly loved.

CHAPTER 19

Great anticipation across the country greets the announcement that Anya Ahar will be interviewed by Cryptic this evening. As the moment draws closer, Hunter and I gather with the president and Dave Perry in the Freedom Home's communications center to view the broadcast.

"I'm really concerned," Westgale says, his face flushed. "We have absolutely no idea what she's going to say tonight, and frankly, that scares the hell out of me."

"I've made sure all our security forces are on high alert, sir," Dave Perry says as he paces the floor. "I can't believe this damn Commission has decided to do this."

"You know, gentlemen, you might be worrying for nothing," I say, trying to ease their anxiety, along with my own.

After Attorney General Champ Sutton relays all the facts pertaining to Anya's situation, the UCIT broadcast shifts to the visiting room of the Federal Justice Center.

Dressed in a lavender prison jumpsuit and sporting her enormous glasses, Anya appears relaxed as she waits for the interview to begin. Suddenly a series of dissonant sound effects can be heard as the camera zooms in on Cryptic. Then silence. Cryptic is now a few feet away from Anya. She appears to be staring directly into the robot's eyes, which are shifting rapidly between baby blue and jet black.

"Good evening, Miss Ahar," the robot says in its monotone voice.

"Hello," Anya replies softly.

"Your refusal to fight for your freedom in the Judicial Triangle comes as a shock. Would you kindly explain why it is you've decided not to fight?" Cryptic asks.

Anya gathers her thoughts for a moment before answering. "I refuse to continue to be judged by a broken system," she responds firmly. "A system that chooses power and greed over love and compassion. A system that suppresses individuality and is rife with hypocrisy."

"So, is this your way of protesting?"

"You may call it that if you like."

"Do you believe you'll be regarded as some kind of martyr?"

"That is not my intention."

"What would you like to say to those who have been behind you, and have demanded you be set free?"

"First of all, my death will be my freedom. To the youth of America, I ask you to please remain strong and continue to fight for the things you believe in. The future is yours. You must hold it close to your heart!" Anya replies, her voice rising with every syllable.

"Do you think a revolution is the answer? Or is it all a matter of proper leadership?"

"To repair a broken system, yes, strong leadership is required. A leader who heeds the concerns of their followers and sets a proper example. A leader who listens and attempts to understand their followers, regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, and social status."

"Do you believe such a person exists?"

"Yes. Nicole Kratz is that person," Anya answers firmly.

I look to my left at Hunter, who's grinning from cheek to cheek.

"This is perfect. Exactly what we need," he crows.

"I don't know, Hunter," Westgale says, scratching his head.

"Nicole's just been endorsed by someone on death row."

"Unjustifiably on death row," I chime in.

"It'll be interesting to see the reaction on the World Connect," Hunter says, motioning toward the flash-screen at the front of the room.

“Well, I knew it wouldn’t be long before *he* had his say,” Dave Perry quips as Gerald Levin appears on the screen.

“Good evening, my fellow Americans. Election Day is drawing closer,” he says from the MAA’s headquarters. “I’m very grateful and honored to have a very special guest with me this evening. I’m even more honored by the fact that after all these years he’s decided to venture over to the dark side, if you like, and provide me with a much-appreciated endorsement,” he says with an unscrupulous grin. “Ladies and gentlemen, a former president of the United States, Jackson Snyder.”

“What the hell!” Dave Perry shouts.

“God help us,” Westgale says, shocked at the thought of his political hero endorsing “the enemy.”

“Thank you, Gerald. I’m thrilled to be here this evening,” Snyder says from the podium. “I never thought the day would come when I would be re-entering the political spectrum, let alone providing support to the very men who led the insurgency to overthrow me as president.” He chuckles. “I’ve enjoyed my quiet life of farming for the last twenty-five years. It’s such a far cry from the nasty world of politics. However, there is no way I will sit by and watch my country be turned into a giant spectacle,” he says boldly.

Known for his potent speeches, Snyder doesn’t seem to have lost his touch, even after all these years.

“It’s my understanding that I’m President Westgale’s political hero. And up until this past year I actually thought he’d been doing a rather fine job. But when I consider what has recently transpired, anger fills my heart.

“Over the last several months, corruption and mass confusion have plagued his Administration far beyond the pale. Westgale’s insane decision to do business with Cobra Pix is in opposition to everything democracy stands for. To make matters even worse, President Westgale has handed the rapidly dimming PBA torch to Nicole Kratz.

“It’s difficult for me to be critical of Ms. Kratz, considering the respect I have for her father, who was a highly valued and respected US Attorney General under my Administration. Nonetheless, when it

comes to the importance of the president's office, the truth must never be sugar-coated. Nicole Kratz's support of Anya Ahar is downright appalling. By continuously supporting such a criminal extremist, she has made it clear that she has no sense of justice. This is not a person fit to be president. I sense we are seeing the beginning of the end of the Peace-Bringers Association of America.

"If it's your wish to see America rise back up from the perilous depths of complete irrelevance, you must embrace Gerald Levin as your next president. He's a man who has..."

"I've heard enough. Turn the damn thing off, Hunter," Westgale says, his face flushed. "My Lord. Levin is being praised by the greatest president this country has ever known. The man who created this very association," he adds, slamming his fist on the table. "This will crush you, Nicole."

An hour later, I'm thrilled to learn a mass gathering of my supporters have made their way to Central Park. "Check this out," an excited Beth says to me, showing me her flash-pad.

"Down with the old, vote for Nicole!" my supporters shout in unison while holding up signs that read "Nicole for Prez!" The camera scans the grounds. Several young men and women can be seen destroying a police electro. As they smash the car with clubs, they continue the chant, "Down with the old, vote for Nicole!" Others are seen setting off fire-zaps and shouting the same words, thrusting their signs in the air. When the UCIT camera provides a wide angle view of the park, several small fires can be seen spreading across the property.

"It has become absolutely crazy out here," Cryptic says as it observes the area. "I've been told three police electros have been demolished, and five police robo-cycles have been set ablaze. I'm here with a young lady who is one of the organizers of this event. Can you tell me what has happened here tonight?"

"I wish I knew," she answers as she glances around. "The purpose of gathering here tonight was simply to show support for Nicole Kratz, in a peaceful manner."

“Are you surprised some of her supporters have chosen to behave this way?”

“Most definitely... I really can't tell you why this has happened.”

* * *

Earl Pemberton and his nephew Andy watch the chaotic scene over a few drinks in the lounge of the Prestige Hotel. “Great work, Andy,” Earl says with a smirk. He chugs down what’s left of his beer and slams his glass on the tabletop before adding, “They did a good job of spreading themselves throughout the crowd—everything looks authentic.”

Andy laughs. “I must admit that was some of the best acting I’ve ever seen. It’s amazing what some people will do for a little cash.”

“Heh, you were right; it was worth every cent. Dirty, but worth every cent.”

“I assure you, Uncle Earl, we’re on our way.”

Pemberton smiles and rubs his hands together. “Yeah, I can feel it. We’re going to pull this off. With Snyder on our side, I’m certain our friends at the PBA are reeling.”

CHAPTER 20

“If you asked us here because you’re planning to ambush Nicole and have her candidacy revoked, you’re wasting both your time and ours, Phillip,” Westgale says to Chairman Malone as he and Director Perry meet with him in his office.

“I don’t see any other choice, Mr. President. With Jackson Snyder now backing Levin, there’s no way Nicole can pull this off. We need to put a contingency plan in place,” Malone insists, leaning forward in his chair. Westgale looks away, shaking his head.

“Just out of curiosity, what is it exactly you have in mind?” Dave Perry asks.

Malone relaxes slightly, as if drawing that question from Perry signals capitulation. “I think I know the very person who can turn this thing around,” he says, his voice conspiratorial, “and get us back to where our focus should be.”

“And who might that be?” Westgale asks with a raised brow.

“The very man I replaced as chairman,” Malone answers smugly.

“Thor?” Westgale blurts.

“Yes. I spoke with him late last night and he’s completely on board. He was actually quite excited about the opportunity,” Malone replies. “All we need is for you and David to let this go to council, and I’m sure Nicole’s candidacy will be revoked.”

“Are you aware that David and I literally begged Nicole to get into this race?” Westgale says, keeping his voice level with difficulty. “We’re sure as hell not about to stab her in the back!”

Dave's been peering at something on his flash-pad. "Whoa..." he says. He looks at Malone. "May I?" He indicates the control panel for the flash-screen at the front of the office. Malone nods. Dave activates the flash-screen and calls up what he's been viewing on his flash-pad.

"I'll be darned," Westgale exclaims.

"Hmm, that is something," Malone says uncertainly, studying the most recent polling numbers on the screen.

"Who would've thought!" Westgale crows, jumping up from his seat. "This is unbelievable—sixty-four percent!" He pauses to study the screen again. "Anya Ahar endorses Nicole, Snyder endorses Levin, and it gives us a stranglehold on this damn thing," he adds, his voice cracking with excitement.

* * *

After I'm informed of my incredible surge in popularity in the polls, my security team discreetly escorts me up to Room 823 of the Prestige Hotel. Before I have a chance to knock on the door, Jackson Snyder flings it open. "Nicole! Come in," he says, moving out of the doorway to let me pass.

I turn to the two men who escorted me. "Thank you, gentlemen. I'll message you when I'm done," I say, and step into the room.

"Come on in, come in," Snyder says, still ebullient as he leads me into the room. "I'm so glad you agreed to meet." He indicates a chair, then offers me a coffee as I sit down.

"Thank you, sir," I reply formally as he hands me a mug. Mystified, I regard him with cold eyes. This is the man who declared for my opponent.

"So—I just saw the recent poll numbers," Snyder says happily as he plops down on the sofa across from me. "I'm thrilled to see my plan worked."

About to rebuke him for gloating—for what reason, I have no clue—I clamp my mouth shut and do a double take. "Your plan worked? What in the world does that mean?"

Snyder leans forward and regards me with wide eyes, smiling incredulously. "Did you actually think that was for real?" He studies my

astonished face for a moment, then throws back his head and laughs. I gape at him as he chuckles. Then he lowers his head and looks at me with such satisfaction, I'm further mystified. "I knew it'd backfire on them. Serves those bastards right!" he brags, chuckling again.

"You'll have to forgive me, sir, but I'm rather confused," I admit when he stops.

He draws a deep breath and looks at me seriously. "Clarity, Nicole. I've always believed it's the most important aspect of any form of communication," Snyder says. "You see, when that ignoramus brought me up to the podium to praise him and trash you, he clouded his political position, came across as a hypocrite." He pauses to calmly sip his coffee. "Hell, I'm the president he and his cronies toppled. His people thought my support would help him capture the best of both worlds. Foolish. Very foolish."

I inhale sharply as understanding dawns. "Oh my. You mean to tell me this was some sort of strategy you came up with to help *my* cause?"

"Exactly." He nods, chuckling again. "I'm yesterday's news, Nicole; an already exceedingly dim light fading faster and faster into oblivion. Having me endorse him was the worst move Levin could make."

"But—your legacy! You'll never be looked at in the same way again," I almost wail. I pause at a memory, and shake my head before saying, "You should've seen the way the president and Dave Perry reacted when they saw you standing up there with Levin."

"The future of America is far more important than *my* reputation," Snyder says. He looks sheepish. "The only difficult part in all this was saying those nasty things about *you*."

"Did Levin ask you to come on board with his team in the aftermath?"

"No. The crazy thing is, I got the impression Levin himself wasn't thrilled about the whole idea in the first place. It was his staff and that pompous jackass Earl Pemberton who thought they were being clever." Snyder pauses thoughtfully. "I'm actually still shocked Levin went along with it."

“Well, thankfully, for once in his life, he listened to others,” I say sarcastically.

Snyder looks intently at me. “You keep up the good fight, Nicole. Make this country proud. I’ll be out on the farm, pulling for you. Heck, I’m even going to have Warren get me one of those flash-screens. And then maybe someday down the road, I’ll meet with William Westgale and fill him in on our little secret.” He grins devilishly. I grin back.

* * *

The mood at the MAA headquarters is one of anger and trepidation. “How in the world could this have backfired so badly!” Gerald Levin shouts at his two lead advisers.

“We have no idea, sir,” one of them replies, shaking her head.

“No idea? Why the hell do you wake up in the morning, get yourself all fancied up, and come down here, if you have no idea what’s going on!” Gerald continues, his voice bouncing off the walls of the boardroom. “You people are paid to have your ear to the ground, your eye on the ball—and not fall flat on your ass.”

“I guess we underestimated the impact Anya Ahar’s interview would have on the—”

“Don’t use that as a cop-out, sweetheart,” Gerald sneers. “The research report you people provided me told me it’d be wise to accept Jackson Snyder’s support, and sure enough, it ended up being a complete failure.” He pauses and takes a deep breath. “Termination packages will be sent to each of you tomorrow morning,” he concludes, and storms out of the conference room and into Earl Pemberton’s office.

“You fired both of them?” Earl asks, frowning. “They’re two of the most brilliant political minds in the entire country.”

“I went along with what those so-called brilliant minds recommended and it just may have cost me the election. Having Snyder endorse me... what a stupid mistake,” Gerald says, staring into space.

“Before they came to you, I was the person who approved it. So I should probably be clearing my desk with them. Or perhaps we really need to take a step back and admit the truth,” Earl says calmly.

Gerald looks at him. “The truth?”

“Yeah. As much as we both hate to admit it, this Anya Ahar thing is the catalyst behind all of this.”

Gerald loosens his tie and thinks for a moment. “You’re correct. I hate to admit it, but you are. I just can’t understand how she’s attracted the interest she has.”

“It’s as if she’s some kind of evil saint who has this country under a spell. And frankly, I have no idea what we can do about it,” Earl admits, shaking his head.

Gerald squares his shoulders. “We keep fighting, Earl, until there’s no fight left.” He moves to the sideboard. “Once word gets out that America’s supposedly greatest golfer is not who the country thinks he is, I’m sure the tide will begin to turn,” he says as he pours two glasses of brandy.

“I hear you, Gerald. Andy’s been on it nonstop,” Earl says, thinking back to the conversation his nephew related to him two weeks ago.

* * *

“Shale, it’s been far too long, buddy,” Andy Pemberton said to his long-time friend, pro golfer Shale Michaels, when they met in the café at the Pemberton’s private golf club in Orlando. “Thanks for agreeing to do the clinic. We’re expecting quite the turnout. Heck, judging by my game of late, I know I could use some pointers.”

“I don’t know, Andy. The last time we played, you gave me a run for my money. Soon I may be the one coming to you for pointers.” Shale laughed.

“I highly doubt that’ll be happening anytime soon, but if you ever require any legal assistance, you know I’m only a flash-message away,” Andy replied. To his surprise, the smile instantly left Shale’s face. “Is everything okay, Shale?” Andy asked, concerned.

Shale sighed. “I might be taking you up on that offer sooner than later,” he said, staring out the window of the café.

“Are you in some kind of legal trouble?”

Shale released a heavy sigh and looked at Andy. "As much as I hate to face it, it's only a matter of time before all hell breaks loose."

"Talk to me, Shale. What's going on?" Andy asked, leaning closer to his friend.

Shale dropped his voice. "I know you'll probably find this impossible to believe, but up until recently the Eternal had been controlling our entire association."

"The AGA?" Shale nodded. "The crime syndicate was controlling it?" Andy asked in disbelief.

"Yes." Shale's voice turned bitter. "It's a massive cesspool of corruption."

Andy subconsciously dropped his voice. "How so?"

"The tournaments; they've been rigged. When this whole gambling on golf thing became popular a few years back, the Eternal swept in and took control."

"My Lord... Was Lowell Billings involved in this as well?" Andy asked with a raised brow.

"Of course he was. Actually, everything was done to ensure he remained at the top of the heap."

"Oh?" Andy replied, his curiosity boiling over. Hmm, Nicole Kratz's husband, a fraud. This could be exactly what we need, he thought. "I guess we should start off by having you tell me everything you know."

* * *

"Thanks for seeing me, Nicole," Attorney General Sutton says as I enter his office.

"Is something wrong, Champ?" I ask in response to his grave expression.

He sighs. "From a legal standpoint, I shouldn't even be doing this."

"Does this have something to do with Anya?" I ask, his concern putting me on edge.

He looks at me. "It's not Anya. It's Lowell."

"Lowell? As in my husband?" I say in surprise.

"That's correct. I'm sorry, Nicole," Champ responds, and then explains.

“Wait a second—when did your office find out about this?” I think to ask only after my mind has stopped reeling.

“We’ve been working on this since the day Edgar Fryman was exposed as one of the biggest crooks this country has ever known,” Champ answers. “We’ve been thoroughly investigating the inner workings of both the Fryman Group and the Eternal. Edgar Fryman’s nephew has been singing like a bird. He claims it’s his wish ‘to cleanse himself of sin,’” Champ says sardonically.

My mind is racing, trying to sort through this information. “Are you certain Lowell was involved in this?”

“Your husband’s been the premiere golfer in this country for the last fifteen years,” Champ says. “Of course he was involved.”

I can’t just accept this. “Do you have proof?” I ask.

“We’re still gathering all the facts. Look, Nicole, like I said, this is not something I should be discussing with you,” Champ says calmly. “In fact, the only reason I called you here was because Westgale asked me to. He’s really concerned about the impact this will have on the election.”

“Please, Champ, give me the details,” I say, my body trembling.

Champ looks at me for a few seconds and sighs. “All right. From what we’ve learned so far, Edgar Fryman had things set up so that both his investment firm and his racketeering outfit, the Eternal, were getting the best of both worlds.”

“How the hell was he pulling that off?”

“When betting on golf recently became such a popular trend here in America, the Eternal did what it usually does—it muscled its way in with payoffs and threats, got the executives and players on board, and the next thing you know, the whole system became rigged. But you see, both the executives and the players were taken care of financially, so as hard as it seems to believe, purposely missing a three-inch putt sometimes worked to a player’s advantage.”

“The association *and* the players were being paid off?”

“Let’s just say it was the cost of doing business. Oh, don’t worry; through the Eternal, Fryman was making back at least five times his investment.”

“And the Fryman Group?”

“This is where Lowell came into play,” Champ says gently. “The plan involved fixing it so he won most of the tournaments, or at least was always in the top three.”

“Hold on a second,” I say, feeling like I’m now entering my worst nightmare. “From what you’re telling me, this whole ordeal began after Lowell had already established himself as the country’s number one golfer.”

“That’s correct,” Champ says. “And Fryman made sure it stayed that way, even through your husband’s battle with injury.”

I look at him. “I don’t understand.”

“He had a deep financial interest in Lowell.”

“I still don’t understand.”

“Think about it, Nicole. Lowell Billings, an elite golfer, the all-American hero, married to the most powerful woman in the country. I don’t have to remind you of how many companies your husband became the face of, do I?”

“And let me guess—the Fryman Group was heavily invested in those companies?”

“Exactly. Panther Electros, KT Sports, Starcrest, Jiggs Beverages, to name a few.”

“Lowell somehow had to have been threatened into this,” I insist.

“We should have that answer soon,” Champ says. “Unfortunately, when it came to your husband, even Fryman’s nephew wasn’t privy to all the details.”

“Are you going to be arresting him?” I ask somberly.

“I’m sorry, Nicole, but as of right now, it doesn’t look like we’ll have a choice. Once due diligence has been performed we’ll be doing an entire sweep. I think it’d be in everyone’s best interest if Lowell came forward.”

“Oh my Lord,” I say.

To say I’m preoccupied as I leave Champ Sutton’s office a short time later is an understatement. To think my husband may have been threatened into participating in such a sinister scheme is ripping at

my heart. Oblivious to my surroundings, I find myself back at the grand-electro that brought me here, so perturbed that I barely acknowledge Edward, my driver.

He immediately notices my anxiety. "Is everything okay, Ms. Kratz?" he asks gently as he opens the back door of the grand-electro for me.

"I'm fine, Edward," I reply, although truthfully, I want to say, *No! I'm a complete wreck.* "Please, just take me home," I add.

Safe in the back of the electro, I can wipe away the tears that I finally let come to my eyes. I think of Lowell. I met him when I was eighteen at one of my mother's charity galas. At the time he was a rising star on the golf circuit, having won every junior championship there was.

What I find most attractive about Lowell is his sense of humility. Even though the world is constantly telling him how great he is, he views himself as just another person, albeit one who happens to be extremely gifted at the sport of golf. Lowell will be the first one to tell you the many things he isn't good at, like, for example, cooking. Although he does claim to be a master at preparing a bowl of cereal. "It's all about perfect proportions," he jokingly intones, displaying his bowl of Raisin Honey Flakes to me and the girls during family breakfasts.

Sadly, those family breakfasts have always been few and far between. Lowell and I have really lost touch with each other; no surprise given the hectic lives we've been leading. I guess the crazy world of high-stakes politics and being the country's premiere golfer don't allow for a lot of overlap in schedules. There even came a point when we almost separated. But we felt we owed it to our daughters to try and work it out.

During the time I was President Westgale's executive director, Lowell was dealing with an awful back injury. Here I was, travelling around the world promoting the World Harmony Program, while my husband could barely get out of bed. Fortunately, with the aid of some of the country's foremost specialists, he recovered well enough to golf again, but I regret

not being there for him the way I should have been. I also regret not taking his last name when we married. By that time the name Kratz was highly regarded in American politics, and I deemed keeping it beneficial to my own political career. Though he'd never admit it, I know this hurt Lowell.

As the electro approaches my home, my anxiety is becoming overwhelming. With the girls away on a school trip, this evening is supposed to be the two of us enjoying a very rare romantic Friday night dinner. Instead I'm struggling with a maelstrom of emotions, none of them romantic.

I immediately notice the lack of lighting within the house as the car comes to a stop in the drive and I get out. Knowing Lowell and the effort he puts into these occasions, I'm sure when I enter I'll discover a house lit by candles and a man in a tuxedo, playing a violin. As I open the front door, I feel lost in a haze. *How could this be happening?* My hands are shaking and my heart feels like it weighs a thousand pounds.

I enter and take a few tentative steps down the dark hallway. There's not a candle in sight, and no violin music. I reach for the nearest light switch and flip it on, then head toward the living room. "Lowell," I call out. "Lowell, are you home?" As I pass the bar area leading to the living room, I see a half-empty bottle of whiskey on the counter. *Hmm, that's strange, Lowell never touches alcohol.*

"I'm here... in the living room," Lowell finally answers. His voice sounds scared.

It sure doesn't sound like the usual happy-go-lucky Lowell I know. I grow alarmed. My heart is hammering in my head.

I enter the living room and stumble to a stop. "Oh my God!" I cry out.

He's sitting on the sofa, holding a lit-up styngor to his head. His thumb is trembling an inch away from the trigger. *One push of that button and he'll be dead.* "What are you doing, Lowell?" I ask, my body shaking uncontrollably. I try my best to remain calm, but the more I look at the styngor's glaring red light, the more I fear the worst is about to come.

“I’m sorry, Nicole. I failed you—I failed everybody. I’m a fraud,” he moans. Tears flow down his cheeks.

My eyes remain glued to that styngor. “It’s okay, Lowell. We’ll get through it,” I say gently.

“You don’t know what I’ve done,” he cries.

“I know all about it, honey. It’s going to be okay,” I say, trying to keep my voice level, keep it from quavering.

“I wanted to... I wanted to come clean. There’s no excuse.” Suddenly he moves the styngor right up against his head.

I sway, light-headed with fear. “Put that thing down,” I say. “I’m right here with you. I love you, Lowell. Please put the styngor down,” I say in sheer desperation. I ever so slowly reach for a photo of Tiffany and January on the table to my right. “Do you remember this, Lowell?” I say, and manage a slight chuckle as I show him the recent Halloween photo of the girls in their zombie costumes. “I’ll never forget how you spent days designing those costumes for them. All I can remember is January complaining about how spooked she was by dressing up as a zombie, and of course Tiffany couldn’t get enough of it.” I look up at him. “These beautiful young girls need their father. *I* need you, and the rest of your family needs you.”

Finally, Lowell moves his eyes toward the photo. Oh my God! I see his thumb make a rapid movement. A split second later the styngor’s red light vanishes. The weapon is off. He places it on the side table. I quickly reach over, pick it up, and put it on lock mode. Lowell sits with his head buried in his hands. I can hear his sobs.

“What have I done?” he moans.

“It’s going to be okay. I’m here with you,” I answer, quickly sitting down beside him and holding him in my arms. I pull the blanket normally folded over the back of the couch around his shoulders. “Just lie back and relax.” I rise and spread the blanket over him as he lies down. I sag with relief when he calms down and quickly falls asleep. But I remain a nervous wreck.

I call in one of my bodyguards and ask him to sit in the living room with Lowell, then go to my office and make some phone calls,

first to Lowell's brother Norm, quickly explaining the situation and asking him to come over, then to Champ Sutton.

"Oh my, we need to address this. Have you called for help?" Champ asks after I explain what transpired.

"Things are under control, Champ," I answer confidently. "He'll be okay."

"You told me he almost killed himself. How can you say that?"

"Trust me. I wouldn't tell you that if I didn't believe it was the case," I reply.

"Let me at least send a doctor of some sort over there."

"I appreciate your concern, Champ, but that won't be necessary."

"I'm sorry, Nicole, but if your husband's in that state of mind, I don't think you should be alone with him."

"I'm not alone with him; Milos is watching over him," I answer. "Plus, Lowell's brother is on his way over as we speak. We'll be all right."

"I wish it were that simple, Nicole. The arrest warrant for your husband is in place, and I'm afraid—"

"I'll make certain he turns himself in first thing tomorrow, so we can get this stupid ordeal over with," I cut in. "I still can't believe those bastards forced my husband into doing something so despicable."

A few minutes after I end the call, Milos notifies me that Lowell's older brother has arrived. Norm rushes into the house. "How is he?" he asks as I intercept him in the bar area.

"He's asleep in the living room," I answer, leading him into my office. "A member of my security team is watching over him."

"What in the world happened?" Norm exclaims.

I take a deep breath and explain.

"Now I get it," Norm says.

"Get what?"

"Why there was a period recently when he had me call in a couple of my men to keep an eye on your daughters," Norm says. He has his own private eye business, here in Washington. "He wouldn't tell me why. I just thought it had to do with one of his obsessed fans. He also gave me strict orders not to worry you."

I stare at him. My daughters were in some sort of danger? My heart starts hammering again. “I can’t believe this has happened.” I move to sit down.

“I wish he would have just called it a day after that damn back injury,” Norm says, taking one of the two other chairs in the room. “He already would have gone down as one of the greats.”

I draw a shaky breath. “They’re going to be charging him, Norm. This is really serious stuff.”

“Once it comes out that he and his family were being threatened, I’m sure he’ll be held blameless,” Norm says, then adds solemnly, “I just hope it doesn’t hinder your run for president.”

“It shouldn’t,” a strained voice says from the office doorway. It’s Lowell. I start to rise, but he waves for me to stay put and plops into the other chair. He sighs. “I don’t deserve you, Nicole,” he says.

“How are you feeling?” I ask gently.

“Like a complete imbecile,” he answers, looking directly at us. “I’m so sorry.”

“Come on, little brother,” Norm says, “I know if my life and the lives of my loved ones were being threatened, I’d probably—”

“Nobody was being threatened, Norm. I was totally complicit in everything.” His voice is harsh, as if he’s already found himself guilty and is delivering his verdict.

“Yeah, but what about when you came and asked me to have my guys keep an eye on the girls?” Norm counters, sensing, like me, that Lowell’s mental state is still fragile.

Lowell impatiently waves that away. “That was because of some deranged fan who’d written some unsettling letters to me.”

“If you weren’t being coerced, then why in the world did you do it?” I ask calmly.

“When the AGA executives came to me with their scheme, I’d just got back on the circuit after the back injury, and as you’ll both recall, I was far from being at the top of my game. I was afraid I never would be again,” Lowell answers, subdued. “I guess the one thing I’d always worked so hard to put aside finally got the best of me: my ego.”

Norm glances between us as if sensing awkward tension between husband and wife, and slaps his knees, then rises. “Well, it’s getting late. I’ll leave you folks to yourselves. I’ll be in touch, and if there’s anything you need, call me.”

We murmur our goodbyes.

With Lowell in a very fragile state of mind, I’m still trying to maintain my calm disposition, but it’s rapidly crumbling, and I’m growing furious. “Your ego got the best of you! Why? Why in the world did you do this? You have everything you need, including two amazing daughters who adore you. And you have to know how deeply *I* love you.”

He lifts his head and looks at me with sad eyes. “Maybe that’s the thing, Nicole,” he replies solemnly. “Maybe that’s why I went to such lengths to stay on top—to fill a void, the void that once was our love... What happened to us?” he blurts, rising from the chair and reaching out to me.

With my emotions reeling, I rise and walk into his arms.

To the outside world, we were the “perfect” couple—accomplished, powerful, and beautiful. We had everything, right? The sad reality is, what we didn’t have was each other. Now, here we are, broken souls.

CHAPTER 21

After spending the entire night tossing and turning, catching maybe three hours of sleep, I awake with a sense of doom.

Lowell is up already, preparing to turn himself in. “As difficult as it’ll be, I’m resigned to facing whatever comes my way,” he says as he pulls a comb through his wavy locks.

“I hope you don’t mind, but I took the liberty of calling Arthur Fine on your behalf,” I inform him. “He’s as good as there is.”

“I appreciate that, Nicole, but I’m not intending to fight this. I’m guilty and that’s all there is to it. I need to face what’s coming to me,” Lowell replies as he slicks back his hair with a daub of gel.

“Nonetheless, I still think it’d be wise to retain Arthur,” I say.

“Sure,” he answers casually. But then the comb pauses and he looks at me. There are tears glittering in the corners of his eyes. “I really messed up,” he says. “I’m so sorry, Nicole.”

I rise and shower. We have breakfast, abandoning any effort to make it seem normal. Just as we’re about to leave, the story breaks on UCIT, and we pause to watch it in silence.

Minutes later, Tiffany and January return home earlier than expected.

“Already arrested are several executives of the American Golf Association, and two dozen of the country’s premiere golfers,” the report says. “The country’s number one golfer, Lowell Billings, who is also the husband of presidential candidate Nicole Kratz, is expected to turn himself in this morning.”

“What the hell!” shouts Tiffany, dropping her bags on the floor. January looks at me in horror.

“Th-this isn’t true... is it?” January stammers.

Lowell and I can only stare at them. The lack of a response provides her with the answer. The girls exchange a shocked glance, then turn away and leave the room in a huff. I hear the patio door slam.

I start to go after them, but Lowell stops me. “Let me,” he says gently, holding me back. “I’m the one who created this mess. I’m the one who needs to deal with it.”

I nod. He goes back into the kitchen and opens the patio door. I trail him, then stand near the open window to watch from the kitchen. Outside, the girls are sitting on a bench a few feet from the patio door. Tiffany is holding her younger sister. My heart aches.

Lowell approaches them. They look up. “What’s going on, Dad? What are you turning yourself in for?” Tiffany asks.

Lowell answers simply. “There’s a scandal in the AGA, and I was involved in it.” He sighs and pulls up a chair to sit across from them. “I’m sorry for what I’ve done. It was wrong,” he says, and my heart surges with pride.

“Are you going to go to prison?” January asks.

“Most likely I will,” Lowell replies. He’s still presenting a calm front for his daughters, but I can tell he’s struggling to remain composed.

“What happened, Dad?” January asks.

“Tournaments were rigged,” Lowell says. “I wasn’t competing fairly. I cheated.”

“What made you do something so awful?” Tiffany asks.

As Lowell explains, his daughters listen closely.

“We wouldn’t care if you didn’t win anymore,” January says when he finishes.

“That’s right,” Tiffany says defiantly. “You’re our father and we love you no matter what.”

As I watch the three of them share a warm embrace, a rush of emotion comes over me.

“I was going to have Edward take the girls to my sister’s house, but I think it’s best I stay with them for the rest of the day,” I say to Lowell when he reenters the house.

“I think that’s wise,” Lowell answers quietly.

“I called Arthur’s office. He and his driver are going to be here to pick you up within the next half-hour.”

Lowell looks at me with empty eyes, resigned to what’s about to come his way. “Whatever happens, just know that I love you,” he says, and we hold each other tightly.

Later on, with sadness consuming every part of our being, the girls and I sit in the living room in front of our flash-screen. Attorney General Sutton appears on UCIT, announcing details of the scandal to the country. “*This investigation has revealed what is definitely the worst sports scandal this country has ever seen. A web of corruption was woven from the highest ranking executives of the AGA, right down to the players,*” he says solemnly, and continues with the details.

“I can’t watch this anymore,” Tiffany says.

“I understand, Tiff,” I reply gently. “Do you girls want to talk about it?”

“What’s there to talk about?” Tiffany answers. “Dad told us everything. We always knew anyway.”

“Knew what?” I ask with a raised brow.

“That he became really depressed when he injured his back, and that you guys only stayed together because of us,” she replies, her expression dejected.

“I’m so sorry, my sweeties,” I say, pulling them close to me. “Yes, because of our busy lives your father and I have grown apart, but the one thing you need to know is that we love both of you more than anything in the world. And once this is all said and done with, we’ll all pull it back together. The four of us.”

“Can you still be president if Dad goes to jail?” January asks with wide eyes.

“I’m still going to try, honey,” I reply with a subtle smile.

Seconds later, Lowell appears on the screen with Arthur Fine. It’s just been announced that his bail has been set at three million dollars.

“Come on, Jan. Let’s go into the study, and I’ll show you the really neat parts in the *Book of ZeZ*,” Tiffany says. Before she leaves the room she looks back at the screen, then drops her head, frowning.

Watching them exit, I feel immense pride. Being the daughters of two famous people has not been easy for them. Even at the exclusive private school they attend, the other kids can sometimes be ruthless. When I began supporting Anya Ahar, many of Tiffany’s classmates continuously ridiculed her. But she exhibited a high level of resolve and never let it get to her.

Lowell and I are very fortunate that our daughters have developed into the fine young women they are, despite our crazy lives preventing us from giving them the attention every child deserves. In retrospect, I guess this is why Anya’s story resonated with me so profoundly.

“My client would like to make a statement,” Arthur says on the flash-screen.

The camera shifts to Lowell who, understandably, appears distraught. He takes a deep breath and looks into the UCIT camera. *“I want to take this opportunity to apologize to all those I have let down,”* he says, his voice cracking. *“There is no excuse for my actions. I have failed my family, I have failed myself, and I have failed you, the American public. Regrettably, I have also contributed to tarnishing the sport of golf.”*

“As a professional athlete, I’ve always believed it is paramount to conduct oneself in an honorable manner, setting an example for those who have chosen to cheer me on and view me as an inspiration. I did not live up to my own set of standards.”

“I’d like to close with a very important fact. My wife, Nicole Kratz, who also happens to be the person who deserves to be this country’s next president, had absolutely no knowledge of my involvement in this scandal. Please do not let my actions cause you to view her in a negative way.”

Shortly after, Lowell contacts me to inform me his bail has been paid and he is free for the time being. “Great. I’ll see you later,” I happily reply. “I’ve been summoned to the Freedom Home. I’m

going to have Edward take the girls to my sister's house for the next few days. They asked if they could go and spend time with their cousins."

"I think that'd be wise," Lowell responds.

While preparing to leave for the Freedom Home, I realize UCIT is obtaining public feedback on the news of the day in a new segment on *Pulse of the Nation* from Washington's Brave Land Shopping Center.

Cryptic approaches a tall blonde woman in a tan duffle coat, looking for a comment.

"I think all these PBA scandals are just horrendous," the woman says, her expression angry. "I've always admired Nicole Kratz, but I fear her world is crumbling down around her."

"Would you vote for her for president?" Cryptic asks.

"After hearing this news, I don't think so."

"Even though her husband made it clear she had no knowledge of the crime?"

"Oh, come on," a middle-aged man says, joining the conversation. "That's a bloody joke. He's her husband, for God's sake. Of course she knew."

After a few more people voice their scorn, Cryptic approaches a twenty-something man wearing a hoodie.

"People are always so quick to pass judgment," he says, shaking the hood off his head, his shaggy brown hair falling into his eyes. "I believe him. I found him to be very sincere in his apology. From what I've gathered over the years, with their busy lives, they haven't had a very close marriage, which means they may at times be oblivious to what each other is doing. Besides, look at the alternative—a wolf in designer clothing. Free Anya! Free America!" the young man cheers. Within seconds, others join in.

By the time Edward returns from dropping the girls off at my sister's house and we head for the Freedom Home, Gerald Levin is minutes away from speaking. *I'm definitely not looking forward to this.* Nevertheless, I don't turn off the flash-screen in the back of the grand-electro. He'll be speaking from the National Soccer League's

Hall of Fame, where later this evening he's being inducted for his contribution as a builder of the league.

Wearing a Washington Androids leather jacket and ball cap, Levin appears agitated as he takes the podium in the hall's conference room. "This is a bittersweet day for me, folks. On one hand I'm honored and proud to be entering the coveted NSL Hall of Fame, yet at the same time, I'm devastated by today's news," he begins, shaking his head. "In any facet of life, if we don't have integrity, we have nothing. To learn that the American Golf Association and a large number of its players sank to such depths is very disturbing.

"I'm especially saddened to learn that Lowell Billings, one of this country's premiere athletes, is at the core of this scandal. I, like so many people across this country, am a big fan of Mr. Billings. It's heartbreaking when one of our sports heroes lets us down. I hope and pray Mr. Billings will one day find inner peace. He obviously is a troubled man.

"On that note, I'd like to let it be known that on behalf of the Washington Androids, I am donating ten million dollars to the Lawrence Kratz Foundation to help in the fight against these dreadful addictions that plague our society. Thank you, and God bless."

Hmm, interesting, I think as the announcement ends. He expresses sympathy for my husband, donates a large sum of money to my father's foundation, and doesn't bring me up at all. I must admit, very tactful.

As I enter the main Freedom Home conference room, I immediately notice the concern on the faces of those who've convened for the meeting. The atmosphere is bleak.

PBA Chairman Justice Phillip Malone begins the proceedings. "Let's get right to it, folks. Rebounding from this latest scandal will be a very difficult task." He looks directly at me.

I'm doing my best to remain composed. Hunter and Beth are on either side of me, while Westgale and Dave Perry are seated across from me, making notes in their flash-pads.

Malone continues. "It is my understanding that a new set of polling numbers will be released tomorrow afternoon. It would be reasonable to speculate that this set of numbers will be nowhere near as favorable to us as the last one." He shifts his gaze across the room. None of us are used to seeing Justice Malone so sullen. Considering what's at stake, who can blame him?

I'm torn, as I sense my dream of becoming president fading. I'm even more torn, thinking of an America being run by the MAA. If we discover Lowell's indiscretions are causing panic among the voting public to the degree that it has crushed my chances of winning, then I'll have no choice but to back out of the race and hand over the reins to Thor Hardy. Gerald Levin must be kept out of the Freedom Home.

* * *

"Hey, I've got a good one, Uncle Earl," a drunken Andy Pemberton calls out during the revelry at the MAA headquarters. "How *Low*-ell can the PBA sink?"

"What time tomorrow are those results supposed to come out?" a smirking Earl Pemberton asks Gerald Levin.

"According to UCIT, two o'clock," Gerald replies, checking his flash-pad.

"Hey, are they going to make good ol' Lowell pay all that illegal money back?" Andy slurs as he pours himself another shot of tequila.

"I imagine they will, Andy," Gerald replies with a satisfied chuckle as he dabs a cracker with caviar.

"They should make him give it all to Santa Claus," Andy murmurs.

"Come on, Andy," Earl says, holding up his drunk nephew. "It's time to get you back to the hotel."

* * *

Watching the flash-screen in their penthouse condo the next day, Jessica and Shadow look at each other when UCIT alerts the country that it'll be airing a view-file from Cobra Pix in the coming minutes.

The view-file begins with a group of Pinian children playing soccer. Their smiling faces fill up the screen as they run exuberantly around the field.

Seconds later, Cobra appears on the screen. *“Good day, I’m Cobra Pix,” he says, walking around the perimeter of the soccer field with a border collie prancing happily by his side. Wearing a black flat cap, mirrored sunglasses, a red windbreaker, and blue jeans, Cobra doesn’t look the part of a tyrant. “Children are the world’s greatest gift,” he continues in his usual commanding voice. “Their innocence must be treasured. For me, the joy they bring surpasses that of a sunset, the singing of birds, and even that of a night sky sprinkled with stars.”*

Jessica and Shadow watch, mystified. “What in the world is this all about?” Jessica wonders.

“As I’ve told you, there are many sides to my father, Jessie,” Shadow answers. “Regrettably, this is a side he rarely displays.”

“I’ve been wondering, Shadow,” Jessica says as she caresses his arm, “do you think the day will come when you’ll be able to forgive him?”

“I highly doubt it,” Shadow says stiffly.

The scene then shifts to past footage of Jessica and her team teaching the Pinian children how to use their flash-pads, with a voice-over by Cobra: *“I want to take this opportunity to thank Jessica Westgale and her team of incredibly compassionate American aid workers for the work they’ve performed here in Pinia. You are true champions of the human spirit.”*

CHAPTER 22

It's almost 2 p.m., and Westgale and his executive committee have reconvened for a follow-up to yesterday's meeting. I'm feeling uneasy as eyes glance in my direction and then quickly move away. "Hang in there, Nicole," Hunter says, noticing the cold reception. "We need to keep our heads up and battle on."

"I don't know, Hunter; I'm having a tough time remaining confident," I answer as I await the poll results. Since the Quick Flash Poll Program began automatically accessing all registered flash-pads and flash-screens, UCIT's political survey polls have been reaching a frightening level of accuracy. For example, back when Westgale was elected, the poll was off by less than three percent.

Images of the American flag fill the flash-screen. "Here we go," Beth says as she gives me a nudge.

There's a twenty second countdown before Cryptic's image appears on the screen. "*I will now present the up-to-the-minute presidential election poll results,*" it says as it slowly fades out of the picture. The UCIT logo flashes several times before the numbers are displayed. I take a deep breath, fearing the worst. The tension in the room is rising by the second. As if to tease viewers, the annoying undecided voter result is presented first, on its own: *UNDECIDED 5%*. More flashing images of the American flag, then suddenly the numbers appear: *UNDECIDED 5%; NICOLE KRATZ 67%; GERALD LEVIN 28%*.

A loud cheer cascades across the room. Glum expressions are instantly replaced by those of sheer delight. Beth and Hunter jump

up and down in an embrace. On the other side of the room, Justice Malone, William Westgale, and Dave Perry are all laughs and smiles.

“Nicole, come on, don’t hold back,” Hunter says, tugging at my arm. “We’re in the clear.”

It quickly dawns on me that unless the UCIT computer network has made some kind of egregious error, which is totally unfathomable, or another catastrophe arises, I’m going to be the next president of the United States of America. I should be jumping for joy, smiling from cheek to cheek, but I’m not. All I can think of is what has happened to the most important thing in my life, my family. And then there’s Anya.

“Excuse me. Uh, excuse me,” Director Perry says, grabbing the sound-blast amidst the excitement. “Please proceed to the presidential lounge. We have some celebrating to do!” he shouts gleefully.

Although I actually feel like heading straight for my sister’s house to pick up my daughters and tell them how much I love them, I do what’s expected and join the celebration. I remain deep in thought, though, and find a spot by myself in the corner of the vast lounge.

President Westgale sees me and approaches. “Wow, who saw this coming?” he says, taking the seat beside me. I sit aimlessly stirring my lemon tea, staring into space. He studies me a moment. “Are you okay, Nicole?” he asks softly.

“Honestly, I’m not, sir,” I respond with a sigh.

“Is it Lowell?”

“I’m sorry, Mr. President, but I’m in no mood to celebrate,” I answer as I prepare to leave.

“Nicole... Nicole!” he calls out. I stop and turn around. “You’re not thinking of dropping out, are you?” he asks with a raised brow.

“I’ll speak with you tomorrow, sir.”

* * *

As expected, the mood at the MAA headquarters is far from joyous. “This can’t be happening,” Earl Pemberton says to Gerald and Andy.

“Oh, it’s happening, Earl,” Gerald replies, scowling. “We can’t even hit thirty percent, damn it!” He pounds a fist on the conference room table.

“We’ve obviously underestimated Nicole Kratz’s staying power,” Earl says.

“It’s not *her* power we’ve underestimated. This is all about Anya Ahar,” Andy Pemberton says, reading from his flash-pad.

“Just as we feared,” Earl mumbles, pacing the floor.

“I’ve been studying the corresponding data that came with the results, and I’m telling you this has everything to do with Anya,” Andy says, looking up at his uncle. “That little bitch has really struck a chord with this country.”

“It’s obvious, gentlemen,” Gerald interjects. “Just consider what has transpired. First we learn Nicole’s father was the person who ordered the closure of Green Light hospital, and now we discover her husband’s at the core of what is the worst sports scandal in this country’s history, yet none of this has even put a dent in her armor.”

“So, how do we pull ourselves out of this quagmire?” Earl asks, his scowl growing deeper.

Gerald sighs and laces his hands behind his head. “The day we met at my estate and you asked me to take the helm, I sincerely thought we’d take this,” he says solemnly. “I thought we could get this country back on the right track. But as much as I hate to admit it, I was wrong.”

“I refuse to believe that,” Earl says, his face flushed.

“The very things that led us to start that war all those years ago have come full circle, and frankly, Earl, this time it’s clear we’re completely outnumbered,” Gerald says.

* * *

Lowell and I arrive home within a few minutes of each other. “How are things going with your case?” I ask as he enters the house.

“You amaze me, Nicole,” he answers with a smile. “Concerned about *me*, after what I did. Like I’ve said a million times, I don’t deserve you,” he adds, shaking his head.

"I understand why you did what you did," I say as we stand in the main hallway. "And I want you to know that I share the blame."

"Oh no, this was all my doing. I just couldn't stand the thought of not being the man I used to be," Lowell says. "If those last several tournaments weren't fixed, I'd have been lucky to even make the top ten."

"And I should have been there for you, to help you through both your physical and mental anguish. Instead, I was preoccupied with too many other, less important things."

"Like trying to create world peace?" Lowell asks rhetorically, and chuckles as we move into the living room. "Come on, Nicole. You were the second most important person in the country. On top of that, when you were thinking about taking that position, you came to me and I gave you my full support, because I knew how badly you wanted it. And I wanted it for you, just as badly. You're not to blame for any of this. By the way, I saw the current polls. That must have come as quite a relief," he says, forcing a smile despite his sadness.

"Yeah, I guess so," I murmur as I plop down on the sofa.

"Is something wrong? Did something happen I should know about?" Lowell asks, concerned.

"I've been doing a lot of thinking, and I'm seriously considering backing out, Lowell."

"Whoa... you just learned that two-thirds of the people in this country want you as their president, and you're thinking of turning away?"

"I spoke with Arthur today and he told me you're probably looking at three to five years in prison. I want to make sure at least one of us is always there for our daughters, and with you behind bars, it's going to have to be me."

"The girls will be fine, Nicole. Teresa's done such a great job with them," he says, referring to their nanny. "And I know for certain that you'll be there for them when they need you."

"I'm their mother; I should be there for them all the time," I respond.

Lowell looks at me with a sheepish grin. "I promised Tif I wouldn't show this to you until it's complete, but I think it'll help ease your mind," he says as he lays his flash-pad on the counter.

“What is this?” I ask as he taps the screen and retrieves a document.

“Tiffany’s teacher asked the class to write an essay about who they think should be president,” Lowell explains. “Thinking it’d be unfair for Tif to do so, the teacher gave her the option to write about something else, but our loving daughter was adamant about writing the essay.”

I begin to read:

There is no doubt in my mind that Nicole Kratz should and must be our country’s next president. Okay, of course I’m biased because she’s my mother, but that also means that I know her better than most people. Not only is she extremely intelligent and patriotic, she is also very compassionate toward everybody she meets. Our country needs her leadership.

When she was the country’s executive director, I was always amazed that even with her busy schedule, she never failed to be there for my sister January and me when we needed her. We are both so grateful to have such...

As I continue reading a rush of adrenaline pours through me.

“Are you sure you still want to back out?” Lowell asks with a smile.

“Back out, and face the wrath of Tiffany? I don’t think so,” I reply, laughing.

Seconds later, I hear the sound of a violin from down the hall. Lowell takes my hand and leads me to our candlelit dining room.

* * *

“Good morning, Nicole,” a fatigued-looking Westgale says to me as I join him for breakfast in the presidential lounge. He studies me as he tops his oatmeal with dashes of cinnamon. “Please tell me that the incredible news we received yesterday isn’t all in vain,” he says.

“I’d be lying to you if I didn’t tell you I was very close to backing out,” I respond.

“Past tense?” he says, and grins. “I was certain you were going to call it a day. What changed your mind?”

“I realized I’d be letting too many people down—especially those closest to me,” I respond with a wink.

“This is excellent news,” Westgale says, waving over the waitress. “Get this young lady the special of the day.”

“Thank you, sir. I just want to tell you how much I appreciate your honesty and how you’ve supported me through all this madness,” I say sincerely.

His face slowly turns from smiling to frowning. “Well, to be frank, I haven’t always been honest with you, Nicole,” he says, dropping his eyes back down to his oatmeal.

“Oh?”

“I’ve been holding something back from you for way too long,” he says with a sigh.

Hmm, what in the world is he talking about?

“It has to do with Anya.”

“Anya?”

“More specifically, the Judicial Triangle hearing last summer.”

“Huh... I’m listening,” I say.

“I’m sure you can recall how disappointed you were in me for remaining neutral during the hearing.”

“Come on, sir, that’s water under the bridge. I have my sights looking forward, as we all should.”

Slowly exhaling, Westgale leans forward. “I get that, my dear, but you need to know the truth.”

“The truth?”

“Yeah, you need to know it was always my wish to allow Anya to find that cure.”

“Please, Mr. President, you don’t owe me any explanation.”

“After the court decided to reject letting her continue working on the LRS cure, I couldn’t accept it. So with the aid of Dr. Muller and Anya’s specially assigned guard, she was given every opportunity to find the cure.”

“Is this for real?” I answer in shock.

“Yes, it is. When Hunter and Dr. Ahar announced the teal-berry discovery, Anya was actually on the cusp of creating a medicine to combat the illness.”

“Why... why didn’t you fill me in?”

“You have to understand, if the Outer Commission discovered what was taking place it would’ve been curtains for all involved. Dr. Muller and I were willing to sacrifice ourselves, but I just couldn’t put your future on the line.”

“But I resigned because of that.”

“And that ended up being a blessing in disguise. I know for a fact it ended up saving what little was left of your marriage... didn’t it?”

“Gee... I don’t know what to say,” I respond, reeling at the revelation. “What made you divulge this to me now?”

“My conscience. I couldn’t keep it from you any longer,” Westgale answers.

He’s distracted by an incoming flash-message. “Hmm, this is interesting. It’s from my office,” he says as he reads the message. “Apparently Gerald Levin is requesting you and I meet with him and his associates at the MAA headquarters this afternoon.”

“I wonder what kind of scheme he’s cooking up now.”

CHAPTER 23

When we enter the MAA headquarters, Westgale and I are immediately greeted by Gerald Levin's Director of Communications, Brandy Noble. "They're waiting for you in the conference room," Brandy says, leading us down a hall. The walls on both sides are lined with photos of military weapons from the past and present. Just prior to entering the conference room, I notice a War Within plaque containing the words *Bring the Fire to the Torch*.

The first person I see upon entering the room is Guardian Macdonald. The dark brown suit he's wearing is in severe contrast to his bright orange hair. "What the hell is this imbecile doing here?" Westgale whispers to me.

"Please be seated," Brandy says, directing us to our seats. Andy Pemberton nods at me, grinning stiffly as he whispers something to his Uncle Earl.

Gerald Levin enters the room. "Mr. President, Ms. Kratz, thank you for attending," he says, then gestures toward Macdonald. "And thank you, Guardian Macdonald." As usual, Macdonald has his head buried in his flash-pad. He slowly looks up.

"I'm sure you're all wondering why you're here right now," Gerald continues. "Well, the reason is simple, but yet extremely disturbing. Our Alliance has concluded we are fighting a losing battle. And I take no pride in fighting losing battles. Much to our dismay, the American people have spoken. They've decided to enable the obliteration of this incredible nation by once again

supporting the Peace-Bringers of America. Therefore, under Section 3.3 of the New Order Treaty, the Militant Alliance of America has decided to forfeit its presidential candidacy.” Gerald casts a sullen look first my way, then toward Macdonald, whose nose is once again buried in his flash-pad.

Andy Pemberton then submits a formal flash-message, making the MAA’s forfeiture official. Macdonald studies the document. “All appears in order,” he states. “Once the Commission’s legal secretary reviews and seals the declaration, it’ll be final.”

“Way to go, Nicole!” Westgale says as he practically lifts me off the ground in a bear hug.

Gerald and Earl abruptly exit the room, while Andy remains, staring into space. “Congratulations, Nicole,” he says with a sigh. “You’ve done it again.”

“I’m sure we’ll meet again, Andy,” I reply as I pass him.

On our way back to the Freedom Home, the president and I are still bewildered. “Boy, I didn’t see this coming,” I say, gazing out the window of the grand-electro at the street passing by. *I’ll soon be in charge of all this*, I say to myself, watching the people and the buildings.

“That’s the crazy thing about Gerald Levin—the man is so unpredictable. Nonetheless, by doing what he did, he placed his country above all,” Westgale says, looking down at his flash-pad. “Whoa... the Commission is planning to announce the news on UCIT this evening,” he adds excitedly.

“I can’t believe this,” I reply, still shocked. “A few hours ago I almost backed out of the whole ordeal.”

When we reach the Freedom Home, in a whirlwind, I begin contacting those closest to me to share the news. As expected, Mom and Dad are ecstatic. “We’re so proud of you!” Mom exclaims.

“Just like you told us all those years ago, huh, Nicole?” Dad adds. “And as usual, our daughter ends up doing exactly what she told us she’d do.”

When I contact Lowell and the girls, who are spending the day at the Brave Land Shopping Center, they too are overjoyed by the

news. “You certainly deserve this, honey,” Lowell says, his voice filled with enthusiasm.

“So, when do we get to move into the Freedom Home?” Tiffany asks eagerly.

“Whoa, whoa,” I quickly answer. “Let’s just take it one day at a time.” I chuckle.

“Are Tiffany and I going to have our own personal security guards?” January asks.

“Okay, girls, that’s enough,” Lowell says, laughing.

* * *

As diligently as I’ve worked to achieve this goal, and as excited as I am to begin living the dream of becoming president, actually hearing the words “the next president of the United States of America” is like having a locomotive bear down on me. But after Cryptic introduces me as such, I quickly realize that that speeding train will soon be mine to conduct. “I consider it both an honor and a privilege to serve my country,” I announce with joy from the foyer of my campaign headquarters. “I want to begin by congratulating Gerald Levin and the Militant Alliance of America on a hard-fought, spirited battle.

“In tandem with you, the American people, I will do whatever it takes to ensure this country reaches a level of prosperity it has never witnessed before. Courtesy of the excellent work performed by the Westgale Administration, I am very fortunate to reap the benefits of the VX drug program and the rich, newly struck energy deal with Pinia. Most importantly, the miracle VX drug will enable Americans to live much healthier and longer lives, and along with its many environmental benefits, the Pinian energy deal will allow us to fully pay the debt owed to the Outer Commission and bring back what we crave so strongly: our complete independence, guided by our sacred Constitution.

“I also want to assure you that I will do everything in my power to make certain America is fully protected from those who wish to do it harm. Sooner than later, I will be proposing a motion to the Strategic Council that will involve a hefty reinvestment in our

military. I will also continue working on the very important World Harmony Program which, as the country's executive director, I'm so proud to have established.

"Lastly, as I've stated throughout my political platform, my Administration will be representative of all Americans, including our youth. I am extremely excited about growing this country with your valued input. I promise, you will be heard."

As the UCIT camera shuts off, so do the lights in the foyer. Suddenly I see several flashes appearing from the side entrance. It's Hunter and Beth, rolling out a trolley containing a massive cake, with several red, white, and blue streamers and balloons floating above it. Following, are the rest of my staff. I'm so glad to be able to celebrate this monumental event with the people who were so vital in making it happen. "We did it, Nicole!" Hunter shouts above the background music.

Thinking of Anya, I can't help but feel there's a bittersweet irony to all of this. As I celebrate in preparation of becoming the most powerful person in the country, Anya Ahar is on death row, preparing to die. The crazy thing is; it was clearly *her* endorsement that has brought me here. *Damn! I just wish she'd let me fight for her.*

"Hey, Mom!" a voice calls out, bringing me back to the present. I look to my left and see January running toward me.

"Come here, my sweetie," I say as she runs in for a big hug.

"This is so amazing!" Tiffany adds following behind her sister.

"I hope you don't mind the surprise," Teresa, their nanny, says. "It was all your husband's idea."

"Are you kidding?" I answer with joy. "This would be an empty celebration without them... where's Lowell?"

"Dad decided not to come," Tiffany answers.

"Why don't you girls go with Teresa and get some cake," I say, then I find a quiet space to connect with Lowell on my flash-pad.

"I didn't want to tarnish your evening," he responds when I address the matter with him. "It just wouldn't be fair to you."

"Hold on. I thought we agreed that from now on, we're in this together. No more walls between us," I say sincerely.

"Bars maybe, but not walls." Lowell chuckles ruefully.

“You just get yourself down here, or I’ll order Gil Robichaud to have his men come get you,” I quip.

“Your wish is my command... Ms. President.”

* * *

“This is sensational news, Cobra,” President Woi says via his flash-screen. “Now it’s simply a matter of time.” He pours himself a glass of champagne.

“Isn’t it something, how Levin ended up being swept away like yesterday’s dust?” Cobra gloats, intent on the mirror in front of him as he meticulously draws in his eyebrows. “And soon Nicole Kratz, William Westgale, and all their cronies will be nothing but *tomorrow’s dust*.”

“Tiny little particles, drifting in the wind,” Woi responds, cackling as he lifts his hands and moves them to one side, fluttering his fingers. “I’ll be seeing you soon, my friend.”

Woi turns off his flash-screen, leans back, and rests his feet on his desk, indulging in memories. Thirty years ago, he’d been a lieutenant under his country’s chief military commander, Kenneth Pahl, at HKM Military Headquarters.

“You see, Lieutenant Woi, hostage negotiation is just like a business deal. One’s goal must be to gain the upper hand without the other party realizing it. Always,” a grinning Pahl said after officially announcing the release of fourteen US agents who had been held captive for the previous ten months.

“I’m sorry, sir, but I thought you would have received far better compensation for those American agents,” Woi said, staring at a shipment of heart-shaped green pills.

“Please close the door,” Pahl said. Woi obliged immediately and then took a seat in front of his superior’s desk. Pahl was gazing at the pills with a devious smirk. “These drugs, Lieutenant Woi, are special—very special, indeed.” Pahl handed a bag to Woi, along with a sealed document. “I’m placing you in charge of them. All you need to know is contained in this document.”

Woi opened the envelope and studied the document intently. He was honored to be placed in charge of something so important.

“Now, I must be off,” Pahl said, gathering his things. “My American friends have invited me to Las Vegas, as their guest. Is everything clear?”

“There is one question I’d like to ask,” Woi said nervously.

“Go ahead, Lieutenant,” Pahl answered.

Woi hesitated and took a deep breath. “We’re not planning to attack America, are we?”

“Attack America?” Pahl laughed. “Why would we attack a country that feeds us all that delicious money? Now our Russian friends, that’s a whole other story.”

Woi frowns, though, when he recalls what happened just five years after that. By then, *he* was the HKM’s chief military commander.

“You damn liar!” shouted Woi as he and his lead political adviser listened to Kenneth Pahl warn America of an imminent HKM attack.

“Why do you think he’s doing this?” Woi asked his adviser. They were watching Pahl speak with Carly Taylor during what became known as “The Interview.”

“There’s no doubt in my mind he’s being paid to lie,” the adviser responded.

“Being paid to lie? By who?” Woi asked.

“By American interests who hope to see their current government crumble,” the adviser explained. “You see, Commander Woi, America’s at war with itself. And by telling this lie, these fools are using paranoia as a weapon.”

“But why would Mr. Pahl resort to such a thing when he’s already a very wealthy man?”

“Was a wealthy man,” the adviser answered. “You of course remember why he was relieved of his duties here.”

Yes, Woi remembered—the president had learned that Pahl had become deeply indebted to a group of American gangsters. “The Eternal,” he said simply. His adviser nodded.

CHAPTER 24

“I’m glad you could make it, Nicole,” Westgale says to me as I enter the Freedom Home’s main conference room. “From the brief conversation I had with Colonel Peters, this sounds extremely important,” he adds, handing me a copy of a report. I begin reading it, noting that Director Perry and the rest of the executive committee are also present.

A moment later, the colonel enters the room with an exhausted-looking, casually dressed, dark-haired man, who appears to be in his early thirties. “Ladies and gentlemen, this is James Vine from the HKM. He’s the chief political strategist for the Gold Star Federation,” Peters says as an introduction. “As you’re all well aware, our government has done whatever it can to not interfere with the tumultuous politics of the HKM. It’s not our place. However, as you’re about to hear, this may have to change.”

“Thank you, Colonel Peters. And thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for allowing me to address you,” Vine says. “Since its formation a decade ago, the Gold Star Federation has set out to peacefully rescue the HKM from the depths of injustice, in hopes of enabling our people to live a life of liberty by deconstructing our oppressive political structure.” Vine pauses and gazes around the room. “We are proud of the inroads we have made, and we believe we are on the edge of eradicating the clouds of oppression created by President Woi and those before him. Like your country, our people are craving change.

“Now, the reason our federation has secretly reached out to your government is because we strongly believe Woi is on the verge of attacking America.”

There is a collective gasp, then the room becomes unnervingly silent.

Westgale abruptly rises from his seat. “On the verge of attacking America?” he says, his voice faint with shock.

“Yes, Mr. President,” Vine answers calmly.

“You’re certain of this?” Westgale asks.

“Whoa... with all respect, Mr. Vine, we heard this same warning twenty-five years ago,” Dave Perry interjects, “and I’m sure you’re well aware of the problems that caused.”

“I understand your reluctance to believe me, but this is different,” Vine says with conviction.

“With all due respect, Mr. Vine, do you expect us to just accept what you’re telling us without any proof?” Westgale says.

“He has proof, Mr. President,” Colonel Peters interjects. “Please, everyone, direct your attention toward the flash-screen.”

The flash-screen at the front of the room comes to life as everyone turns to watch it.

“These men are two of President Woi’s top officials,” Vine says of two neatly groomed men sitting in a diner. “This diner is close to his central military office, and is covertly owned by our federation. Knowing how often Woi’s men frequent the establishment, we have recording devices throughout the building. I know for a fact they’ve been ordered to never talk shop outside of their place of operation, but fortunately, as you’re about to hear, these guys had loose lips.”

The view-file begins.

“Were you able to convince your brother in Jersey to accept your gift?” one of the men asks.

“Both he and his wife were very receptive,” replies the other man, who is wearing gray-tinted glasses.

“A first-class trip around Europe—how could they refuse that?” The two men laugh.

“I’m sure they must’ve wondered why I was so gracious.”

"I just hope you didn't tell them why."

"Seriously, do you actually think I was going to tell them that they should leave America because it'll soon be turned into a giant hellhole?" the man wearing the glasses replies.

The view-file suddenly ends.

Oh my God! How could this be happening? I look around me and see faces etched in dread, as mine must be.

Westgale abruptly rises from his seat, his eyes wide, his face haggard. "What else do you know about this?" he asks Vine.

"I wish I could tell you more, sir," Vine replies. "But I'm actually amazed we got what we did."

"Is it possible these men may have known they were being recorded, and staged this whole thing to deceive us, for whatever reason?" Dave Perry asks.

Vine shrugs. "I guess it's possible, but I seriously doubt it."

"Did this just come out of the blue, Mr. Vine, or has your federation had any prior knowledge that Woi may be up to something?" I ask.

"No. This is the first time something of this nature has come up. Woi runs his operation in a most careful manner," Vine replies. "That being said, none of us at the federation are surprised, since he's a megalomaniac whose goal in life is to one day take over the entire world."

"If he *were* to attack America, how do *you* believe he would do it?" Westgale asks.

"Well, since the World Coalition brought an end to his nuclear weapons program a few years ago, I really have no idea how he could launch such an attack."

"Are you aware of how often the World Coalition inspects his weapons facilities?" Perry asks.

"To my understanding, it's every two months."

"Thank you for coming forward with this information, Mr. Vine," Westgale says as he runs his hands through his hair. "Agent Herta will escort you to the Prestige Hotel, where he'll have a couple of his

men watch over you until we are able to figure out where it is we're going with this."

As Vine is escorted from the conference room, Westgale again peruses the report. "Could this be some kind of setup?" he asks Colonel Peters. "I mean, what do we *really* know about the Gold Star Federation, and why should we trust them?"

"All our research indicates they're as pure as fresh snow. It appears that for the last several years, they've been doing their part to bring social equality to the country. And with substantial financial backing. They seem to have made enormous inroads," Peters replies. "In all honesty, I don't think it'd be wise to just sweep this away."

"Director Perry... Nicole. What are your thoughts?" Westgale asks.

"I have to agree with the colonel, sir," Perry answers. "It'd be way too risky to ignore this."

"Nicole?"

"Have we confirmed these are the guys Mr. Vine says they are?" I ask.

"Yes, we have," the colonel answers with certainty.

"Well, then, I agree. This definitely must be addressed," I respond.

Westgale reaches for his flash-pad and contacts Guardian Macdonald's assistant to request an emergency meeting. Twenty minutes later, they meet one-on-one in the president's office.

* * *

"Wow, this must've cost a pretty penny!" Macdonald exclaims around a mouthful of steak sandwich as he gazes around the exquisite office setting. "My assistant informed me that this is some kind of emergency. Is this about the deadline?" Macdonald asks before taking a giant bite of the sandwich.

"As I've told you before, we'll meet your deadline and pay back every cent," Westgale says through clenched teeth.

"I'll take your word for it, Mr. President," Macdonald says with a smirk. "So then, tell me why I'm here."

Westgale plays the view-file and hands him the report. He then recounts what Vine said.

“Hmm... so let me get this straight: you and your people are concerned these guys are going to destroy your country?” he asks as he takes out a toothpick and begins picking away at his teeth.

By this point, Westgale is seething. “These *guys*, as you refer to them, happen to be two of Woi’s top military officials.”

“I’m well aware of who they are, and I’m also well aware that two days before this view-file was made, the World Coalition completed a full HKM weapons inspection, and all was well. Here, see the report for yourself.” Macdonald pulls up the report on his flash-pad and hands it to Westgale, who studies it intently.

“This is all very well, but you know as well as I do that the validity of these inspections totally depends on how transparent Woi and his people are being.”

“Are you suggesting that maybe Woi is secretly storing a few nuclear missiles under his bed?” Macdonald cackles. “Come on, Mr. President, I suggest you get over the paranoia. As history has proven, it can be very harmful to America’s well-being. I think it’d be best for everyone if you’d shift your focus back to paying off your country’s debt.”

Far from content with Macdonald’s response, Westgale and Colonel Peters have James Vine brought back to the Freedom Home.

“Do your people still have eyes on these guys?” Westgale asks Vine.

“Let me put it this way: if they so much as sneeze, we know about it,” Vine replies with a nod.

“Keep us posted, Mr. Vine. In the meantime, I’m going to have our Intelligence department liaise with your federation,” Peters says.

CHAPTER 25

“Nicole, Nicole—come on in and have a seat,” says Secretary Deacon, as he directs me to a chair before his desk. “Wow, *President Kratz*—sounds good to me,” he adds in his usual jovial manner. He smiles, his red cheeks swelling like apples with the movement. Reaching for a plate of brownies on his desk, he holds it out to me. “My wife made these this morning. Here, try one.”

“Mmm, delicious!” I exclaim after taking a bite.

“I guess you could say they give this energy minister some much-needed energy,” he says, laughing as he reaches for another one.

“Good, because I’m going to need you at your best,” I say.

“I hope that’s your way of telling me you’re planning to keep me on board within your Administration.”

“Let’s just say those brownies are pretty hard to pass up,” I say, and we share a chuckle.

“Now, shall we address the matter at hand?” he says, growing serious. “With Gerald Levin and Earl Pemberton officially out of the political picture, it’s time to bear down and bring the Pinian energy deal to life. Did you receive my report?”

“Yes, I did, and I’m astounded by the progress. The fact we’re so close to receiving the first shipment is very exciting.”

“There’s never been anything like this,” he says, his enthusiasm animating his voice. “Besides the discovery of the VX drug, I think this is the greatest thing to happen to this country in decades. As you can see from the report, the incredible thing

about the fera-bean biofuel is that it is in no way temperature sensitive, and the tanks can be shipped by air without a single concern. My people have been working on the logistics and I'm thrilled to say it's all going as smooth as silk. Once we receive the first shipment and everything is deemed okay, the remaining shipments will follow on schedule."

"And from what I got from the report, there also doesn't appear to be any concerns when it comes to storage," I say.

"That's correct." He pauses and his apple-red cheeks bulge again. "This is absolutely incredible, Nicole."

* * *

"Is everything okay, Jessica?" a concerned Kolton asks Jessica backstage as he prepares to address a group of recovering alcoholics in support of the Kratz Foundation.

"Yeah," she says, running her hand back through her hair. She hesitates, then adds, "It's just my father. He's upset that I refuse to have my security around me twenty-four hours a day. As usual, he's just being overprotective." She shrugs.

"That's a parent's job," Kolton answers with a chuckle.

"I know he means well, but I've never been comfortable having a security detail follow my every move. I feel it puts me up on some unwarranted pedestal. Besides, this hall is a two-minute walk from the apartment." She moves to the curtain, and Kolton follows her.

"Wow, this is quite the turnout," he says as they look out at the stage and the auditorium beyond.

"Yeah, I'm glad to see the foundation is gaining momentum."

The announcer is introducing him now. "Knock 'em dead, Kolton," Jessica says, patting him on the back. She leaves the backstage area as he steps out onto the stage.

"Hello," he begins, looking out at the audience. He takes a moment to remove his jacket and roll up his sleeves—the stage lights are putting out a lot of heat. He drapes his jacket over the stool positioned next to the mic stand. "It's a true honor and privilege to

be standing here in front of you today. Let me begin by telling you what led me on my downward spiral.”

After he describes the events surrounding the tragic deaths of his sisters, there isn't a dry eye in the house. “To think that the very thing I was so proud to have created killed my own flesh and blood left me completely devastated,” he finishes, and pauses to take a deep breath and exhale. “It came to the point where I would try to drown my anguish in alcohol. Every day, I sank deeper and deeper into a black hole. For years, I received help from many caring professionals, but no matter how hard they tried to help me, it seemed there was no hope. Every time I believed I was seeing a light at the end of the tunnel, I would sink deeper into that hole of misery.

“Time is the healer, I was constantly being told. Well, let me tell you, more than twenty years later I was still battling my demons, and believe me, they had no mercy. But for the last couple of years I've been fighting back with all my might, guided by the most powerful thing of all: love. And now those demons don't stand a chance. I've learned how to find the goodness in others.”

Kolton addresses the audience with passion. “We need to realize that there'll always be challenges in life. And we must face those challenges head on. Through my own personal trials and tribulations, I've come to learn that the alcoholic sinks into a bottle to shelter himself or herself from reality. The problem is, it's far more difficult to get out than it is to get in. Sure, at times we'll fail, hurt, and feel sad, but the truth is, we can't know success without failure, and we surely can't know joy without sadness. It's life. It's reality.”

When Kolton finishes his talk and leaves the stage to thunderous applause, Jessica is again backstage. “Fantastic speech, Kolton,” she says. “You really moved these people.”

“You know, Jessica, when I look at them I see myself,” he says as he pours two glasses of fruit punch from a pitcher on a table. “In their eyes I can actually see the battle between sadness and hope playing out.” He hands Jessica a glass.

“Well, here's to hope,” she says, tapping glasses with Kolton.

“May I have the pleasure of walking you back to the condo?” Kolton asks as he puts on his coat and toque, preparing to leave.

“Thank you, Kolton, but I’m going to stick around and do a meet and greet with the audience, then I’m planning to join Shadow and a few friends at that new restaurant across the street,” Jessica replies. “Hey, how about you and Luanda join us?”

“Oh, thanks, but when I contacted Luanda before my speech she was preparing to turn in for the evening,” Kolton says.

* * *

“I wonder what’s keeping Jessie,” Shadow says to Jessica’s friends as they wait for her at the restaurant. “She was supposed to be here a half-hour ago.”

“That seems to happen to Jessie. Being who she is, people are always wanting to meet her. She’s probably held up signing autographs,” Andrea says.

“And that’s the thing about Jessie—she never turns anyone away,” Andrea’s boyfriend, John, adds.

Shadow frowns, looking at his flash-pad. “I don’t know, guys. I’ve tried contacting her, and I’m getting nothing.” Her friends, content to wait, drift back into their conversation after a few moments, but Shadow is preoccupied. He excuses himself and finds a quiet location from which to call the Kratz Foundation Event Coordinator, Catalina Sanchez.

“All I can tell you is, I know for a fact Jessie left the auditorium about half an hour ago,” Catalina replies when he expresses his concern. “She spent at least an hour meeting and greeting tonight’s audience.”

“Were you with her when she left?” Shadow asks. “How was she? Was she feeling ill or something?”

“Oh no, she was fine. We left the building at the same time.”

“Together?”

“No, we exited through different doors.”

“What about her security detail? Did they not escort her out of the building?” Shadow asks, his worry shifting to fear.

“She didn’t have them with her tonight, or her driver. She said the auditorium is so close to your building that she didn’t need either.” Catalina pauses, then asks carefully, “Do you know if your mother or Kolton have heard from her?”

“I’ll try them next.” Struggling to maintain his composure, Shadow calls his mother’s number. Kolton answers.

“Oh my Lord,” Kolton says. “I left the auditorium about an hour and a half ago. Jessie said she was going to stick around and meet the audience and then join you at the restaurant.”

“That’s what she was supposed to do, but she hasn’t. What in the world could have happened to her?” Shadow’s voice rises with panic. “I’ll be there in a few minutes. I’ll tell the others to stick around here in case she shows up.”

Shadow rushes up to Kolton and Luanda’s apartment. Luanda comes running to the door with Kolton behind her. “Shadow, what’s going on?” she cries, looking as if she just woke up.

“I have no idea, Mother,” Shadow replies, rubbing his eyes. “She’s not answering her flash-pad. We can’t keep wasting time. We have to do something.”

“Do you want me to call the police?” Kolton offers, reaching for his flash-pad.

“No. I’m going to call the president’s direct line,” Shadow says, pulling out his flash-pad and punching in numbers.

“Shadow, this is a pleasant surprise,” Westgale says when he answers. “I really want to thank you for the work you’ve done with Secretary Deacon regarding the Pinian energy deal.”

“I’m thrilled things have worked out as well as they have, sir,” Shadow replies. Then he explains to Westgale why he’s calling.

“Yeah, I have that file in my office,” he says, then a minute later explains, “I didn’t want to alarm my wife. Now, tell me what you know.”

“She didn’t have her security with her, sir,” Shadow says.

Westgale sighs. “I’m well aware of that. I just finished giving her hell about that earlier this evening.”

“I didn’t know... I didn’t know whether to call the police, or...”

“You did the right thing by contacting me,” Westgale says. “I’m going to put my people on this right away. If you hear from Jessie, or anyone who knows anything about where she is, contact me immediately.”

As Westgale ends the call, he feels his chest tightening, and takes several deep breaths before returning to the drawing room to tell April what’s going on. He then contacts Gil Robichaud and explains the situation. “Do you think we should announce this to the public?” he asks his chief of security.

“No, not at this point. But I’ll immediately get word out to all levels of law enforcement,” Gil says.

Westgale allows the crack in his calm façade to widen enough to say, “Gil, please do whatever it takes to find my daughter.”

“I’ll do everything I can, sir,” Gil promises.

Gil quickly assembles a team of agents and they fly out to New York. During the flight, he speaks with Catalina Sanchez. “I’m hoping, as the event coordinator, you’ll be able to send me every detail pertaining to this evening’s event.”

“Of course. All our events are carefully planned,” Catalina informs Gil. “I’ll send you the list of the 237 people who were in attendance.”

Seconds later, Gil receives the list of names. He immediately forwards the list to Agent Herta, who begins running the names through the criminal database.

“Eighty-three of these people have had some sort of documented run-in with the law,” Agent Herta reports.

“What types of things are we looking at?” Agent Gallio asks as the plane prepares for landing.

“Uh... it’s all minor stuff. It doesn’t appear we have any serious criminals in this group,” Herta replies. “That being said, I think until Jessica is found, it’s wise to start contacting everyone who was at the event.”

When they arrive in New York, they begin setting up shop in the New York Justice Center. Minutes later, appearing completely

flustered, Shadow arrives. “I take it there’s still been no sign of her,” Gil says to Shadow.

“Nothing. Not a damn thing,” Shadow answers as he sits down and buries his head in his hands. “I can’t believe this is happening. I should’ve been there with her,” he moans. “Jessie’s an angel; why anyone would want to harm her is beyond me.”

“I know it’s difficult, Shadow, but it’s vital we don’t panic and think the worst,” Gil says as he offers him a glass of water. He studies him for a few seconds.

“Shouldn’t we disclose this to the public? Can we not offer some kind of reward?” Shadow asks. “I’ll offer whatever amount of money it takes.”

“At this stage, I don’t think it’s wise to make a public announcement,” Gil answers as an agent enters the room with Catalina Sanchez.

“Is there any news?” she asks, brushing strands of dark brown hair from her eyes.

“Unfortunately, we’re at a standstill, Miss Sanchez,” Gil answers.

“Well, hopefully this’ll help,” Catalina says, handing Gil a data chip. “This is a view-file of Jessica’s meet and greet. My assistant recorded it to use as a marketing tool for the foundation. There’s no sound, though,” she adds.

Gil instantly scans the chip to the flash-screen positioned at the front of the room. As the view-file plays, the group watches a radiant Jessica smiling, signing autographs, and posing for photos. Shadow watches with tears in his eyes. And Shadow, in turn, is observed by those Gil has ordered to watch him.

“Hmm, check this guy out,” Agent Gallio says, asking Gil’s assistant, Shamir, to freeze the picture and highlight a man standing off to the side. “He’s been standing there the whole time, just staring at Jessica.” The man is about thirty, and neatly groomed. He seems annoyed as he watches Jessica.

“Back it up. Back it up to the beginning. And keep him highlighted,” Gil calls out to Shamir.

“What’s with this guy?” Shadow exclaims, rising.

“Hold on. It looks like he just murmured something to himself,” Agent Gallio says.

“Zoom in on that, Shamir,” Gil orders.

As the man’s thin, triangular face fills the screen, it becomes clear he is mouthing the words “stupid bitch.”

“This has to be the guy,” Shadow shouts.

As the view-file plays on, the man now appears to mutter something to a lady standing next to him.

“Zoom in on that,” Gil says to Shamir. “Can anybody figure out what the hell he’s saying?” he then asks the others.

“It beats me,” Agent Gallio replies. Agent Herta and the others in the room are also at a loss.

“Give me a minute. I’ll get it for you,” Shamir says as he taps a few buttons on the keypad. A minute later Shamir raises his head. “I’ve got it,” he says.

“Are you certain?” Gil asks.

“Yes, I am,” he replies, confidently. “Okay, he’s saying, ‘Look at her, thinking she’s holier than thou... She’s nothing but a damn jezebel.’”

“Whoa, I wanna know every single thing there is to know about this guy,” Gil says.

Shadow sits frozen, staring straight ahead. Catalina does her best to console him. “It’ll be all right, Shadow,” she keeps insisting. She urges him to his feet and leads him out of the operations room. In the doorway, he slowly turns and looks back at Gil and his team.

“Please, find her,” he says softly.

The agent who’s been watching Shadow alerts a couple of his associates that Shadow is leaving the building. The others begin gathering as much data as possible on the man in the view-file.

“His name is Joshua Thompson,” Agent Herta calls out. “He’s thirty-one and works as a stock trader with a small New York firm. And... he resides a few blocks from the auditorium.”

“Any trouble with the law?” Gallio asks Herta.

“His ex-wife filed for divorce, claiming he became abusive and prone to drunken tirades, but he was never charged with anything,” Herta answers.

“Here we go,” Shamir says out of the blue. “It looks like Mr. Thompson has been quite busy on the World Connect.”

“How so?” asks Gil.

“Expressing his political opinions on a view-file page titled Twilight’s Last Gleaming,” Shamir replies, handing his flash-pad to Gil.

“The guy’s definitely a militant extremist. His writing’s filled with all kinds of vitriol against the PBA and particularly Westgale,” Gil observes as he peruses the material. “Check this comment out. It’s in response to Jessica’s work in Pinia. ‘Cute little rich bitch with nothing better to do than go and lend a hand to our enemy—disgraceful!’ Oh my Lord, listen to this. It was posted right after the Pinian energy deal was officially announced. ‘If only Westgale and his bleeding heart daughter would somehow fall off the face of the earth, then maybe this country will finally be what it should be.’ We may have our man,” Gil says as he reaches for his jacket and signals for Agent Gallio to join him. “We need to pay this guy a visit, Nick—and get us the necessary backup,” he adds, looking back at Agent Herta.

CHAPTER 26

En route to Joshua Thompson's residence, Gil calls to brief Westgale.

"Oh my God," he breathes as Gil updates him. "I told Jessie it wasn't wise to do these meet and greets. There's just way too many nut jobs out there. And this guy sounds like one of them. But that's my daughter—when she sets her mind to something there's no—"

"I must caution you, sir. We don't have any hard proof linking this guy to Jessica's disappearance, but when you piece everything together, and consider the facts, it's impossible not to be suspicious of him."

"Why, Gil? Why would anyone harm such a loving person?" Westgale says. "All she's done her entire life is help people."

"I wish I had an answer for you, Mr. President, but I don't."

When Gil and Gallio reach the apartment building where Joshua Thompson is supposedly living, they make sure their backup is fully in place before identifying themselves to the building security guard.

"Here, let me escort you up to Mr. Thompson's unit," he says, and leads them up to the twenty-first floor. Gil knocks gently on the door.

"Hey, who is it? I didn't see my signal light up," a deep male voice says. When Gallio informs him of who they are, the man opens the door. "Well, I guess it sure wouldn't be in my best interest to turn you guys away. Come on in."

"Joshua Thompson?" Gil confirms, though the man before him is the same one they saw in the view-file.

"That's me, in the flesh," Joshua replies matter-of-factly.

“Let me tell you why we’re here, Mr. Thompson.” Gil then explains.

“And you think *I* had something to do with her disappearance,” Joshua says, looking shocked. “That is ludicrous,” he adds.

Gallio details their suspicions.

Thompson scowls. “That’s right, anything to do with her and her father makes me sick. Watching these people run my country to the ground crushes my heart.”

“To the point where you referred to her under your breath tonight as a ‘stupid bitch,’” Gil says with a raised brow.

“Is that a crime?”

“And according to your view-file page, your wish is for her and her father to fall off the face of the earth.”

“Oh, forgive me for not being one of their sycophants,” Joshua sneers. “Do we not still have something called free speech in this country?”

“Very well, Mr. Thompson, but what perplexes me is that you’ve attended the last four Kratz Foundation events knowing very well that Jessica Westgale oversees the foundation,” Gil says, his tone growing sharper.

“The only reason I’ve been attending these meetings is because I’m trying to better myself, Agent Robichaud,” he answers, then takes a deep breath. “My alcohol addiction has had a negative impact on so many aspects of my life—worst of all, it cost me the woman I love. I couldn’t care less about Jessica Westgale’s involvement. The only reason I stayed for the meet and greet was because the person I attended the event with wanted to get an autograph and a photo for his sister. Here’s his name.” He moves to a side table in the foyer and writes the man’s name and contact information down on a piece of paper. He hands it to Gil, who then steps to one side for a murmured conversation with Gallio.

“I thank you for your time, Mr. Thompson, I’m leaving, but I hope you don’t mind if Agent Gallio asks you a few more questions,” Gil says.

“He can ask me all the questions he wants, but I don’t know a damn thing about any of this,” Joshua says as he plops down on his

living room sofa. Flash-pad in hand, Gallio sits across from him. Gil leaves.

Back at the Justice Center, he and Agent Herta begin diligently analyzing further information. An hour later, Gallio returns.

“So, what’d you make of the guy, Nick?” Gil asks.

“I think it’s wise to keep him under surveillance, but I doubt he’s our man,” Gallio responds, rubbing his hands over his face in frustration. “It’s obvious the guy’s a militant extremist, but I think he’s all talk. Besides, his buddy corroborated everything he told us.”

“The more I think this over, the more I feel we have no choice but to go public with Jessica’s disappearance,” Gil says. “Time is ticking.” Sighing, he leans back in his chair and laces his hands together behind his head.

“What about a reward?” Gallio asks.

“We’re going to start it at two million dollars. The president insisted we make it higher, but Martin Stevens and I were able to convince him otherwise,” Gil replies.

“Who’s going to make the announcement?” Herta asks.

“I know the president wants to, but I don’t think that’d be wise. Whoever abducted Jessica may very well have done so because of their feelings toward him,” Gil says. “I’ll talk to him.”

Minutes later, in a video conference call, the president is adamant that he be the one to address the nation. “I appreciate and respect your opinion, Gil, but I *need* to do this. And I will.”

Not long after that conversation, Gil and his team watch the president’s appeal on the flash-screen on one wall of the operations center.

In the Freedom Home drawing room, Westgale gazes directly into the UCIT camera. He looks weary and pale. *“To whoever may know the whereabouts of my daughter, Jessica, I’m asking you to please enter this code into your flash-pad.”* He provides a series of three numbers and three letters, which seconds later are presented on the screen. He also announces the reward information. Then his expression softens, and it’s clear he’s speaking from the heart.

“Jessica is a kind and caring person who, ever since she was a teenager, has dedicated her life to helping people in less fortunate positions. She usually doesn’t disclose this information to the public, but today I feel compelled to.” Westgale cites several examples of Jessica’s generosity.

“The work her and her team of aid workers have performed at an international level is unparalleled; most recently, she has assisted the children of Pinia.”

As Westgale continues to speak, video clips of Jessica and her team, hard at work, appear on the screen.

“Jessica is not a politician or a businesswoman; she’s a humanitarian who is guided by an altruistic outlook on life. Prior to leading her team into Pinia, she was offered a lucrative high-level position at Step 1 Health. As much as I tried to encourage her to remain in America and accept the position, she wouldn’t even give it a second thought.

“Once again, I plead with you, if you know the whereabouts of Jessica Westgale, please immediately enter the code you see on the screen into your flash-pad.” He then repeats the code twice before the screen fades to black.

* * *

Jessica wakes slowly, blinking her eyes open. Hazily, she checks out her surroundings. She’s lying in a plush, queen-sized bed in a large and elegantly decorated room she doesn’t recognize. *Where the hell am I? What in the world is going on?*

She’s still wearing her clothes from the evening before, she notes with relief. Other than feeling highly fatigued, she’s unharmed. She sits up and reaches for the curtain drawn over a window in the wall beside the bed. *Maybe I’ll find some answers out there,* she decides as she pulls the curtain aside.

Steel panels cover the window. Gasping, heart pounding in fear, she springs out of the bed and looks around for her purse and flash-pad. They’re nowhere in sight. She catches her reflection in the mirror over the bureau and clutches at her throat. Her dragon-stone

necklace is gone. She runs to the door and twists and yanks on the knob. It's locked. Frantic now, she pulls on the handle with all her might, twisting and turning it, but it won't budge. Abandoning the handle, she hammers on the door with her fists, repeatedly hollering, "Where am I? Somebody help me!"

It's to no avail. She is somebody's prisoner.

She turns, back to the door, and again looks around the room, noting details that might help her escape, or tell her where she is. To her right is a rudimentary kitchenette, with a counter where several packaged sandwiches and other snacks are stacked. A fridge reveals all kinds of fruit, vegetables, and beverages when she opens the door. She crosses the room to a bathroom; there is a large supply of toiletries on the vanity. Fresh towels are stacked inside a cabinet. Back in the bedroom, she opens the bureau drawers to see them filled with clothes. Women's clothes. In her size. She steps back in confusion. *What in the world is going on?* She looks again at the counter, at the fridge, and her fear mounts. *Have I been left alone here? How long do they plan to keep me here? Will someone come back, or... will I die here?*

* * *

"We've been able to contact eighty percent of the people who attended the event, and not a single soul claims to have seen or heard anything suspicious. Neither has anybody in the surrounding area," Agent Gallio reports to Gil, shaking his head in frustration.

"Hopefully that will change when we speak with the remaining twenty percent," Gil replies, trying to remain optimistic. He looks across the room at the agent hunched over his screen. "What about her flash-pad signal; what have you learned, Shamir?" he asks.

"It was shut down the night of the event," Shamir replies. "And according to Shadow, the activity logged in the last few weeks shows nothing peculiar. We're checking it out ourselves, though."

CHAPTER 27

“Come on in,” a lady named Eva Gould says to Agent Gallio. “I’m sorry it took me the time it did to meet with you, but the day after that event, I headed straight to Long Island to visit my husband in rehab.”

“I understand he’s the reason you attended the event,” Gallio says as he enters the living room of the quaint home.

“Yes. I’ll do whatever it takes to help my husband, and I think the Kratz Foundation is doing some wonderful things. I just hope and pray Jessica Westgale comes back safe and sound. I’m a great admirer,” Eva says with a smile.

“I don’t want to take up too much of your time, ma’am, but did you notice anything out of the...” Gallio hesitates as a young child runs into the living room.

“Grr—and now you will all face my wrath!” the boy calls out as he jumps onto a sofa, thrusting a plastic sword into the air. He’s wearing a peculiar mask.

“Austin, you come down from that sofa right now. And take off that bloody mask,” his mother barks. “I’m sorry, Agent Gallio. I think letting him keep that mask and buying him that toy sword was one of the biggest mistakes I’ve ever made,” she adds with a chuckle. “Now say sorry and go to your room,” she tells the boy.

As little Austin runs off, Gallio pauses in shock. *My Lord. SOH... the Spirit of Hades.* The mask totally matches the description provided by Morris Johns. “That’s an interesting mask,” Gallio says

with a smile, attempting to hide his concern. “I have a young boy as well, and he too always seems to be fascinated by that sort of thing. Do you mind if I have a look at it, and maybe even take a photo of it? I know my son would love something like that.”

“Sure, go ahead,” Eva says with a raised brow at Gallio’s sudden interest in the mask. “I wish I could tell you where you can buy one, but Austin found this one when we moved in here. I had to adjust it so it would fit his face.” She laughs.

“Found it?”

“Yeah, the prior owner left it in a box that was headed for the garbage, until Austin got his grubby little hands in there,” Eva explains. “And since that day he’s been in love with the thing. I probably see that mask more than I see his actual face.”

“Did the prior owner have children of his own?”

“Oh no, at the time he sold the house he was single.”

“Ah; maybe he was a fencer.”

“You know, it’s funny this has come up, because I was intending to ask him about the mask the other evening, but I didn’t have a chance.”

“You still keep in touch?”

“No, no. The other evening was the first time I’d seen him since I bought the house. Sometimes it amazes me, just how small the world really is.”

“Oh? What makes you say that?”

“Well, when I saw that it was Mr. Rollins who was giving that speech the other night, I nearly fell out of my chair.”

“Mr. Rollins? Kolton Rollins?”

“Yeah, Kolton Rollins, the man I bought this very house from. He delivered such an enlightening speech—are you okay, Agent Gallio?”

Gallio struggles to relax his expression again. “Uh, yes, ma’am. I was just thinking of all those poor souls like your husband, who wake up every day and face the awful battle they do.”

Eva nods, then recalls, “I must apologize. You were in the process of asking me a question when my son so rudely interrupted you.”

“Oh yeah,” Gallio answers, still deep in thought. “I wanted to know if you noticed anything out of the ordinary during or after the presentation.”

“The only thing I noticed, sir, were a lot of tears during Kolton’s speech, and then a lot of smiles afterward, when Jessica Westgale was kind enough to greet us.”

* * *

“Kolton Rollins?” Gil says in disbelief when Gallio meets with him at his hotel suite. “Did you bring him in?”

“We have no idea where he is, sir,” Gallio replies as he sighs in frustration.

“Are you certain the mask is a match?”

“I sent a photo of it to Morris Johns and he verified it’s the exact mask that was being worn by the members of SOH,” Gallio says.

“Do you realize what this could mean? They could all be playing us. All three of them,” Gil says.

“I’m sorry, sir, but you’ve lost me.”

“Kolton Rollins, his wife Luanda, and our dear friend Shadow.” Robichaud looks at his time-pin. “Westgale and the Lady of Honor are due to arrive anytime now. I’m supposed to meet them at the Prestige. We’ll talk further when I return.”

“I don’t know anything about this Rollins fellow, but I have nothing but full trust in Shadow,” Westgale insists when Gil mentions Rollins and Shadow’s mother. “That young man saved my life. On top of that, there’s no doubt in my mind that he sincerely loves my daughter.”

“Well, as much as I trust your judgment, sir, I still think it’s wise to continue tailing him,” Gil responds.

“Hold on. You’ve been tailing Shadow?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Please, Gil, that’s ridiculous. I’m ordering you to end it now.”

“Very well, Mr. President, as you wish,” Gil replies, reluctantly pulling his flash-pad from his pocket to relay the order to his agents.

“What about Shadow’s mother, Luanda? What do we really know about her?” he asks.

When Westgale tells Gil how Cobra threatened her to make her leave Pinia and abandon Shadow, he’s taken aback. “Gee, I had no idea that was the case.”

“We didn’t find out about that until after the Pinian deal was made, and it’s definitely not something I want to be made public. Now, even if this Rollins character was linked to SOH, it doesn’t necessarily mean he’s the person who abducted Jessica.”

“Maybe not, but it surely increases the likelihood,” Gil says.

“Have you brought him in yet?”

“There’s a problem with that, Mr. President. We have no idea where he is.”

“Damn it,” Westgale yells. “What do you mean, you don’t know where he is? You have men tailing Shadow Pix, but the other two are left to wander off?”

“We never suspected them, sir,” Gil replies.

Westgale shakes his head. “In the meantime, set up an emergency meeting,” he orders. “Oh, and invite Shadow. I think it’s vital we fill him in.”

Westgale turns away abruptly and moves to stare out the window. Knowing the pressure the man is under, Gil joins him at the window.

“She’s out there somewhere, sir,” Gil says softly. “And I plan to keep my promise and find her.”

“Thank you, Gil. You’re a good man.” Westgale lets out a sigh and walks over to the sofa, where the Lady of Honor is examining a picture of their daughter she’s holding on her lap. As he gathers her into his arms, Gil leaves.

An hour later, at the New York Justice Center emergency meeting, Gil asks Shadow if he’s aware of Kolton’s whereabouts. “Mom and I haven’t seen him since the day after Jessica went missing,” Shadow answers. “We feared maybe he relapsed and fell into some sort of drunken stupor. I guess now we know the reason why he ran off. Damn that son of a bitch!”

A team of agents from National Investigation begins arriving.

“Would you have any insight into why he’d have such hatred toward America that he’d join a group like SOH?” Westgale asks Shadow, who responds by explaining how Kolton’s sisters died.

“Whoa... the very same bombs he designed ended up killing his sisters? Now that could really mess a person up,” Gil says.

“It seemed like his anger was all focused toward Direct Aim, but obviously it ran a whole lot deeper,” Shadow says, frowning.

“I hate to do this, Shadow, but considering you just recently reunited with your mother, I have to ask you how well you really think you know her,” says Gil.

“All I know is what I feel and what I’ve heard and seen, and I don’t believe for a second that my mother had any idea what this guy was really about,” Shadow replies, rubbing his tired eyes. “If anything, I have to wonder how he ended up in her life.”

“I hope you understand we’ll need to question her.”

“I’m certain she’ll cooperate fully.”

“People, listen up,” Gil calls out. “This is the man we are looking for. His name is Kolton Rollins.” A large photo of Rollins appears on the flash-screen. “As you will notice from the photo, Mr. Rollins has one very distinguishable feature, the burn mark on his right cheek. Please note that a detailed report on this case and Mr. Rollins has been flashed over to your National Investigation central database. The report will be updated continually. I must stress the importance of capturing Mr. Rollins alive.”

Late that same evening, Gil Robichaud meets with Kolton Rollins’s ex-wife, Nadine, at Stacy’s Diner.

“When was the last time you spoke with Kolton?” Gil asks.

“When we divorced, seven years ago,” Nadine replies, nervously pouring cream into her coffee. “That doesn’t surprise me,” she responds after Gil reveals Kolton’s apparent link to SOH. “He came to despise everything America stood for. That was the main reason I had to get away from him. Well that, and of course the drinking. Frankly, I’m surprised to hear he’s still alive.”

“Did you ever witness him become violent?”

“No, not physically. But he would go into these diatribes against America, referring to the country as one large poisonous pit of wickedness, or something weird like that. Of course, the death of his sisters was at the root of his anger.”

“Can you think of anywhere he might be hiding? Do you recall him having any places where he used to visit in order to find some peace of mind?”

Nadine frowns in thought, then says slowly, “There was one place that he often visited. No matter how difficult things became.”

“And where would that be?” Gil asks.

“Not far from here at St. Agnes Cemetery; where his sisters lay in rest.”

At the break of dawn, Gallio and Herta visit the cemetery. “The grounds here are so sprawling that it’s impossible for us to fully monitor them. So many people come and go every day. But yes, I know this man,” the manager says as she studies Kolton’s picture. “I can’t recall the last time I saw him, but I can tell you that he visits quite often. He once told me how his sisters died. Awful story,” she adds as she searches the cemetery’s database. “Ah, here we are. His sisters are entombed together in Section F 527... This programmed robo-electro will take you directly there.” She nods toward the door.

Gallio and Herta clamber into the electro when it stops outside the admin office door. It carries them through the expansive grounds and stops on the pavement fifteen yards or so from the graves. Gallio and Herta exit the electro and begin scouring the area.

Herta calls Gallio’s name and nods toward a figure in the distance. It appears to be a man wearing an overcoat and a winter toque. He’s sitting, head bowed, on one of the benches scattered throughout the property.

They return to the electro and move closer. Gallio takes out his laser-view scope. “My Lord. I think we have our man,” he says to Herta.

“How can you be sure?” Herta asks.

“That’s him. I can see the burn mark on his cheek,” Gallio answers, his voice strained. Herta immediately calls for backup, informing the command center that they’ve spotted Rollins.

“Wow, this is quite bizarre... he’s holding onto a white box with a red and blue bow,” Gallio says as he continues to observe. “He doesn’t appear to be moving. Unless he’s in some kind of deep sleep, I think he’s dead.”

They move the robo-electro a little closer.

“Should we move in on him?” Herta asks.

“It’s far too risky,” Gallio replies as he continues to observe the man they believe to be Kolton Rollins. He pulls out a miniature sound-blast and says through it, “Sir, we are federal agents. Please place both your hands on your head.” Nothing. No movement at all. Gallio repeats the order with more force. Again, nothing. “Wait a second, I just saw him press—”

BOOSH!

A thunderous roar precedes a massive fireball that rolls over the robo-electro, blowing it to pieces.

Gil along with a bevy of federal agents descend on the cemetery a short time later. Agents Gallio and Herta are immediately pronounced dead. Kolton Rollins is nowhere to be found.

“Hey, look over here,” one of the agents says to Gil directing his attention to a bench.

“Get the hell out of there,” Gil hollers to the agent when he sees a white box with a red and blue bow.

The bomb squad moves in. “It’s clear,” their commander calls out, and brings the box over to Gil. He unties the bow, reaches in, and removes a dragon-stone necklace.

“That’s Jessica Westgale’s,” he says.

* * *

“Are you certain you don’t want me to stay with you?” Shadow asks his mother as he takes her back to her apartment after a rigorous interview with a National Investigation agent. Luanda looks exhausted.

“You’re a very special young man. I’m so fortunate to have you in my life,” Luanda says with a wan smile that quickly fades. “I must be strong, Shadow, and see my way through this. There’s no other way.”

“Well, just as long as you know I’m here for you,” Shadow says as she unlocks the door. He steps inside with her.

“After what I’ve done to your life, I don’t know why you’d want to be,” Luanda says, throwing her arms in the air as she moves farther into the apartment. “I caused you to leave your home, and now my husband...” Her shoulders sag.

Shadow quickly moves to grip her shoulders. “None of this is your fault, Mother. Kolton fooled us. He fooled all of us.”

Luanda smiles bravely and kisses Shadow on the cheek. “Now go. I’ll be fine. You have enough to worry about.”

His flash-pad buzzes with an incoming message as Shadow is leaving Luanda’s unit. He pulls it out of his pocket and looks at it. Gil wants to meet him in his electro, currently parked at the back of the building.

As he approaches the vehicle, he notices Shamir is with Robichaud.

“Please give your flash-pad to Shamir,” Gil says to Shadow, who gives him a puzzled look. Before he can ask what’s going on, Gil signals for Shadow not to speak.

Shamir studies and then quickly disables the flash-pad. “You were correct, sir,” he says to Gil. “It was an LS 30.”

“What’s going on? And what’s an LS 30?” Shadow asks.

Gil tells Shadow what took place at the cemetery. “An LS 30 is a listening bug that can be scanned onto a flash-pad,” Gil tells him. “You’re the only person outside of the command center who knew my agents were planning to visit the cemetery. I figured Rollins must have somehow been listening in when I informed you of the plan.” Gil sighs. “And damn it, my carelessness cost two good men their lives.”

Shadow buries his face in his hands. “I can’t believe what is happening.”

“I think it’d be wise if I bring a couple of our men in and sweep both your and your mother’s apartments for any other potential bugs,” Shamir says. Shadow nods.

“There’s one more thing, Shadow,” Gil says softly. “I think you should have this.” He hands him Jessica’s dragon-stone necklace.

Shadow stares at the necklace, blinking back tears. “And to think I told her this would always keep her safe,” he murmurs.

The next morning, Shamir and his team discover two listening devices in Shadow’s apartment. None are found in Luanda’s.

CHAPTER 28

The anger over the calculated murder of Gallio and Herta is evident at today's meeting at the New York Justice Center. Gil hears the muttering as he enters the operations room and moves to the front.

"I'd personally love to get my hands on the guy and tear him to shreds."

"Nick always had everybody's back. We owe it to him and to his family to make sure we bring this son of a bitch to justice."

"That's the goal, ladies and gentlemen," Gil says loudly, ending the chatter and drawing all eyes to him. "First we must focus on actually tracking him down. And remember, the goal is to capture him alive," he warns.

"It looks like it's too late for that," Martin Stevens, head of National Investigation, says. His eyes are on his flash-pad.

"What is it, Martin?" Gil asks.

"Rollins... he's dead. I'm being told he walked into Precinct Five and collapsed."

"Precinct Five. That's the area where his sisters were killed," Gil says.

"This guy certainly has a flare for the dramatic," someone calls out.

Gil holds up his hand, eyes still on Stevens. "Are they saying what caused him to collapse?"

"Apparently he took his own life with a styngor," Stevens answers. "Wait a second... I'm now being told that before he

collapsed, he shouted out something really peculiar: ‘This is the beginning of the end.’”

“This is the beginning of the end? What on God’s earth is that supposed to mean?” Gil says.

In Washington, Westgale joins Robichaud’s meeting via the World Connect.

“I ask that everyone except Agent Robichaud and Mr. Stevens please exit the room,” Westgale orders calmly. Gil nods; he and Martin wait as the room empties.

“All clear now, Mr. President,” Gil informs Westgale.

Westgale takes a deep breath and lets it out. “Gentlemen. Now that Kolton Rollins has taken his life, I need your expert and honest opinion.” He pauses and takes another deep breath. “Do you think there’s even the slightest chance my daughter’s still alive?”

Gil hesitates, then admits, “Very slight at best. I’m sorry, sir.”

“Martin?” Westgale says. “As a highly seasoned NI director, your experience is unmatched. I need you to be completely honest with me.”

“To be blunt, Mr. President, considering the fact there’s been no ransom demand whatsoever, I highly doubt your daughter is still alive,” Stevens replies.

As if having expected to hear the worst, Westgale quickly moves to his next question. “I also need to know what you gentlemen make of what Rollins said before he died: ‘This is the beginning of the end.’”

“Knowing he made that comment has left me uneasy, assuming he was involved with the Spirit of Hades,” Stevens answers, glancing at the National Investigation report on the extremist group.

“It is a rather ominous comment, but then again, it could just be the final words of a mentally unstable person,” Gil adds.

“I believe the most important thing here is to determine whether Rollins was working alone when he took Jessica. From what we know of SOH, we’re looking at a highly financed and very sophisticated operation that was somehow able to disappear without us being able to figure out what and who the hell they are,” Stevens says, eyes on his flash-pad.

“Where do we go from here?” the president asks.

“It’s imperative we continue to find out every single thing imaginable about Kolton Rollins, and see where the trail leads us,” Stevens replies with conviction.

“Gil?”

“I fully concur, sir.”

* * *

After a long, but fruitful session with Harrison Deacon and Pinia’s strategic coordinator for the energy deal, I’m contacted by the director of the Federal Justice Center. “As I’m sure you’re well aware, Ms. Kratz, tomorrow is the day Clifford Sims will be executed,” the director informs me.

“I can hear the gates of hell slowly creaking open as we speak,” I quip, feeling absolutely no remorse for a man whose evil ways almost brought this entire country to its knees.

“He’s requesting to speak with you.”

“Hmm, that’s a surprise. Has he said why?”

“I haven’t the slightest idea,” the director replies.

As much as I despise the man, I oblige, and a few hours later, I’m sitting across from him, separated only by a row of bars.

“Nicole, it sure has been a while,” Sims says with a smirk. “You didn’t forget about me, did you?”

“Please don’t be offended, but yes I did. And to be honest with you, I think I made a big mistake coming here.”

“Well, since you accepted my invitation, I guess maybe you still care about me after all.” He bursts into shrieking laughter.

“Aw, it’s nice to see you haven’t lost that dreadful sense of humor, even while waiting for the grim reaper,” I reply, and allow a malicious chuckle.

“Now, that’s not very presidential of you, Nicole, teasing a man who will be zapped from this earth just hours from now.”

“You reap what you sow, General.”

“And believe me, Nicole, I’m fully prepared to face the music, even looking forward to it. Heck, I’ll probably be laughing as the

hellfire chars me up. But before my journey into the afterlife begins, I thought it'd be totally inexcusable of me to not congratulate you on reaching your much coveted goal: Nicole Kratz, president of the United States of America. It's such a natural fit."

"Well, if that's why you requested my presence, then all I can tell you is that your kind words mean absolutely not a damn thing to me. What a waste of time this was," I answer in frustration, looking through the bars directly into his stony eyes.

As I turn away, he calls out, "There is one thing I sincerely need to ask you."

In a huff, I turn back. "Go ahead, but hurry up," I snap.

He leans up against the bars and sneers, "How the hell did that freckle-faced punk Macdonald get you and your PBA friends to go along with it?"

"Go along with what?" I answer, shrugging.

"The cover-up."

"Cover-up? I have no idea what you're talking about."

He stares at me intently, then shakes his head. "My Lord. You don't know, do you?"

"You win, I don't know," I say impatiently.

"Little sweet Anya. My, oh my, and here I thought *I* was the corrupt one."

"Stop playing games with me and tell me what you mean."

"Or else what, you'll have me executed? Ha-ha! All right, let me cut to the chase, but I think you'd better sit back down."

Oh boy, I don't like the sounds of this. I sit down, my expression remaining noncommittal.

"You see, Nicole, right around the time you decided you wanted to become the country's top boss and Anya's tale began to capture the hearts of Americans, I made an offer to disclose some very important information to that idiot Macdonald."

"And in return?"

"He would make certain my brother's medical license was reinstated—I know for certain he didn't over-prescribe those pills to

that lying bitch. And I know it was because of *my* crimes that he was never given a fair shake to prove his innocence.”

“This information: what was it?”

“It pertained to Anya. Information that I most definitely thought he would’ve shared with you and the rest of the dullards down at the Freedom Home... unless, of course, you were all purposely left out of the loop—for whatever reason.”

“I’m listening,” I say, my curiosity now engaged.

“Hmm, where to begin?” he drawls, savoring the power he currently has over me. “All right, let’s start with the helcin that Anya provided to AXE. Now, that stuff was beautifully crafted, just the perfect mix of baking powder and food coloring.”

“Baking powder and food coloring? What in the—”

“Yeah, and if it weren’t for our state-of-the-art equipment, Johnny T and I may actually have fallen for it.”

“Hold on a second. You’re telling me the helcin Anya created and AXE sold you was fake.”

He smiles. “Fake and useless—unless, of course, we were going to bake a cake.”

“Hold on,” I say, reeling in confusion. “That stuff was used to kill General Gibson?”

“You see, once we discovered the truth, we found another supplier, the Spirit of Hades... And that’s not all, Nicole. Through some behind-the-scenes work, Johnny T and I discovered it was your visually challenged gnome who actually tipped us off about the planned bombings of those animal research labs.”

“If what you’re telling me is true, then Anya was actually doing all she could to *prevent* Dwight Wagner, Morris Johns, and the rest of AXE from carrying out their agenda, yet she pretended to be on board. On top of all that, she’s willing to face the death penalty, though she’s innocent. Do you realize how insane this all sounds?”

“I didn’t write the script, Nicole. I’m just relaying the story. Perhaps, for whatever reason, Anya was somehow prohibited from exposing the truth.”

“Now tell me, General: why should I believe a single word coming out of your mouth, and more importantly, why have you decided to stab Macdonald and the Commission in the back and tell me all this?”

“Because that’s the very thing he did to me. He promised me, and he reneged. Of course he gave me this garbage about trying his best... two-faced son of a bitch.”

“What do you know about SOH?”

“Other than the fact they’re a deranged bunch of misfits, not a helluva lot. If I knew at the time their goal was to destroy America, I would have had Johnny T blow their delivery guy’s head off right there on the spot, when he brought us the helcin. It was never my goal to destroy this country. I simply did what I did for the betterment of my country.”

“You’re just such a patriotic man, General. And it’s fascinating, hearing you, of all people, speak of others as being deranged. Do you ever look at yourself?”

Sims draws himself up. “I sure do, and what I see is a noble patriot. A man whose mission in life was to protect America from bleeding hearts like you.”

Sims laughs as I rise abruptly and leave.

In a wave of fury, I head to the warden’s office and demand to speak with Anya. My entire body’s trembling. While I sit in the waiting area, I try to gather my thoughts. I’m at a complete loss. If what Sims is telling me is true, then it’s as if AXE were some wild beast, and Anya was doing everything in her power to tame it. But why?

“I’m sorry, Ms. Kratz, but as of a week ago, Miss Ahar became property of the Outer Commission. In order to speak with her, you’ll require clearance from Guardian Macdonald,” the sergeant at the front desk explains. “Actually, your timing is very good; he’s here finishing up a meeting with the warden. I’ll send him a flash informing him it’s your wish to see him.”

Minutes later, the desk sergeant leads me to the warden’s office. I enter to see Macdonald about to putt a golf ball on the warden’s miniature putting green.

“Shh,” he whispers as he looks back my way. He then removes his suit jacket and neatly places it atop the warden’s desk. Gently swaying the putter back and forth, he prepares for the putt. “Geez!” he blurts after sending the ball a few inches wide of the hole. “Well, maybe the stage just wasn’t big enough to bring out the best in me,” he says with an annoying chuckle, placing the putter in a corner before retrieving his jacket. “Maybe one day, after your husband pays his debt to society, I’ll get him to give me some lessons,” he adds. That annoying laugh lingers.

“I urgently need to speak with you,” I say, panic edging my voice.

“Yes. I understand you wish to speak with me about Anya Ahar,” he answers calmly.

“That’s correct, sir.”

“Please, have a seat.” He directs me to the chair in front of the warden’s desk.

“Now, what can I do for you, Ms. Kratz?” he asks with a goofy grin as he sits at the warden’s desk.

“Just today I learned from Clifford Sims that Anya Ahar may be totally innocent.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear you have the trust of felons. The only thing is, at this point in time, Sims’s words hold about as much value as yesterday’s trash,” Macdonald says, shrugging. “Anya Ahar has admitted her guilt and gone through the proper process, per the New Order Treaty. And now she must prepare to face her penalty—that of death.”

“She’s an innocent woman!” I shout, my anger taking over. “I’m demanding to speak with her.”

“Please settle down, Ms. Kratz,” Macdonald orders. “The prisoner is no longer at this facility.”

“Where the hell is she?”

“That I can’t disclose. Since her case was deemed a Code Three, she is now under the Commission’s control. I’m sure you’re aware of the rules. So, I think it’d be wise of you to begin focusing on other things, such as paying your country’s debt—or America will soon be *Nomercia*,” he says. His snicker now sounds sinister.

“Wait a second. You know it’s true! You know Anya’s innocent! And you and your wretched Commission are willing to kill an innocent woman!” I shout.

“On top of paying the debt, I think you should also be dedicating your time to tracking down those who were behind this Spirit of Hades gang. Who knows what else they may have in mind?”

“What kind of rotten human being are you!” I yell in a rage.

“Your country created this damn mess, and if not for the Commission, the vultures would’ve swept in a long time ago and you’d be like sheep, living under some tyrant’s influence,” he answers with a smirk. “You should be grateful. At least I’m a pleasant shepherd.”

“No. What you are is a self-centered, unhinged creep,” I say, looking directly into his icy green eyes.

“This meeting is over, Ms. Kratz. Now please, I have far bigger fish to fry, not to mention a golf game that needs an awful lot more work,” he says smugly.

“This *meeting* may be over, but *this*—it’s far from over,” I growl as I storm out of the room.

CHAPTER 29

Feeling it's now become vital to bring this matter to Westgale's attention, I return to the Freedom Home. As I enter the hallway to the drawing room, I'm intercepted by the Lady of Honor. "Nicole, it's been a while," she says, greeting me with what I instantly notice is a forced smile. I can see her pain by looking into her eyes. Normally sparkling blue with an undeniable vibrancy, they now appear haunted and dull.

"I'm so sorry... I'm so sorry," I say softly as I move toward her.

"Thank you, my dear," she replies as we embrace. "He keeps blaming himself," she says as we regard Westgale from the drawing room entrance. "I'm very concerned about him," she adds.

"And what about yourself, ma'am? How are you?" I ask.

"Truthfully, I'm falling to pieces," April replies, her voice tightly controlled. "But just as I'm about to completely crumble, I think of Jessie and how she'd demand that we be strong and 'fight like troopers,' as she used to say."

I smile back at her, blinking back tears. "I hate to be a bother at such a time, but it is rather urgent I speak with him," I say hesitantly.

"By all means, Nicole. He thinks the world of you, and right now he could sure use the support," she responds softly. "Go on in."

When I enter, Westgale's watching a view-file of Jessica at a Washington children's hospital. Her security guards are carrying several bags containing all kinds of toys and stuffed animals. Together with an effervescent Jessica they begin working their way

through the hospital, handing out gift after gift. Jessica is seen speaking to and embracing each child, a huge smile permanently etched upon her face.

“That’s her, Nicole,” Westgale says, his voice cracking as he acknowledges my presence. “A kind, compassionate soul... nonjudgmental. If only she were the daughter of... I don’t know, an insurance broker or a plumber, and not a man who—”

“You can’t do this to yourself, sir. This is not your fault,” I tell him instantly, thinking of my own family issues.

“My God, Nicole. To think she’d just discovered true love, and was doing such terrific work, assisting your father with his foundation,” he says wistfully as he turns off the flash-screen. “I just hope to God that Gil and the rest of the good folks assisting him will finally be able to uncover the truth behind the Spirit of Hades. I’m certain this runs far deeper than just Kolton Rollins...” He mentally shakes himself. “Listen to me rambling on,” he says in a brisker voice. “Now, I guess you’re here about Anya.”

“Yes. How did you know?”

“I just received the notice a few minutes before you arrived.”

“Notice?”

“Yeah, the notice indicating Anya’s been executed. I take it you didn’t receive one.”

“Oh no!” I cry out in disbelief, sinking into the sofa beside me. “Those damn bastards! How could they do this!”

“I’m sorry, Nicole. I know how much you thought of her.”

“They just executed a completely innocent young woman,” I say, fighting to find the words.

“Completely innocent? I’d say that’s a bit of a stretch, my dear.”

“No, no. You don’t understand, sir. The truth was concealed.” I then explain what Sims had told me along with the details of my visit with Macdonald.

“How can this be?” he says, stunned by my revelation. “And Macdonald claimed Sims was lying?”

“Of course, but I saw through his deception.”

“Yeah, but can we trust Sims?”

“In this instance, we’d be foolish not to.”

“Hmm. It sounds like Anya was being prevented from telling the truth. But why?”

“I think the Outer Commission has some explaining to do, sir.”

“I wouldn’t hold your breath, Nicole. Very rarely does a king answer to a servant, and sadly, until we pay that debt in full, that’s exactly what we are—servants to a higher power.”

“I refuse to just let this go, Mr. President. I’m certain they knew of her innocence, and still decided to kill her.”

“You’re probably correct, but the way I see it, it’s too late; the damage has been done. When you take the helm you can go back and question the Commission all you wish, but for now, this Administration’s focus needs to be on the Spirit of Hades, along with paying that debt.”

“Oh my God, the doctor! He shouldn’t learn this from the World Connect. Do you know if he’s in his office?”

“Actually, for the last few days, Jack has been doing some research from his home. Here, I’ll contact him,” Westgale offers, reaching for his flash-pad.

“No,” I say, stopping him. “I need to do this in person. I think it’s important that he hears the entire story, and isn’t alone when he does.”

“Well, you’d better get a move on; UCIT will announce the news any time now,” Westgale cautions.

When Edward lets me out in front of Dr. Ahar’s condo, I gaze up toward his penthouse, my heart racing and my emotions whirling out of control. I’m oblivious to the noise that surrounds me. All I keep asking myself is how I’m going to tell this man his daughter has ended up a victim of the War Within again.

I enter the building and the concierge offers to discreetly escort me and my security up to Ahar’s penthouse. “Why thank you, sir,” I say, accepting his offer. “Should we notify him that I’m here?”

“There’s no need. Dr. Ahar has personally requested that whenever you, Director Perry, or the president visit, I am to personally escort you up to his unit.”

With my security by my side, I enter the VIP elevator with the concierge.

I disembark on the top floor and take a deep breath before pressing the door's flash-signal.

"Nicole, what a pleasant surprise," Dr. Ahar says, beckoning me in.

"I hope I didn't catch you at a bad time," I say as I step inside.

"Oh, no. I could use a break," he answers as he takes my coat. "I've just been so busy, working on the VX drug program," he adds. I notice he appears rather uneasy, looking several times toward a partially closed door to one of the rooms off the living room.

"Make yourself at home," he says, focusing on me. "Would you like some coffee?"

"Sure, that'd be great," I answer. He still seems on edge.

As he leaves to fetch coffee, I turn my attention toward the living room's flash-screen. *Oh no, there it is*, I think as I see the UCIT logo appear on the screen and hear the usual jarring sound effects that accompany Cryptic.

"I come to you today to make an announcement on behalf of the Outer Commission," the robot says in its monotone voice. *"This evening at 7:00 p.m. Eastern Time, Anya Ahar was..."*

Suddenly I hear a female voice call out, "Well, I guess I should probably..."

I quickly look behind me. I'm jolted from my seat in shock. "Anya! Is that... you?" I stammer. My eyes are seeing but not believing. "What in the world?" I gasp, attempting to catch my breath, dazed beyond belief.

"Yes, it's me, Nicole," she answers calmly.

I turn back toward Dr. Ahar, who is standing in the doorway to the kitchen, his eyes shifting nervously back and forth between me and his daughter.

He then enters the living room and settles the cup of coffee on the table beside me. "I think it's best if I allow the two of you some time alone," he says anxiously as he moves to the front door. He pushes his feet into shoes and pulls on a jacket as he exits the apartment.

“Doctor, wait a minute—” I call out, but too late; he’s gone. “What in the world is going on?” I say, turning back toward Anya.

“I guess I owe you an explanation,” Anya says as she takes a seat across from me but doesn’t lean back. Gone are the horn-rimmed glasses, and her hair is neatly styled and now a few shades lighter.

“Yeah, I think at this point an explanation would probably be very helpful,” I reply sardonically, wondering if I’m travelling through some very strange dream.

She begins by explaining how she’d come to join AXE. “I’d had numerous conversations with Morris Johns when we were at Summit, regarding politics and the future of America. At first I was very impressed by the fact that he believed America’s youth needed to have a voice. I guess you could say, like many young Americans, we’d both become somewhat radical in our way of thinking. The strained relationship with my father left me extremely confused about the meaning of life.

“I truly thought AXE was going to emerge as a massive political entity focusing on youth empowerment, and through forceful but peaceful methods, our message would be heard. But then I began to realize I was terribly mistaken.”

“How so?”

“One afternoon while we were conversing on the Summit University lawns, I saw a side of Morris I hadn’t seen before. He began speaking about how, for our message to be heard, we’d have to create anarchy... sabotage corporations and government view-files, and even blow up buildings. I was taken aback.”

“But yet you agreed to go along with his plan.”

“Yes, but it’s not what you think.”

I settle back on the sofa. “Go ahead, I’m listening.”

“When Morris left for class that afternoon I remained out on the lawn, reviewing a paper I’d been working on for the last few days. I tried my best to concentrate, but what Morris had told me had left me feeling very uneasy. Then a young male jogger with fiery orange hair approached me. He said his name was Macdonald.”

“As in Guardian Macdonald?”

“Correct. You see, he’d been watching Morris. The Outer Commission was well aware what he and Dwight Wagner were up to. In fact, he knew Morris and I had been having these long conversations almost on a daily basis, so he researched my background.”

* * *

“The young man you were speaking with earlier; is he your boyfriend?” Macdonald asked.

“Oh no, he’s just a friend I enjoy conversing with... or at least I thought I did,” Anya replied, frowning suddenly.

“Is there something you’d like to tell me about Mr. Johns?”

“Yes... there is...”

* * *

My mind begins to form a picture. “I get it—the Commission forced you to infiltrate AXE,” I say.

“You’re partly correct. But the Outer Commission didn’t ‘force’ me to do a single thing. It was all my idea. I volunteered. With an election on the horizon I believed it was imperative for the PBA to remain in power, and I knew every time my story was told it would have a great impact on the country and serve as a strike against the MAA.”

Anya describes her follow-up meeting with Macdonald. “I met with him at a secret location, in a warehouse...”

* * *

“Infiltrate AXE? I can’t let you do that, Miss Ahar. It’s way too dangerous,” Macdonald said. “As long as you’re willing to provide testimony, we’ll have these guys locked away in no time.”

“And do you think locking up Dwight Wagner and Morris Johns will calm this current massive wave of disenfranchised youth?” Anya asked.

“It surely won’t, but at least it’ll stop these punks and set an example for others who are considering following in their footsteps.”

“That’s the problem, sir. It’s always the same thing over and over, the good guys versus the bad guys. Have you ever thought for a moment why it is young adults feel so marginalized?”

“Please—enlighten me,” Macdonald urges.

“It all comes down to having a sense of purpose—feeling like one matters in the world.”

“Are you saying youth must be coddled and constantly told how wonderful they are?”

“Not at all. What I’m saying is that we need to be heard; enabled to express ourselves and not just be slaves to the powers that be.”

Macdonald looked thoughtful at that. He nodded. “My superiors at the Outer Commission are more than twice my age,” he said, and added that he had to fight twice as hard to be listened to and accepted. “So I understand what you’re saying and it’s all wonderful, but how is your infiltrating AXE going to help accomplish such a lofty goal?”

“You know how my mother died on that cold December day, don’t you, Guardian Macdonald?”

“Yes, and I must say it’s one of the most tragic stories I’ve ever heard.”

“And that’s why you need to let me do this.”

“With all respect, Miss Ahar, how does your mother’s tragedy relate to bringing down a group of extremists?”

“The tragic story of my mother needs to be told. As a warning sign, it needs to be pounded into the minds of the entire country. And this isn’t just about bringing down extremists; this is about fixing a system that has been broken for way too long. A system that chooses power and greed over love and compassion.”

“How about I speak with the people at UCIT and have them prepare a view-file of your mother’s story?” Macdonald suggested.

“And that would be relaying just another sad story about the War Within. Oh no, for the story to have a real impact, I, as a victim, must do something impactful. I must grab the country’s attention.”

While listening to Anya relay this information, I feel as if my brain is about to jump out of my head and shatter into a thousand pieces. “So, Macdonald and the Commission actually went along with your plan?” I ask in disbelief.

“It took some coaxing on Macdonald’s part, but his superiors gave in. Macdonald made me aware that the Commission actually dreaded the idea of an MAA government.”

“Your behavior? That empty look in your eyes? That cold, unemotional disconnect? Your dedication to that doctrine? Are you telling me it was all an act?”

“Some of it was. Once the plan was in place, the Commission had me under strict twenty-four-hour surveillance. They even knew the president was allowing me to work on the LRS cure while in prison. I’m just sorry I had to act that way toward you, especially considering how strongly you believed in me. And I’m sorry your father’s life was placed in harm’s way. But it was the only way.”

“And *your* father?”

“For years I truly despised everything my father stood for. But after he faked his suicide and worked with Hunter Talbot on the LRS cure, it made me do a lot of soul searching, and I came to realize he was a far better man than I’d given him credit for.”

“I have to ask you, Anya. If I didn’t find you here today, would you have expected me to go through the rest of my days thinking you’d been executed?”

“Frankly, that was the plan. They didn’t even want my father to know about this, but in the end I insisted. Please understand, this isn’t about me. It’s about the future of America. That being said, I’m truly glad you did find out.”

“So are you planning to live in disguise, secluded away in this apartment for the rest of your life?”

“No,” she answers with a delicate smile. “The Commission will assist me in beginning a new life far away from America. It’ll mean a complete overhaul of my identity, but I’m prepared.”

“My Lord, Anya. To think of what you’ve done and what you’re about to do for this country—the sacrifice—it’s incredible,” I say,

shaking my head in disbelief.

"I just hope I've made a difference," she replies softly.

"And what about your father?" I ask.

"Yeah, what about your father?" says Dr. Ahar, standing in the doorway. "Don't you dare tell me this is goodbye."

"Of course not," Anya answers. Beaming, she walks over to Jack and embraces him. "Once my new life has been established, we'll have plenty of opportunities to make up for lost time."

"Well, I guess I should be off," I say as waves of emotion fill the apartment. "But before I go, I'd love for you to have this, Anya," I add, handing her my Liberty Bell pendant. "This was given to me by the Strategic Council the day I was officially named incoming president."

"Wow... it's exquisite," she replies, studying the pendant. "Are you certain you want to give this to *me*?"

"If there's one person in this country who deserves to wear such a badge of honor, it's you, Anya."

Entering the back of my grand-electro, I'm immediately startled by a man hurriedly climbing in behind me. "Don't fret, Nicole. It's only me," says Macdonald as he slides in beside me. "I hope you don't mind, but I took the liberty of giving your driver a few bucks to get himself a bite to eat."

I look at him, confused, my mind still reeling. "I can't believe this. Your Commission fixed this entire election," I say, staring straight ahead.

"Fixed? I think you might be giving us a little too much credit. It was that young lady you just visited who somehow knew how to penetrate the soul of your country," Macdonald responds, chomping away on his gum. "And America clearly decided that *you* were the person to guide the way. Nobody was forced to do a single thing. And as far as our Commission is concerned, one could say we just helped set the stage," he adds. "So now, pay that debt and it'll be clear sailing. But then, you'll no longer have the privilege of seeing my handsome face." He grins. "Best of luck, Nicole." He slithers out

of the electro and walks away, mockingly humming the American national anthem.

As a person who prides herself on honesty, to say I'm left feeling conflicted would be a massive understatement, but I ask myself, what would exposing this shocking story do? Possibly start a series of countrywide riots? Or perhaps another War Within?

CHAPTER 30

With every passing second, minute, and day, Jessica Westgale sees her life pass before her. Still completely isolated with absolutely no contact with anyone, she's certain that whoever brought her here isn't coming back. *Perhaps they're dead*, she thinks, not wanting to believe they simply left her here to die. Why leave her everything she needs to be rather comfortable for quite some time, if they intend to let her die? She's lacking in only one very important thing: her freedom.

A strange buzzing sound draws her attention toward the front of the room. She realizes it's coming from the large flash-screen. Within seconds a bright flash appears, and she hears the now hauntingly familiar opening notes to *Starlight Serenade*. Seconds later, a view-file begins to play. There she is on the screen, dancing with Cobra Pix.

"Cobra! Cobra! Cobra!" she screams frantically. "Get me the hell out of here, now!" The view-file continues to play, showing her and Cobra floating across the room in unison. She scurries over to the door. "Open this damn door!" she yells at the top of her lungs, relentlessly pounding on it. Succumbing to dismay, she falls to the floor, weeping uncontrollably.

When the view-file concludes, Cobra's image takes over the screen. "Hello, Jessica," he says calmly. "Now, I owe you an apology, my dear."

Still reeling in shock, Jessica slowly rises and staggers over to the chair in front of the flash-screen.

"I'm sorry to have neglected you all this time, but sometimes there just isn't enough hours in the day," he adds.

"Where the hell am I?" Jessica shouts at the screen.

"Ah... please excuse me. What an awful host I am. Welcome back to Pinia, Jessica," Cobra replies with a smile.

"Pinia? It can't be," she says in disbelief, gazing around the room. "How—wait a second. Oh my God... have I been set up? Please don't tell me Shadow is involved in this."

"Don't be silly, my dear. That young man is completely enamored with you. The love the two of you share is beyond extraordinary."

"Then how and why in the world did I end up here?"

"Now, in due time, I promise to answer your questions," he replies. "Since you've been cooped up in that room for way too long, why don't I have my assistant come and get you out of there and escort you to the courtyard, where we can have a nice chat."

When Victor, Cobra's newly appointed assistant, comes to escort her from the confines of the room—which is on the second floor of Cobra's palace, she notes—she's surprised by his kindness. "He's waiting for you," says Victor as he hands her a wool sweater. "It's a little chilly this afternoon, so you might want to put this on."

As Jessica and the guards reach the courtyard, all she can think of is Shadow and the many lovely dinners the two of them enjoyed in this very enclosure. She recalls how after dinner they'd gaze endlessly into the starry Pinian sky, and relay to each other their innermost thoughts. There's one particular conversation she'll always remember. One which, at this point in time, seems extremely relevant.

* * *

"How do you do it, Shadow?" Jessica asked as they sat gazing at the winking stars.

"Do what, honey?" he asked in reply.

"Not fear for your personal safety, considering the political unrest in this country."

"I know it sounds crazy, but I don't fret over politics or the idea of war. My father, on the other hand, is so paranoid that his assistants are ordered to wear spy-stars twenty-four hours a day."

"Spy-stars?"

"Yeah, they're tiny star-shaped sound- and view-chips that enable Cobra to listen in and watch every move his men make. For me, my only fear is for your safety, especially after Jolio attempted to kill you. If something were to happen to you... I don't know how I would carry on," Shadow said tenderly.

* * *

Now, all Jessica can think of is how Shadow and her family back home probably think she's dead. She sits down directly across from Cobra, takes a deep breath, and glowers at him.

"Please pour a cup of cocoa for the lovely Miss Westgale," Cobra orders Victor. Jessica studies Victor and notices a tiny silver star on his lapel. *That must be a spy-star.* She accepts the beverage, and decides to lose the glower. *There's absolutely no point in being difficult.*

"Now, as promised, let me enlighten you as to how you ended up back in the promised land of Pinia," Cobra says after taking a sip of his cocoa. "And again I do apologize for not addressing you sooner upon your arrival. I realize the situation must have been somewhat traumatic for you, but I at least hope the amenities were to your liking."

"Actually, I was quite comfortable, thank you," Jessica responds, disguising her anger and fear with formality.

"Great, because as I explained to you during our *prior* meetings, I have no intention of bringing harm to you, Jessica. I want you to feel welcomed in Pinia."

"I don't understand, sir. You say you don't want to harm me, yet you had me kidnapped in New York City and brought all the way here. Do you realize how Shadow and my family must be suffering right now? And furthermore, do you realize the suffering you're causing me?"

“That’s totally up to you, Jessica. I’m doing my best to make you feel welcomed. There really is no need for you to feel anxious or afraid.”

“Please, Cobra, get me on a plane and let me go back home.”

“I couldn’t do that to you.”

Jessica hesitates and looks at him in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“In due time, you’ll understand.”

“At least tell me how the hell I ended up here. I don’t remember a damn thing... Wait a second—Kolton. It had to be. Backstage in the auditorium. The glass of fruit punch he poured for me had to have eventually knocked me out.”

“Ah, very good detective work, my dear. One must be careful when accepting drinks from mad chemists.”

“My Lord... his relationship with Luanda—you had to have orchestrated it. You had him under your control.”

“Tsk-tsk, you’re not the detective I thought you were,” Cobra says with a smirk. “Believe me, Kolton Rollins was more than willing to do his part. Poor soul. He was a brilliant man who became consumed by misplaced guilt, which eventually led to his demise.” Cobra nods to his assistant as Victor refills his cup. “Imagine learning that something *you* created was used to kill your siblings, when all the time you thought your creation was being made to kill your enemy.”

“What do you mean his *demise*? Is he dead?”

“Sadly, Kolton decided to take his own life.”

“Tell me what the hell is going on!” Jessica demands, losing her patience.

“In due time, Jessica,” Cobra says calmly. “That’s the thing with you youngsters today; you have absolutely no regard for the process of discovery. You’re always in such a rush to know everything right away. Personally, I just don’t see any enjoyment in that.”

“Why are you holding me captive?” Jessica shouts. “Is it a ransom you’re looking for? Or is this your sick way of getting revenge against my father, or Shadow?”

“Whoa, I just hate seeing you worked up like this, my darling. I think it’d be best to pick this up again tomorrow,” Cobra says as he waves

Victor toward Jessica. Her glower returns as Victor eases her out of her chair. “Be gentle with her,” Cobra says calmly. “Miss Westgale is a very special young lady, and she must be treated as such.”

He reaches into the bag slung over his shoulder and pulls out a white box wrapped with a red and blue bow. “This is for you,” he says with a smile as he hands Jessica the box. She studies it closely. “No need to worry, Jessica, there’s nothing ticking in there,” he adds with a chuckle. “It’s merely a welcome gift.”

On the way back to her room, all kinds of thoughts and questions whirl around in Jessica’s mind. She now knows how she got to Pinia, but why is she here? What kind of game is Cobra playing? Despite Cobra’s words, she continues to fear for her life.

* * *

In another part of Pinia, Trevor Larsen has been holding a week-long farewell carnival for the children of northern Pinia. “Okay, listen up,” Trevor calls out. “I want everyone to go to your stations and gather around your leader, so you can receive your special gift packages. Miss Jessica and Mr. Shadow sent them all the way from America,” he says with a lump in his throat. Just a day ago, he had learned that Jessica was missing.

“Mr. Trevor, do you know how come Miss Jessica has stopped sending me flash-messages? And why she doesn’t answer mine anymore? Is she angry at me?” little Ulu asks Trevor. Sadness pours out in her voice. “Doesn’t she care about me anymore?”

Trevor thinks quickly. “Of course she still does, Ulu. Miss Jessica and everybody else on our team love you and all the other children very much. She’s just been really busy back in America. But look at all the gifts she and Mr. Shadow sent over.”

The children shout with joy as they open the gift packages, which contain clothing, Laser Flash Frenzy games, toy Sortar dragons, soccer balls and equipment, and a new product from Vexton-Tech called Sky-Scope—a miniature, lightweight yet enormously powerful telescope.

“Wow, this is really neat,” exclaims Ulu, running over to Trevor to show him what she received.

“Whoa, that’s a Sky-Scope, Ulu. Now you’ll be able to see right into space, and look at the moon and the stars,” Trevor explains as he playfully lifts her into the air.

“What about spaceships?” she asks with a wide smile.

“Of course,” Trevor answers as he gently whirls her through the air.

“And heaven?” she asks, cocking her head in curiosity.

“Sure. You can see whatever you like, Ulu,” Trevor replies. His heart races, and tears well up in his eyes as he thinks of Jessica.

* * *

After taking a hot bath, Jessica stares long and hard at the box Cobra presented to her. *What could it be?* she keeps asking herself. *Should I, or shouldn't I?* Finally she removes the bow, then slowly lifts the lid of the box. Reaching inside, her fingers touch a book; she pulls out her father’s most recent autobiography. His photo on the front cover generates a rush of sadness that runs through her like ice water. Having been the driving force behind the book’s creation, it triggers a lot of memories for Jessica.

* * *

“Come on, Dad, the world should get to know the real William Westgale,” Jessica said as they worked on the contents.

“Yeah, but don’t you think telling them my favorite show on the World Connect is actually a cartoon might just be a little too much information?” Her father smiled.

“Now, now, who says there’s anything wrong with the president of the United States watching weekend marathons of Sandy the Talking Cat?” Jessica chuckled.

“And this thing about how I accept ties from strangers. Do you really think it’d be wise to print that?”

“Hmm... seeing as you now have about seven hundred ties, yeah, maybe it’d be a good idea to leave that one out.” They both laughed.

* * *

That annoying buzz from the flash-screen abruptly brings Jessica back to the present.

Cobra appears, dressed in his red and black Iron Lotus uniform. “Well now, I’m thrilled to see you’re enjoying my gift,” he says. “It’s surely not on *my* must-read list, but, as they say, ‘different strokes for different folks.’ Hopefully it’ll help to ease your mind.”

“Are you enjoying this game?” Jessica snaps at the screen.

“Yes. I’m elated to have you here as my guest, if that’s what you’re asking,” Cobra answers as he moves toward a vast collection of weapons and military equipment. “This is the actual laser-rifle my son Hadar was carrying when he was killed in Oria,” he says as he picks up the gun and silently stares at it for about fifteen seconds. “And this helmet, it belonged to my second eldest son, Norro. Do you see this hole?” he says, holding the helmet up in the air for Jessica to see. “This hole is from the laser-blast that was aimed directly at his skull. Killed him instantly. American power at its most deadly. Norro was actually hoping to one day play professional soccer in America. He was by far the best player Pinia had ever produced.” Cobra then removes his military cap, rubs his bald head, and sinks into a large easy chair.

“Do you think I’m that naïve, Cobra? I know this is all about avenging the deaths of your sons, and getting revenge by making my father think I’m dead,” Jessica says, her voice shrill. “Why don’t you just go ahead and kill me? By now the entire world thinks I’m dead anyway!”

“I gave you my word,” he shouts, rising from his chair. “You will not be harmed. I will see you tomorrow morning,” he calmly adds.

The screen shuts off, leaving her to linger in dread. Deep in her heart, this time around, Jessica’s finding it hard to take Cobra at his word.

When she resumes scanning through her father’s autobiography and reaches the photo section of the book, she begins to shake in horror. Large red and black Xs have been stroked through photos of her father, mother, Director Perry, and other Westgale associates. The photos of her are untouched. “Oh

my God... what in the world is this!" she cries. Turning the page to the final photo, her horror escalates when she sees a red and black *X* stroked over an American flag.

CHAPTER 31

After announcing that the initial shipment of fera-bean biofuel is now in Washington, Energy Secretary Harrison Deacon looks over at Westgale and me with a broad smile. “Simply amazing!” he exclaims as his staff let out an enormous cheer. “And the whole process went as smooth as can be,” he adds as he walks toward the robo-cargo plane.

“We’re gonna do it,” Westgale says to me, placing his hand on my shoulder. “There was a time when I highly doubted we’d meet that deadline, but we’re gonna do it, Nicole,” he repeats excitedly. Then his mood swings. “I only wish Jessica could witness this country regain its full independence. It’s not fair, Nicole. It’s simply not fair.”

“It surely isn’t, and it’s all because of me, sir. I have to take full responsibility,” says Shadow, who has just arrived on site to join in the celebration of this monumental event.

“That’s not true, Shadow. Kolton Rollins and whoever the hell he was associated with were on a mission of vengeance. Personally, I don’t think anything was going to stop them,” Westgale replies.

“I still can’t help but wonder how long Jessica had been targeted,” Shadow says with a raised brow.

“Why? Do you think this was in the works prior to Kolton meeting her?” I ask.

“I don’t know, Nicole, but I agree with President Westgale: I think this entire thing runs deeper than just Kolton Rollins,” Shadow replies.

“And that’s exactly why I have all the top law enforcement people from across the country on this,” Westgale chimes in. “We’ll get to the bottom of it. I promise you, Shadow.”

* * *

“Let me get this straight, Miss Taylor. Are you telling me you were paid off for disclosing that information?” Gil Robichaud says to a jet-lagged Carly Taylor, who had just flown in from Germany after watching recent events pertaining to Kolton Rollins unfold on UCIT.

“Yes. However, it’s not what you think. I was telling the truth. That money simply enabled me to get out of America and begin a new life,” Carly replies, nervously twisting her fingers together.

“To get out of America?”

“That’s correct, Agent Robichaud. After coming forward with such damning information against such powerful people, I believed my safety would be compromised if I were to remain here in America.”

“Although I don’t think it was very wise of you to do such a thing, I understand,” Gil says.

“When I saw that mask being shown at your press conference, I remembered it right away. The man who paid me the money was wearing the exact same type of mask. By accident the driver turned a light on, and that’s when I really got a good look at it.”

“But you said the man was much heavier than Mr. Rollins, correct?”

“Oh yes. From the photos I’ve seen, I know for certain it wasn’t him.”

“Did you ever think to ask why they so badly wanted you to divulge the information?”

“I have no idea why, but there’s no doubt in my mind they desperately wanted the PBA to retain leadership of the country.”

“I don’t know if we should trust *anything* this woman tells us,” a frustrated Champ Sutton says as he reviews the details of Gil’s interview a short time later.

“Well, at least she handed over the money, which says something for her credibility,” Gil says, pacing Sutton’s office floor.

“Okay, let’s suppose she’s being completely honest with us,” Sutton says. “The first question we need to ask is: who would’ve paid her to come forward with such condemning information on the MAA? And why?”

“Well, when you think about it, we’re talking about Levin and Pemberton. Not the most endearing people on the face of the earth.”

“I agree. But if we tie this to Jessica’s kidnapping, I think we have something extremely large and sinister,” Champ responds as he pulls up his file on the Spirit of Hades. “Damn. Other than what Morris Johns has told us, and the fact they were the ones who covertly sold the helcin to Sims, we have so little on these guys. Now, was the lab able to match the helcin with the stuff used against the Pinian government?”

“The tests were inconclusive,” Gil says, running his hands through his hair in frustration.

“Hmm... what if whoever paid Carly did so for *political* reasons?” Champ says.

“That makes sense,” Gil answers. “I hope I’m not speaking out of turn here, but I know if I were involved with an extremist group intent on attacking America, I’d much rather have the PBA running the country as well.”

“And in order to settle things down, you’d probably want to eliminate Blackheart, too,” Champ adds.

“Are you thinking Rollins and whoever he was involved with killed Blackheart?” Gil asks.

“Well, once the bomb analysis results come back, we’ll have our answer,” Champ replies.

As Gil prepares to head back to his office, he receives a flash-message from National Investigation Director Martin Stevens, urgently requesting that they meet. He adjusts his schedule and informs his driver.

When he arrives at the National Investigation headquarters a few blocks from the Freedom Home, Gil is immediately escorted into Stevens’s office.

“Thanks for getting here so promptly,” says Stevens. He looks distracted, his movements quick, driven by anxiety.

“Of course. You said it was urgent,” Gil replies, drawing his eyebrows together.

Stevens directs him to the chair across from him, then taps a few buttons on his flash-pad. “This could be the break we’re looking for,” he says as his eyes look toward his office doorway. “Ah, come on in, Mr. Verzi,” he says as one of his agents appears with a dark-haired, twenty-something man.

The young man takes the other chair in front of Stevens’s desk and explains how he recognized Kolton Rollins from the World Connect. “I recall seeing him several times,” Verzi says as Rollins’s picture is put up on the flash-screen at the front of the room.

“Can you recall *where* you’ve seen him?” Stevens asks.

“In my homeland of Pinia.”

“Pinia. I’ll be darned,” Gil says, looking at Stevens.

“Where exactly in Pinia did you see him?” Stevens asks.

“I used to work for an electro service at the country’s central airport. On a few occasions I offered to drive Mr. Rollins, but he always declined. Instead a large black grand-electro used to pick him up. I’m sure it was an Iron Lotus vehicle.”

“Are you certain it’s the same man?” Gil asks as he takes out his flash-pad and begins making notes.

“Yes. I’m one hundred percent certain. I recognize the burn mark on his cheek. He usually had a beard covering it, but the last few times I saw him, it was clearly visible.”

“Do you recall when you first saw him?” Stevens asks.

“It had to be just over a couple of years ago. Not long after the Battle of Oria.”

“And the last time?”

“About six months ago. Right before I moved to America.”

“Did he ever say anything to you?” Gil asks.

“Actually, usually he did his best to avoid me. But the last time I saw him, his ride was late so we ended up conversing.” Verzi relays the conversation.

"Hello, sir. How are you today?" Verzi asked Kolton.

"It's just another day, young man," Kolton said gruffly.

"Not for me. I just received my plane ticket, and next week I'll be America-bound."

"Ah, you're visiting America?"

"Oh no. I'm planning to live in America. And I can't wait," Verzi said with excitement.

"Now, what in the world would make you do something like that?" Kolton asked sarcastically.

"It's always been a dream of mine. My cousin owns three restaurants in Baltimore, and he's asked me to help him manage them."

"So, soon you'll be living the American dream," Kolton says, looking Verzi in the eyes. "Oh, good ol' America, she can be rather alluring—much like an extremely attractive woman." He snickers. "Her welcoming smile, radiant eyes, luxuriant hair, and soft voice can really draw you in, making you feel as though heaven is right before your very eyes. But I suggest you be very careful, young man; sometimes underneath all that beauty and sweetness, there's nothing but a cold, heartless bitch."

* * *

"And that was it. By that time his car had arrived and he was off," Verzi finishes.

"Hmm, that is very interesting indeed," Gil says thoughtfully.

"Thank you for coming forward, Mr. Verzi," Stevens says. "I'm going to have the agent who escorted you here ask you a few more questions, if that's okay with you."

"That's fine. I'll gladly do whatever I can to help."

After Mr. Verzi is escorted from the room, Gil notices Martin Stevens deep in thought. "What is it, Martin? Do you believe this guy?" he asks.

"Yes, I believe him," Stevens replies. "What's really got me is the idea that I've been wrong all along."

"Wrong about what?"

“SOH, the Spirit of Hades. I was certain they had nothing to do with Pinia and the Iron Lotus, but now I guess I was completely wrong.”

“That makes both of us, Martin. I used to argue with Agent Gallio about that very thing. Nick used to insist Cobra Pix was behind it all, and like a fool I would always shoot him down,” Gil says, then notices the NI director is intently studying his flash-pad. “What is it?” he asks.

“It’s the interview one of my men conducted with Luanda Rollins. It has me somewhat perplexed,” Stevens says, his attention again drawn to his flash-pad.

“How so?” Gil asks. Stevens describes the interview.

* * *

“Was your husband ever abusive toward you?” the agent asked.

“Oh, no. Kolton always treated me with respect,” Luanda answered.

“Besides the anger he displayed toward Direct Aim, did you ever see him become angry on other occasions?”

Luanda hesitated. “Well... there was one time.”

“Please tell me about it, ma’am.”

“It was after Jessica came to see me and asked me to visit Shadow in the hospital. I didn’t want to because I knew it would bring a lot of heartache to my son. I felt really strongly about not doing it,” she informs the agent.

“Was Kolton angry to hear you decided to visit your son?”

“No, it was the opposite. He insisted I do it. When I kept refusing to do so, he became furious with me. I was really surprised to see him act in such a way.”

* * *

“Hmm, why would it have been so important to Rollins for Luanda to reconnect with her son?” Gil ponders aloud.

“After all we’ve now learned, it’s become clear Cobra Pix definitely had some sort of agenda,” Stevens replies.

The next morning, Gil and Stevens call an emergency Freedom Home meeting. Shadow Pix is flown in from New York to join us. First comes the news that the bomb analysis has made it clear that Kolton Rollins was responsible for the murder of the extremist Blackheart.

“Although we can’t confirm anything at this point, we’re strongly considering the idea that the two former SOH members had some kind of a falling-out, leading up to the murder,” says Martin Stevens.

When Gil tells the group about Kolton Rollins’s visits to Pinia, Westgale appears very agitated. “Do you know anything about this?” he asks Shadow.

“The first time I ever met Kolton Rollins was when my mother introduced us to each other,” Shadow responds in disbelief. “If he was meeting with our militia, it’s news to me.”

“Did your father keep many secrets from you?” I ask.

“From what I’ve recently learned, it appears he did,” Shadow answers solemnly.

“How would you say your father truly feels about America?” I ask.

“Directly following the Battle of Oria, I know my father definitely wanted to avenge the deaths of my brothers, but to my knowledge he never made an actual attempt to seek that revenge. My father is a complex man who can be so many different people,” Shadow replies, running his hands over his face.

“This is crazy,” Director Perry says loudly. He undoes his tie and walks to the front of the conference room. “It’s now become obvious to everyone in this room that it was your father who was behind the Spirit of Hades.” His voice rises in anger. “Which, by the way, was an American extremist group with the sole *purpose* of destroying this country. How can you sit in this room and lie to us about your father’s contempt toward America!”

“Enough, David!” Westgale interjects forcefully.

“It’s okay, sir,” Shadow responds. “I fully understand where Director Perry’s coming from. After learning how my father treated my mother so terribly all those years ago, it’s now become clear to me that he’s capable of anything. As far as SOH was concerned,

obviously he kept me in the dark because he knew I would never support something like that.”

“Everybody just take a deep breath. I think we need to reel this in a little,” Westgale says calmly. “We’re talking about a man who, although at some point in his life despised America, is now helping to save it with his generosity. I like to think people can change. I won’t condemn the man until we have evidence that he’s actually involved in this craziness.”

“Do you believe your father’s a changed man, Shadow? Is that why you left your homeland, because you believe your father has changed for the better?” Perry asks sarcastically.

“I won’t accept this, David,” Westgale shouts. “This brave young man saved my life and deeply loved my daughter. He doesn’t deserve to be treated in such—”

“I sincerely hope my father has changed, Director Perry,” Shadow answers over top of Westgale. “But unfortunately, I can’t tell you he has.”

“I’m sorry to have gotten carried away, Mr. President. And to think *I* was the person trying so hard to convince *you* to make the Pinian deal,” Director Perry says as he and Westgale sit in the presidential lounge following the meeting. “After what’s transpired around here over the last year, I guess my suspicions are getting the best of me.”

“That’s totally understandable.” Westgale sighs. “And I agree that learning Kolton Rollins and SOH had ties to the Iron Lotus is reason for concern. But as you’re well aware, there’ve been many instances where Cobra’s men have gone rogue... Let’s just hope this is one of those.”

CHAPTER 32

“Good morning, Jessica,” Cobra says while sitting in front of a large plate of scrambled eggs and toast. Jessica rubs her tired eyes and looks up at the flash-screen. “I hope you slept well. Your eggs and toast are on the way,” he adds, lifting a glass of orange juice to sip. “My father used to always tell me about the importance of a good, hearty breakfast. And you know I tried my best to impart that wisdom to Shadow, but as you’re well aware, he much prefers a quinoa fruit salad over a stack of pancakes.” Cobra laughs.

Jessica remains silent as she glares at the screen, wishing she could jump through it and take that knife from the table and—but again, as difficult as it is, she realizes she must suppress her anger and actually play this lunatic’s game.

Seconds later, her breakfast arrives. “Thank you, Cobra,” she says, looking at the plate of fluffy golden eggs and crispy toast.

“You eat up. We have a big day today—we’re going into the village,” Cobra informs her as his image slowly fades from the screen.

“Today’s the final day of the carnival,” Cobra tells Jessica as they ride in the back of an Iron Lotus electro-van. “Your associates did such a wonderful job, finishing the renovation of the community center. I thought it’d be nice for you to see the final results of your team’s hard work.”

“Thanks. That’s very thoughtful of you,” Jessica says, continuing to play along. *He must be wondering why I haven’t said anything about the book.*

As the van approaches the community center, Jessica gazes through the tinted window in wonder. The formerly run-down structure is now an appealing building. “Wow,” she exclaims, “it came out just as we hoped.”

“Pull up toward the front of the building,” Cobra orders Victor. “Look, read the sign,” he urges Jessica. The sign on the building reads *The Jessica Westgale Community Center*.

“Oh my,” Jessica says. “That is such an honor.”

“I wouldn’t have had it any other way,” Cobra says calmly.

The man’s even more insane than I thought, Jessica thinks.

As the van continues on along a stretch of sandy roads, Jessica looks up at the sky in the distance. High up, being carried by a strong gust of wind, a remote-controlled, dragon-like kite soars across the Pinian skyline. When she looks downward toward the field, she sees a running man, trailed by a group of children. She can easily tell by his long strides that it’s Trevor.

“Aw, the innocence of childhood,” Cobra murmurs.

Jessica’s eyes immediately grow teary when she notices one of the children running with a limp, having difficulty keeping up with the others. It’s frail little Ulu. Jessica remembers how she injured herself only a few days before she returned to America. She then flashes back to the day she said goodbye to the sweet orphan who always found a way to brighten up even the darkest of days.

* * *

“I’m really going to miss you, Miss Jessica!” Ulu cried.

“Hey, I might be leaving Pinia, but you’ll always be with me, Ulu. Right here,” Jessica said, placing her hand over her heart. “Now, you make sure you battle like a trooper and take care of that leg, okay?”

“Janet’s been checking it every day,” she answered, referring to one of Jessica’s fellow aid workers who was also a paramedic.

“Great. Now that you have a flash-pad we can send each other all kinds of flash-messages and view-files.”

“We can be friends forever,” Ulu said with a smile as she fell into Jessica’s arms.

* * *

When the van suddenly hits a bump in the road, it jolts Jessica back to the present. The kite has now ascended to a point where it appears to be one with the sun. Trevor and the children are standing back, watching in awe. Some of the children have decided to get a closer look with their Sky-Scopes.

“Aw, it’s so lovely to see the children, so carefree and full of life,” Cobra crows, then he orders Victor to return to the compound. “Why do we have to get old?” he adds, taking one more look back.

“I knew it! I knew it!” Ulu hollers at the top of her voice.

“Whoa, what is it, Ulu?” Trevor asks, turning away from guiding the kite.

Ulu abruptly crumples to the ground and lies there, unmoving.

“What the—Janet!” Trevor shouts.

Janet runs over to check the child’s vital signs. “She’s breathing,” she announces, “but we must get her to the hospital!”

Trevor uses his flash-pad to contact Medical Air Emergency.

“I must admit your team is composed of some of the finest young people I’ve ever come across. Just like you, they’re filled with such compassion,” Cobra says to Jessica.

“That’s true of most young Americans,” Jessica responds.

“Seeing what a terrific young man your friend Trevor is actually brings back memories of my sons,” Cobra says as he taps a button on his flash-pad, bringing up a flash-screen in the back of the van. “This is Hadar after saving a mother and her child from a house fire. As you can see, he needed to be hospitalized for smoke inhalation and a number of burns.” The view-file continues. “And here’s Sye and Norro helping out a disabled farmer whose three sons had recently

lost their lives in a farming accident.”

Jessica senses Cobra’s anger is now overriding his sentimentality. Although she doesn’t show it, her fear is growing by the second. She’s terrified by the thought of where this is all leading. “I’m sure they were fine young men,” she says softly. “I can see why you’re so proud of them.”

“Oh they were, my dear Jessica,” Cobra answers firmly. “And that’s why the time has come for your country to pay!” he snarls. “Zap-grenades may have completely singed off my hair and eyebrows in the Battle of Oria, but these incredible young men you’re seeing were murdered—murdered by William Westgale and the United States of America! And in honor of the Sortar Dragon, the time has come for their murders to be avenged!”

“Oh, so that’s why you placed those Xs throughout the book you gave me. You actually think you can destroy America,” Jessica says with a snicker, no longer content to play along. “I’m sure you realize you aren’t the first person to make such a threat.”

“Oh, I’m well aware I’m not the first—but I guarantee you, I will be the last!” he shouts. His scowl deepens and the veins in his powerful neck appear ready to burst.

The van stops in front of Cobra’s palace, saving Jessica from more of Cobra’s vitriol—she hopes. Two guards remove her from the van.

“How many times must I tell you to be gentle with her,” Cobra scolds them as he also disembarks. “Miss Westgale is not the enemy.”

He turns to the guards as they enter the courtyard. “That’ll be all, gentlemen.”

“If I’m not the enemy, then why are you doing this to me?”

Cobra gives her a cold smile. “It’s very simple, Jessica. You’re here so I can personally assure your safety while America is once and for all put out of its misery.”

“Well let me tell you, Cobra, I’m as American as a person can be, and I’m damn proud of it.”

“Showing loyalty to one’s homeland is a most admirable trait, even if that homeland happens to be a shameful, dark pit of

corruption and hypocrisy,” Cobra says smoothly. “But you, Jessica, you’re like a ray of ceaseless light.”

She ignores the compliment. “I find it interesting that you’re more than willing to do business with that ‘dark pit of corruption.’”

“Befriending and gaining the trust of one’s enemy always eases the course for deception—and destruction, for that matter.”

“So tell me: how do you plan to unleash your wrath on America?” she demands. “That militia of yours will be lucky if it can wipe out a small suburban neighborhood before being blown to smithereens.” Jessica laughs, attempting to hide her terror.

“Ah, spoken like a proud American. I really do admire that about you. But you see, Jessie, one must never underestimate will and determination, especially when they’re accompanied by a well-coordinated plan. And I must tell you President Woi and I have really covered our tracks.”

Jessica thinks for a moment. “Woi and the HKM are part of this plan of yours?” she responds in disbelief.

“Why are you so shocked, my dear? For decades your government has told its people the HKM was coming to get them, so President Woi figured it was time to make their wish come true. And I’m more than pleased to join him.”

“I don’t believe you. I think this is some sick fantasy of yours,” Jessica huffs. “You’re bluffing.”

Cobra looks at her for a moment, then taps a few buttons on his flash-pad. “Come,” he says, and leads her back to the front drive, where the electro-van again waits.

Jessica stops dead and crosses her arms. “Where are you taking me now?” she demands.

“There you go again; so impatient.” He waits while Victor opens the back door, then sweeps his arm toward it, indicating she should get in. He climbs in after her, and moments later they are driving the length of the expansive compound.

Eventually the van stops in front of a fenced-in, heavily guarded warehouse. “All right, here we are,” Cobra says. He sounds excited. At a wave from Cobra, one of the guards enters a

code on his flash-pad, and the wide gate in the fence surrounding the warehouse opens. The van drives slowly inside and stops. Cobra, then Jessica climb out.

Cobra looks up at the sky and throws his head back, arms outstretched. “Oh mighty Sortar, may your undying powers soon damn the sinners to hell,” he calls out. Jessica gapes at him, petrified. It’s as if he’s suddenly in a trance. *What could be in that building?*

Lowering his arms and head, he taps his flash-pad a few times, and, presto, the warehouse door opens. Jessica gasps as she sees bag after bag of heart-shaped green pills.

“What—what are *you* doing with those?” she asks, wide-eyed.

“They are special,” Cobra says as he picks up a bag and stares at it with reverence. “A miracle. Amazing, how the same mineral that can be utilized to substantially prolong life can also be used to destroy it within minutes.”

“Is your plan to get all Americans to overdose on drugs?” Jessica scoffs.

“Ha-ha. Now, that would be interesting,” Cobra muses. “But I prefer a much more direct and potent method of annihilation. If you only knew the laughs Woi and I have shared over the fact your inept law enforcement people believed Woi was interested in these pills as drugs. America, outsmarted by the HKM again!” Cobra crows.

“Thirty years ago, when the HKM first purchased these drugs from that fat-faced Edgar Fryman, HKM scientists knew their real value wasn’t as narcotics, but rather as an extremely powerful bomb-making agent. And with Kolton Rollins’s expertise, we found a way to ensure America’s end.” With a smirk etched upon his face, Cobra describes how Kolton Rollins came to join him in his quest to destroy America.

* * *

“This Rollins guy is the real deal,” said Jolio, who had been sent to America to search for a highly qualified bomb specialist. “He wants to see America turned to ash even more than we do. Trust me,

Cobra, this guy is the man for the job. The funds are in place for him to go forward and lead the Spirit of Hades, and just say the word and I'll get him a load of green hearts so he can start his testing."

"I'm placing my trust in you, Jolio. But the testing, it'll need to be done only here on Pinian soil," Cobra said. "Now, did you also make it clear to him that he must romance Luanda and eventually convince her to reestablish contact with Shadow?"

"It's a done deal. But I have to ask you about Shadow."

"Somewhere along the way, my son forgot what it meant to be a true Pinian warrior, to honor the greatness of Pinia and the spirit of the Sortar Dragon. In order to accomplish my goal, my son must be banished from the Iron Lotus, but for public perception purposes, it must happen of his own accord."

"But if he's in America when we execute our plan there's a good chance he'll be..."

"I will pray for him, Jolio."

* * *

Overwhelmed by what she's just learned, Jessica shunts everything to the back of her mind to process later, and focuses on the bomb. "And do you think my father and his people are just going to stand by and let you attack our country?" Then it dawns on her. "Wait a second, the biofuel shipments—you're going to—"

"Very good, Jessica." Cobra laughs, the sound more a hiss.

He leads her outside to another, much larger warehouse. When Jessica enters she sees rows and rows of large storage tanks. "Welcome to the world of fera-bean biofuel," Cobra says. "In fact, we have several more of these buildings, filled with the stuff. And when mixed with the green hearts and a little bit of this and that... well, let's just say this biofuel gains a whole new function. One that will turn 'the land of the free' into 'the home of the dead.'" He cackles and pats one of the tanks.

"Oh my God!" Jessica gasps. *This is not just a sick fantasy, this is for real.* "You're a madman!" she cries, and lunges at Cobra, only to be grabbed by his guards.

“Easy, gentlemen,” he says to the guards as they hold Jessica back. They release her and she falls into a chair and cradles her head in her hands. “Miss Westgale has every right to be filled with anger,” Cobra says. “If my father was the idiot that William Westgale is, I’d be outraged as well.”

Jessica lifts her head and glares at Cobra. “What’s your end game?” she yells. “Do you think the rest of the world is going to let you and Woi get away with this?”

“Do you think the rest of the world any longer gives a damn about your nuisance of a country? They’ll be grateful to us,” Cobra says with conviction as he motions for the guards to take Jessica back to the van.

Jessica whirls and yells at Cobra, “And what about me? Are you planning to keep me locked up in that bloody room until I die?”

“What a waste that’d be,” Cobra says as the guards unceremoniously bundle her into the van. He climbs into the van beside her. “In the coming days, once those cargo planes explode over America and our magic potion does its thing, you’ll be free to go wherever you wish. But it is my hope you’ll remain by my side. I could really use a formidable goodwill ambassador.”

Jessica doesn’t respond. Trembling, she stares out the window of the van.

Back in her room, she lifts her father’s autobiography and holds it tightly in her hands. Terrified and feeling helpless, she struggles not to panic. Instead, she reaches down into the inner depths of her soul in search of hope, repeatedly telling herself, *American forces are planning to crush Cobra as I sit here in this prison. My father and his people will stop this lunatic, no matter what it takes. Before dawn, Shadow will be bursting right through that damn steel door.*

She remembers her mother’s words of advice in times of peril: fear exists if we let it, but so can courage.

CHAPTER 33

“Do you have any idea what Ulu was talking about when she yelled, ‘I knew it?’” Janet asks Trevor as they wait in the hospital to be updated on the child’s condition.

Trevor sighs and shrugs. “I have no idea. At the time, the children were all admiring the kite.”

“She’s such a little sweetheart. I really hope she’s going to be okay,” Janet murmurs.

“Ah, here we go,” Trevor says as the attending doctor approaches. “How is she, Doctor?” Trevor asks anxiously, rising. Noticing the somber expression on the doctor’s face, Trevor fears the worst.

“She’s resting comfortably, but there is cause for concern,” the doctor responds.

“Do you know what caused her to pass out?” Janet asks.

“Yes. The child is suffering from a very severe and complex case of pneumonia,” the doctor replies. “I’ve reviewed her medical history and noted that she has a history of respiratory problems, along with prior concerns over malnutrition.”

“Have you been able to reach her sponsor?” asks Trevor.

“My nurse has left several messages, but they’re not responding,” the doctor answers.

“Is her life in jeopardy, Doctor?” Janet asks.

“I’d be lying to you if I said it wasn’t,” he answers with a sigh. “Due to the complexity of Ulu’s condition, I’ve contacted World Medical, and they’re arranging to send us a specialist.”

“Are we going to be okay to wait for the specialist?” Janet asks, her brow puckered in concern.

“We’ll be able to adequately treat her for the time being.”

“Can we see her?” Trevor asks.

“By all means. One at a time though, please.”

“Go ahead, Trevor,” Janet says. “I’ll see her when you’re done.”

Trevor enters the room, trying his best to hold back his tears. “Hey, Ulu, it’s me, Trevor... Let me help you with that,” he says as he notices her tiny arms reaching for a cup of water by her bed.

“Thank you, Mr. Trevor,” she says with a whimper as he hands her the cup. She slowly sips the water from a straw.

“The doctors and nurses are going to get you feeling all better, okay, Ulu?”

“Where’s... where’s Miss... Jessica?” she asks, struggling for each breath.

“Miss Jessica?” Trevor hesitates.

“Yes... I saw her.”

“You saw her? Were you dreaming, Ulu?”

“No, I saw her.”

“You saw her? When? Where?”

“When we were... watching the kite. I saw her... with my Sky-Scope.”

“*Where* did you see her?”

“In a truck... a red and black... truck. Will you bring...” Ulu’s frail voice fades away, and she falls into sleep.

Trevor exits the room, shocked. “Janet,” he calls in a loud whisper.

She scurries over from the waiting area. “Can I see her now?” His expression makes her pause. “What’s wrong, Trevor? You look like you’ve just seen a ghost.”

“Come with me,” he says, and leads her to an area where they can speak in private. Trevor then relays what Ulu said.

“Whoa, that’s incredible.” Janet looks as stunned as he feels. “Do you think it’s for real? Or do you think she’s been hallucinating?”

“I don’t know, but she sounded certain, and she did describe the truck as being red and black.”

“Oh my God... the Iron Lotus. Do you think maybe *they’ve* had her all this time?”

“If what the child’s saying is true, then it sure as hell looks that way,” Trevor says, his tone urgent. “I’m going to contact Shadow.”

* * *

“My office received incredible news just a few hours ago,” an even jollier than usual Harrison Deacon informs Westgale and his associates. “Pix’s people have been able to expedite the process and I’m thrilled to inform you that very soon, those robo-cargo-planes will be reaching every state in the country. And remember, they’ll be arriving simultaneously,” he concludes with a glowing smile.

“Damn good work, Harrison,” Westgale says as the room erupts in applause.

“Phew... thank God. It looks like we’re going to meet that deadline after all,” Director Perry says.

As he and Sutton are about to exit with the rest of the group, Westgale waves them back. When they approach him, he’s staring at his flash-pad. He looks up, his expression a mixture of fear and relief.

Before he has a chance to address them, Gil comes storming into the room, pausing only to close the double doors behind him. “How can we be certain the child isn’t making it up?” he immediately asks Westgale.

“She could be, Gil, but we’re going to take the position she isn’t,” Westgale answers as he taps the flash-pad, alerting National Investigation Director Martin Stevens.

“What’s going on?” Perry and Sutton ask simultaneously. Westgale tells them of Ulu’s revelation.

“My Lord. What if Pix has been behind Jessica’s abduction all along?” says a stunned Dave Perry.

“That just wouldn’t make sense,” Gil interjects. “Why would he do such a thing when he’s on the verge of helping to save our country from extinction?”

“Revenge,” Perry answers, gazing at Westgale.

“Oh, come on, David; if Pix wanted to kill Jessie, he would have had it done months ago, when she was living in Pinia,” Westgale

replies, waving a hand in dismissal. "As I told you before, this has to be the work of a few of his men gone rogue."

"If that's the case, Mr. President, then why did they abduct your daughter? If this is about some kind of ransom, then why haven't any demands been made?" Perry fires back.

It's the father, not the president, who answers. "I don't know, David. I just pray to God Jessica comes home alive."

"And the energy deal?" Perry says.

"What about it?" Westgale shoots back.

"Are you telling me we're still going to let Pix send robotic cargo planes into American skies, knowing what we know?" Perry responds, his voice rising.

"There's nothing proving Cobra's been behind any of this, David. Can't you get that through your thick skull?" Westgale shouts back.

"I can't believe this," Perry mutters, shaking his head in frustration. "As your executive director, one of my duties is to ensure the safety of American citizens, and that's not what we'd be doing by letting those planes enter the country."

"So you're telling me, based on pure speculation, you're willing to bring a halt to a deal that will save this country from becoming nothing more than a memory? Our inspection teams have spent weeks in Pinia performing due diligence on those biofuel tanks, and everything has checked out perfectly," Westgale says emphatically.

"Well, I demand we send our inspectors back to Pinia and thoroughly inspect every inch of those tanks prior to letting them within a thousand miles of our airspace."

"There's no time for that, my friend. And there is absolutely no way I will even give a second of thought to terminating that deal!"

"I'm sorry, sir, but I won't idly sit back and risk the lives of our people. I'll be taking this matter to Chairman Malone," Perry answers. Turning abruptly, he stalks from the room.

* * *

Chairman Malone frowns. He and Perry are meeting in Malone's office, and they've invited me. "Normally, a decision such as this

would be the president's domain, but with his daughter being involved..."

"So I guess it's up to the Strategic Council," I suggest.

Malone looks at me. "Typically that would be the case, but with you officially being the president-elect, your power supersedes everyone else's. It's in your hands, Nicole."

"Whoa, talk about baptism by fire," I respond as Malone instructs his secretary to schedule a meeting.

* * *

When Shadow learns that Jessica may have been seen in Pinia, he insists on returning there in hopes of bringing her home. Shadow and Gil meet at the US Central Military Base.

"I don't know, Shadow," Gil says, rubbing his chin. "Do you not think your returning to Pinia will raise suspicion and place Jessica in further danger?"

"Well, I think it'd be far less dangerous than launching an attack on the Lotus," Shadow replies indignantly.

"You do realize there's a chance your father is behind all of this."

"Yes, sir. And that won't stop me from doing whatever it takes to bring Jessica home."

Gil lifts an eyebrow. "Even if it means bringing him down?"

Shadow takes a deep breath and slowly exhales. "Whatever it takes, Agent Robichaud."

"Well, if I'm going to let you do this, you won't be doing it alone. I'll be coming along with a team of our top agents."

"With all respect, sir, that's the very thing that *will* create suspicion."

"There's no need for concern, Shadow. These men are the best in the business."

Shadow thinks for a moment. "Well, let's get to it."

* * *

"Is there no other alternative to meeting that deadline?" Hunter asks me.

"I've been going over it repeatedly with our finance and economics committees, and there's absolutely no other solution," I reply in frustration.

"What about the VX drug? I mean, there has to be enormous value in that."

"That's true, but it's way too late in the game to revisit that option."

"And you mean to tell me the Commission will not budge whatsoever on that deadline?"

"We've contacted Macdonald, and he made it very clear they won't. We're going to keep trying, though. But in fairness to the Commission, the final section of the New Order Treaty stresses that that deadline is firm."

"So, either we take the chance and let Cobra Pix send those planes into our skies, or America goes up for sale like auctioned-off cattle," Hunter says bitterly.

"Yeah, and lucky for me, I'm the person who'll be making that decision," I say sardonically.

CHAPTER 34

When Shadow arrives at the airport in Pinia he rents an electro and heads off for the Iron Lotus compound. On his way, a feeling of emptiness consumes him. He feels like a stranger in his own homeland. Familiar signs, buildings, and the lush Pinian landscape now seem like markings on a path to hell, leading to the devil himself, his father.

Deeply touched when Cobra had welcomed Jessica so graciously, and by the fact that he had appeared to put aside his hatred for America, Shadow had believed Pinia was on a course to greatness, and that Cobra had made the tyrannical approach of his grandfather a distant memory. Now he fears he was wrong. Dead wrong.

When Shadow pulls up to the front gate of the compound, he's greeted by one of the guards. "Shadow... this is quite a surprise," he says, eyes shifting nervously. "Is your father expecting you?"

"I thought I'd surprise him," Shadow answers with a forced smile.

"Just give me a second, please," the guard says as he reaches for his flash-pad and walks a short distance away. A minute later he returns. "Okay, he'll see you in the courtyard," the guard says. Following protocol, Shadow parks his electro and is taken by an Iron Lotus van to the courtyard.

"There he is," Cobra crows, approaching his son with open arms. "Now, this is a pleasant surprise."

"Hello, Father, how are you?" Shadow asks, sticking his hand out to avoid the embrace. Cobra looks at it, then shakes it.

“Well, I’m doing a lot better, now that you’re here. What brings you back, son?”

“The American aid workers are wrapping things up this week, and I thought I’d make a surprise visit.”

Cobra frowns in concern. “I’m so sorry about Jessica, Shadow. Who on earth would do such a thing to such a wonderful person? I hope you received the messages I sent.”

“Yes, I did. Thank you.” Shadow looks into Cobra’s eyes. Having to act amicable in the face of his father’s duplicity horrifies him. *Is Jessica being held captive somewhere on this compound? Did the man sitting before me have her killed—or kill her himself?*

“She was a fine young lady, a shining light in a dark world. I’m sure your mother must be devastated, learning that it appears her husband killed her,” Cobra says.

Shadow grits his teeth; rather than play dumb regarding Kolton Rollins and his links to the Iron Lotus, he decides to disregard the comment.

His father is signaling a man over. “Victor, please get us a couple of glasses of hot apple cider.”

Shadow studies the tall, clean-shaven, dark-skinned man with spiky black hair. *Hmm, I’ve never seen him before. He must be new.*

“So, Father, with the American energy deal in full swing, I’m sure it must be extremely busy around here,” Shadow says, surreptitiously scanning his surroundings, looking for anything out of the ordinary.

“Actually, all the work’s pretty well been done. Now it’s just a matter of fine tuning.”

“It’s hard to believe—America and Pinia, working together.”

“Like I’ve always told you, Shadow, one must never let personal feelings get in the way of a solid business deal.”

“It’s funny you say that, because most people believe you’re getting the short end of that deal,” Shadow says.

“For the time being, from a financial perspective, yes, we are. But let me tell you, son, in the long run this deal will end up being very beneficial in more ways than you can imagine. Now, will you be staying for dinner?”

“Thanks for the offer, but I must be off to the village.”

“Oh; why the rush?” Cobra asks with a raised brow.

“I apologize, Father, but I’m really starting to feel the jet lag. I really should be on my way.”

“Yeah, you do look a little worse for wear,” Cobra says. “How about you leave your electro here and I’ll have Victor bring you into the village?” he suggests. “That way you can get some rest on the way there.”

“No, no, I’m fine.”

“Well, I hope you realize you’re always welcome here, son.”

Having deceived Cobra, Shadow makes his way to a nearby hotel, where Gil is staked out. “Are you certain I’m not being followed?” he asks Gil, calling from the electro.

“We’ve got eyes in every direction, and the coast is clear,” Gil responds.

Minutes later, Shadow arrives at the hotel and makes his way up to the fifteenth floor.

“Were you able to find out how Ulu’s doing?” Shadow asks Gil upon his arrival.

“Trevor Larsen informed me that there’s been no change in her condition, but thankfully the specialist from World Medical will soon be arriving,” Gil replies.

“That’s good to hear. Let’s hope they can give that sweet child the help she requires,” Shadow says as he removes his coat and rubs his tired eyes.

“How did it go with your father?” Gil asks.

“If he’s up to no good, he’s sure doing a heck of a job hiding it, which in fact doesn’t surprise me,” Shadow replies. “He’s a master of deception.”

“Well, let’s see what the camera picked up.”

“Here you go,” Shadow says, handing Gil his time-pin, in which is concealed a high-tech camera.

Gil scans it across his flash-screen. “Does anything look out of the ordinary to you?” he asks Shadow, who’s staring closely at the screen.

“Nah... I can’t say anything does,” Shadow responds, still focused on the screen.

“Okay, let’s move to the next set of images,” Gil says, and the screen shifts its display. “What we’re looking at here is a series of ground photos from the courtyard. Now, since most of this area is composed of sand, we should be able to—”

“Wait a second,” Shadow calls out as he studies the photos. “That footprint right there... please, zoom in a little closer.” Gil complies. “Oh my, I recognize that tread... the W pattern... that has to be Jessica’s footprint!”

“Hold on, let me enhance it even more... Do you know what size shoe she wears?”

“She wears a size eight and a half. I was with her when she bought those shoes. She bought them in Jersey, a few days after we arrived in New York. Trust me, you won’t find those here in Pinia.”

“All right, here we go,” Gil says as he advances the program on his flash-screen in order to check the shoe size imprinted on the sole. “Okay... I’ll be darned. It’s a match.”

“That bastard!” Shadow shouts.

Gil immediately reaches for his flash-pad and sends off a flash-message to agents who are positioned in other buildings surrounding the compound.

“Are you going to send your men in?” Shadow asks, alarmed.

“I don’t think that’d be wise, but I have placed them on high alert. I’ve also set it up so that they all have a direct link to Washington.”

“So, what? Are we just going to do nothing while Jessie’s being held prisoner?” Shadow says in disbelief.

“I understand your concern, Shadow, but acting irrationally surely won’t be in Jessica’s best interest.”

Shadow can only gape for a moment. “Irrationally? Her life’s in danger!”

Gil holds up placating hands. “I hate being so blunt, but the reality is, we don’t even know if she’s still alive.”

“Okay then, Agent Robichaud, tell me your plan,” Shadow responds, throwing his hands in the air.

“We need to be patient and remain vigilant. We’ve got eyes on the entire compound,” Gil assures him.

“Yeah, but we can’t see inside. Who knows what they’re doing to Jessie!”

“I’m sorry, Shadow, but we’re only going to make a move if and when the time is right.”

“The damn energy deal. That’s what you’re worried about, isn’t it? I’ll bet anything you came here with a mandate ensuring nothing gets in the way of that damn deal.”

“That’s not true. My orders come directly from the president,” Robichaud retorts. “And you know how much that man loves his daughter.”

“Oh, I know he loves his daughter, but I also know the pressure he’s under to save his country,” Shadow says.

* * *

Sitting in the Freedom Home’s presidential conference room, listening to Westgale and Dave Perry present their respective cases regarding the Pinian energy deal, I’m torn whether or not to terminate the deal. By far, this is the most conflicted I’ve ever been.

“Recent events have proven to us that Cobra Pix cannot be trusted,” Director Perry argues with conviction. “He could use those planes as weapons capable of doing who knows what? The safety of American citizens must be paramount, regardless of what it means to us as a nation.”

Westgale counters with, “The proper inspections have been performed on that biofuel, and I’m confident that Cobra Pix knows better than to mess with America. Besides, we have no actual proof that he was actually involved with the Spirit of Hades or my daughter’s abduction. If we back out of this deal, we will be writing the final chapter of America’s history, and it’ll be the saddest ending of all,” he adds, his voice trembling.

And now the decision rests with me. I’m reminded of something my father always told me. He’d say, “Nicole, when I’m unsure of who to side with during a case, I look to the future and the

ramifications my decision will have on society as a whole. If I still remain undecided, I dig down deep and follow my heart.” *It looks like I’ll be going where my heart takes me.*

* * *

Still impatiently watching the watchers, Shadow promptly complies when Gil calls him over to the window. “Look to your left,” he says. They watch two black grand-electros disappear into an underground tunnel on the compound. “Would you know what this is about?” Gil asks.

Shadow shakes his head once, eyes remaining on the tunnel entrance. “Whatever it is, you can bet it’s important to my father. That’s the most top secret area on the entire compound. It leads directly to his war room.” Shadow looks away, meeting Gil’s gaze with eyes filled with trepidation.

* * *

Wearing a black turtleneck, black slacks, and a black cape with red slashes, Cobra Pix strides to the front of the Iron Lotus war room. Penciled in thicker than usual, his now glowing red eyebrows accentuate the evil in his eyes.

On one side of the room is HKM President Sie Woi, sitting in the middle of his eight leading military commanders. Seated across from them are four of Pix’s military leaders, including his chief lieutenant, Theodore. From the lectern, as Cobra gazes at the group, his mind flashes back to the Battle of Oria.

* * *

“This invasion is about taking back what is ours. The greatest man to walk on Pinian soil, my beloved father, Ahmet Pix, is the person who discovered those precious metal ores. How dare the Orian government claim ownership!” Cobra shouted, prepping his militia for battle.

“In honor of the nation of Pinia, we must show no mercy to these selfish mercenaries! We must destroy our enemy!” Cobra’s son Hadar added fervently.

“And in the name of diplomacy, I say we call for a truce,” a frustrated Shadow called out.

“Through the spirit of the Sortar Dragon we will unleash a relentless attack on these foolish thieves!” added Hadar’s brother Dorval, overriding Shadow’s unpopular diplomatic suggestion.

As the Iron Lotus prepared to initiate its attack on the Orian government, US President William T. Westgale ordered his American forces to secretly intervene with a surprise attack on the Lotus, leading to massive chaos in the region. American forces began with a direct strike against the Lotus’s command post.

“Cobra, can you hear me? This is Theo.”

“What in the hell is happening out there?”

“We’ve been ambushed by American forces, sir.”

“Where are you?”

“I’m... I’m in one of our trucks with Alton...” Theo’s words were barely decipherable amidst the cacophony of battle. “We just left the command post. We were meeting with your sons and Jolio.”

“Are they out of harm’s way?”

“I’m sorry, sir... but they...”

“You’re breaking up. You’ll have to speak louder,” Cobra shouted.

“All I know is, I saw Hadar with Jolio—they were engaged in battle with American forces,” Theo answered.

“And my other sons?”

“Again, I’m sorry, Cobra, but we have no idea where they are. We’ll let you know if we make contact with them.”

A few hours later, when the dust had settled, Cobra Pix arrived on the scene to find his six sons lying side by side, dead.

* * *

Shaking off the flash of agony the memory brought with it, Cobra brings himself back to the present and invites President Woi to speak.

Woi stands, buttons his dark gray blazer, and approaches the lectern. His diminutive frame is barely visible behind the stand, but his fury is clear in his voice as he shouts, “We must now proceed with our mutual goal: the destruction of America!” Taking several deep breaths, he begins pacing, eyes on the group. “Vengeance is best delivered cloaked in surprise. And loss is most devastating when one loses what they treasure most. We will turn that gigantic poisonous land this world refers to as the United States of America into a crater of broken dreams buried in ash.” He looks toward Cobra, whose eyes are closed, his head tilted back. “May the spirit of your sons be with us as we execute our mission. This destruction will be performed in their honor, as well as the honor of others around the world who have faced great injustice at the hands of this murderous beast!” He slams his fist into his palm. His voice sounds far larger than the man himself. His eyes smolder with rage. The others in the room smile with satisfaction, clinging to every word. “Our alliance is a special union. Together, with our wealth and military power, we will attain a level of domination this world has never seen before!”

* * *

“You need to get your men in there,” Shadow urges Gil, who patiently continues to observe the compound. “Or at least let me take my father up on his offer. That way I’ll be able to get in there and—”

“What the—oh my God!” Gil shouts at the sound of several consecutive blasts.

Shadow scurries over to join him at the window. They look on in shock as clouds of smoke billow across the sky. Through the haze, they see three robo-copters circling the compound. On the ground, a wave of soldiers with weapons in hand run wildly.

“Gil, can you read me?” an agent says over his flash-pad.

“Loud and clear,” Gil responds. “He’s in a building facing the east side of the compound,” he tells Shadow in an aside.

“Are you seeing this?”

“Barely,” Gil responds. “It’s hazy from this vantage point.”

“Well, I can see perfectly. The entire compound is under siege. I know this seems like a crazy question, but, is this us?”

“It can’t be,” a stunned Gil replies.

Another agent joins the conversation. “I was wondering the same thing, so I contacted Washington, and it’s definitely not us doing this.”

“Are you able to make out the uniforms these guys are wearing?” Gil asks.

“Traditional army green, sir,” responds the first agent.

“Shadow, do you have any idea what—Shadow? Damn!” Gil shouts.

Shadow is nowhere to be seen. Seconds later, Gil realizes one of his laser-guns is missing.

* * *

Chairman Malone orders me to present my decision. When I enter the chamber in the Freedom Home, Westgale and Perry look at me with piercing eyes. It’s ironic; these are the two men who asked me to run for president, and now I will be alienating one of them. After digging into the depths of my heart, I’ve made my decision.

“Gentlemen, thank you for the passionate arguments you have put before me,” I say. Tension grips the room like a noose as I play the part of both executioner and messenger of hope. “Believe me when I tell you this is by far the most difficult decision I’ve ever had to make.” I pause and take a deep breath.

Suddenly, Colonel Peters comes charging into the room. “We’ve got a major issue on our hands, folks,” he says, and quickly fills us in on events in Pinia.

“Does anyone know who’s launching the attack?” a dumbfounded Westgale asks. He looks toward Director Perry, who shakes his head.

“We have no idea, Mr. President—none whatsoever,” Peters replies.

CHAPTER 35

With most of the mayhem taking place away from the palace area, Shadow's electro enters a secret back passageway that allows him to reach the palatial building undetected. If Jessica is being held hostage, this is where she'll be.

A quick survey of the scene instantly tells him that Cobra's so-called "most trusted men" have gone running for the hills. This comes as no surprise. Although he always kept it to himself, Shadow was very aware that Cobra's men always wished *he* were the Lotus leader, rather than his father. This was made evident by the departure of several of the compound's special guard unit when Shadow left for the US. And with the majority of Cobra's soldiers stationed in other regions of the country, the compound is vulnerable to attack.

Shadow exits the electro, gun drawn. He slowly walks toward the back entrance gate. The coast appears clear. Nonetheless, he knows he must be alert; who knows what may lurk ahead. *Please tell me the code hasn't been changed*, he thinks frantically as he enters a series of numbers into the panel, his heart racing. He lets out a sigh of relief when the gate slowly swings open.

Beyond the gate, he immediately sees one of the large doors is wide open. Eyes shifting from side to side, he enters the palace. All is quiet until he hears a rattling noise coming from around the corner in front of him. It's growing louder by the second. Heart pounding, he backs up against the wall and braces himself. He hears what sounds like heavy breathing, accompanied by a strange pitter-patter.

“Hey, boy, go on now,” he whispers as Cobra’s dog approaches. He rubs its head and directs it toward the open door. The dog obeys and trots out the door.

Shadow slowly makes his way through the main floor of the palace. He stumbles across a body, that of Cobra’s assistant, Victor. The man appears to have been in some sort of struggle that cost him his life.

Two loud thuds from the floor above draw Shadow’s attention. With the gun set on kill mode, he scurries up a broad staircase to the second floor. Two steps short of the top, he hears a voice call, “Let her go, Theodore. I’m ordering you, let her go, now!” Shadow knows that voice well. It’s Cobra. He leaps the last two steps and ducks around the corner at the top.

“How many times have I told you? She’s not to be harmed,” Cobra says in a calm but firm voice. “She’s what we all should aspire to be,” he adds with extra force.

Shadow peers around the corner and sees Theodore holding Jessica with his left forearm tightly around her neck. His right hand is holding a laser-gun to her head.

“All those men lying dead in our war room, and you’re worried for the well-being of this little bitch! What’s wrong with you, Cobra?” Theodore growls. “Think of your six sons, killed by her butcher of a father,” he adds. Veins protrude in his neck and forehead.

“Release her, now!” Cobra demands.

“I’ll release her, all right—to the hounds of hell,” Theo responds with an evil cackle as he tightens his hold on Jessica.

Jessica sends a forceful elbow to Theodore’s ribs and he winces in pain, his grip loosening enough for her to break free and dash down the hall. It’s not enough. Theodore takes aim and fires off a blast. Cobra quickly lunges in between the killer and his prey, taking the laser-blast right in the chest. He drops to the floor. Theodore attempts to fire off another blast at Jessica, but in a flash Shadow jumps out and fires a shot at Theodore’s skull, instantly killing him.

Unharméd, but reeling in shock, a weeping Jessica crumples to the floor.

“It’s okay, honey. I’m right here with you,” Shadow says, dropping down beside her. “Everything’s going to be fine... everything’s going to be fine.”

“He’s dead, isn’t he,” Jessica says, looking toward Cobra.

Shadow rises and checks. “Yes, he is,” he answers solemnly, rising to stand over his father. Cobra’s eyebrows light up the dreary hallway. *Who is this man?* Shadow asks himself as he stares at his father’s body. Tyrant, monster, megalomaniac, yet a man who just gave his life for a person he barely knew. A person whose father he blamed for the deaths of his six sons. A person who somehow touched his blackened heart in a most profound manner.

Jessica rises and joins him. “You were correct, Shadow,” she says, gently rubbing his shoulders.

“Huh?”

“He was without a doubt the most complex person I’ll ever meet,” Jessica says softly.

“Yes indeed... complex. Except when it came to you. Just like me, I guess he saw something in you that he surely didn’t see in others,” Shadow says.

They turn away. As they make their way to the staircase, Shadow glances back at his father and wipes the tears from his eyes.

“How did you know I was here?” Jessica asks when they reach the bottom of the stairs.

“It’s a long story, Jessie. I’ll fill you in later,” Shadow whispers, checking his surroundings, his gun at the ready. “First we need to get the hell out of here.”

“Why are you still uptight?” Jessica quietly asks. “I’m sure American forces must have this entire compound under control by now.”

“It wasn’t American forces who converged on the compound, Jessie.”

She gasps. “Oh my Lord. Who was it, then?”

“I don’t know, and Gil didn’t either,” Shadow replies as they sidle out the door Shadow had entered earlier.

Just as they exit, a voice yells, “Drop the weapon and get on your knees!”

Shadow immediately complies. Jessica grabs his arm and drags him down with her.

“Hands on top of your heads!” Trembling with fear, they comply.

Several men dressed in green military uniforms emerge from cover and stand before them with their laser-rifles aimed at them. A white grand-electro drives up behind the soldiers. A man in a black designer suit with an American flag tie climbs from the electro. Jessica gasps.

“It’s okay, gentlemen. Put your weapons down and please safely escort Miss Westgale and Mr. Pix from the premises,” Gerald Levin says calmly. Then he reenters the vehicle and is off.

Two MAA soldiers move forward to escort Jessica and Shadow back to his electro, while the others disperse.

As Shadow drives the electro back to the hotel and Gil, Jessica tells Shadow what had happened to her. As he updates Gil via a flash-message, Jessica contacts her mother and father. “I’m so sorry, Jessie,” Westgale says. “I’m to blame for all of this.”

“That’s not true,” Jessica replies gently. “Cobra did what he did because he was a troubled soul. A highly troubled soul who was searching for something... something he never found.”

Shadow hears most of the call. When she ends it, they start exploring the details surrounding the chaotic course of events. “I sincerely believe he never intended to harm me,” Jessica tells Shadow about his father.

“To think he had you kidnapped in order to keep you *safe* while he was preparing to destroy America. The man was beyond complex,” Shadow says, shaking his head in disbelief.

“I still don’t understand how you and my father determined where I was.”

Shadow then tells her about Kolton Rollins and Ulu.

“Your father actually gave me the dirt on Kolton, but Ulu... oh my. That sweet little child. Is she going to be okay?” Jessica asks, her voice tight and her eyes glittering.

“It’s very serious. They brought in a specialist from World Medical to tend to her, so all we can do right now is hope and pray.”

“And what about Levin and the MAA? I wonder how they became aware of the situation,” Jessica ponders aloud.

“That’s an interesting question,” Shadow answers.

“With probably an even more interesting answer.”

When they meet with Gil, he immediately wraps Jessica in his arms. “Thank God,” he says. “And you,” he looks at Shadow, “running off and playing the superhero. Normally, I’d have you arrested, but I think under the circumstances, I’ll let it go,” he adds with a chuckle.

“I’m sorry, Gil,” Shadow replies with a sheepish grin. “I realize it was the wrong thing to do. But thankfully, we got her back,” he adds, beaming as he pulls Jessica into a bear hug.

“Hold on. What do we have here?” Gil says, turning up the volume on the flash-screen as the UCIT Network logo appears.

Surrounded by several armed guards at Pinia’s central airport, Gerald Levin appears front and center.

“Good day, my fellow Americans. It’s with great elation that I’m here to inform you that earlier today, the Militant Alliance of America successfully executed a raid on the Iron Lotus’s headquarters here in Pinia, snuffing out a very serious planned attack by Cobra Pix and HKM President Sie Woi on America.” He then details how Pix and Woi intended to carry out their plan. “Arrangements are currently being made by the World Coalition to safely destroy those tanks. I’ve also been informed that World Coalition forces will be taking control of Pinia within the next six hours.

“During the raid, Jessica Westgale was rescued by Shadow Pix, and from all accounts they are now both safe and sound,” he continues. “However, one of our MAA agents, Victor Mali, wasn’t as fortunate. Victor had been risking his life, infiltrating the Iron Lotus over the last few weeks, and it was his dedication and bravery that led us to this victory... and sadly, to his death. My sincere condolences to his family. He will never be forgotten.”

A picture of the fallen agent appears on the screen for a few seconds prior to UCIT shutting off.

“Oh my... Victor,” Gil gasps, looking at the screen in dismay.

“You knew him?” Jessica asks.

“Yes. He was one of my agents until cutbacks last year forced me to release him. A dedicated agent and a family man with a wife and three kids.” Gil sighs and shakes his head.

* * *

In the Freedom Home conference room, mixed feelings abound after Gerald Levin addresses the country. Westgale in particular is caught up in an emotional tug-of-war. “Don’t get me wrong, Nicole; learning Jessica’s alive and well is the greatest news I could ever receive, but to think Pix pulled the wool over my eyes like he did... how could I have been so stupid?” he says, pacing the floor.

“You weren’t stupid, sir,” I say with conviction. “How could you have known what he and Woi were up to?”

“I just hope to God Macdonald answers our plea and grants that extension,” Westgale says, straightening his tie.

“He’s here,” Dave Perry announces to the group. Seconds later, Guardian Macdonald enters, wearing a blue and yellow striped suit. Westgale is immediately offended—*What is he, a clown that the Outer Commission has sent as some kind of joke?* As if the suit weren’t bad enough, he enters the room carrying a bag of carrot and celery sticks.

“Good day, everyone,” he says with a wave as he takes a seat at the front of the room. “Wow, it’s getting crazy around here again,” he observes, and chuckles. “I’m pleased to hear your daughter is safe,” he says to Westgale. He then removes a carrot from the bag and begins gnawing on it like a high-strung rabbit as he tends to his flash-pad.

“Let’s cut to the chase,” Perry says, approaching Macdonald. “We asked you here to request an extension on the deadline—no, in fact we’re *demanding* an extension.”

“Demanding? The last time I checked, Director Perry, I don’t think you and your friends were in any position to demand a single damn thing,” Macdonald replies, then devours what’s left of the carrot with a loud chomp. “Deadlines. You see, they come with a thing called responsibility, and responsibility comes with a thing called accountability, which none of you apparently know anything about.”

“How dare you come in here and speak to us in such a condescending manner! I’m tired of this bloody power trip you’re on!” Westgale shouts, rising from his seat.

“As your superior, I’ll address this room in whatever manner I see fit,” Macdonald replies with a snicker. “For more than two and a half decades, America has had a chance to show the world it can finally come together as one, and God knows this Commission has surely done its part to help,” he says, looking sharply in my direction. “But as long as you continue to remain so miserably divided, you will never be what you claim to be.” His tone turns upbeat as he rises. “Cheer up, folks; we’ll make certain the country ends up in good hands.” He calmly exits the room.

“Seventy-two hours... in seventy-two hours we’ll be nameless, faceless, a self-destructive, failed nation. Once so powerful, soon so powerless,” Westgale says somberly. “To future generations the memories of the great things we have accomplished will be destroyed by the reality of greed, corruption, and apathy... I’m so sorry to have failed you.” He sits staring into space in disbelief.

Slowly those present rise and file out of the conference room, leaving Westgale, Dave Perry, and me.

“What about the incredible people of this great county?” Perry says with concern. “We owe it to them to be truthful, so they can begin preparing for the worst. Why prolong the inevitable?”

“How in the hell are we going to tell them that in three days they’re no longer going to be Americans, and that they will soon be living under the laws and ways of who knows what and who?” Westgale says, his voice utterly hopeless. “The outrage will be so widespread, within hours there’ll probably be nothing left of the country.”

“Nicole?” Perry addresses me with a raised brow.

“I agree with the president, David. Let’s at least know what we’re dealing with before we attempt to deal with it.”

“Well, I guess this proves that that obnoxious imbecile was spot-on when he said we know nothing about responsibility... and accountability,” Perry scoffs as he rises and exits the room.

CHAPTER 36

As if this day hasn't had enough challenges, Beth informs me that Andy Pemberton has requested a meeting with him at his ERT Power office here in Washington. *Oh well, how much worse can things get?* I think as I summon my driver.

"Actually, Mr. Pemberton called, saying he'll be here shortly," his secretary informs me when she escorts me into his office waiting area.

Taking a moment to reflect, I look out the window of this enormous high-rise, down at the hustle and bustle below. Westgale's words of despair pound in my mind like the wrecking ball I see across the street: *"Once so powerful. Soon so powerless."* I think of recent events, and in particular, of Anya Ahar, a young woman who gave up everything to rejuvenate this country and help me win the presidency. A presidency it appears is only hypothetical now. I just hope that whenever Anya looks at the Liberty Bell pendant I gave her, she'll realize that her sacrifices were not made in vain.

"Hello, Nicole," Andy says. His greeting serves as an instant stop button in my mind. "Come on in," he adds, leading me into his luxurious office. He seems different. More serious than usual.

"So tell me, Andy, did you invite me here to gloat over your recent MAA triumph?" I say, plopping down into the leather chair before his desk. He looks at me, his face expressionless. *His mischievous grin must be trapped somewhere behind that empty stare.* "Aren't you going to brag about finally making a better

castle?” Again, he blankly looks into my eyes. “Talk to me, Andy. What’s going on?”

“I’ve had enough of this place, Nicole,” he says, throwing his hands up in the air. “I just found out that behind my back, for the last few months, my uncle’s had his staff working on an ERT business plan titled ‘A Broken America.’ It’s taken me long enough, but I’ve come to learn that money and power are all that matter to that man, and he couldn’t care less about the well-being of this country. Now, I know you probably think that’s me as well, but let me assure you, it’s not.”

“So, are you planning to leave all this behind?” I quip, looking around at the office.

“Yeah, it’s time. I’ve come to realize that I’ve been chasing something that’s not real. This lust for power people like my uncle and Gerald Levin share is just an illusion. An illusion that slowly tears away at our heart and soul, leaving us empty,” he explains solemnly. “I need to live my life and stop searching for something that doesn’t exist.”

I’m left speechless, instantly realizing Andy’s speaking from the heart.

“But before I do, I need to complete one final project.”

“Does this somehow involve me?” I ask with trepidation.

“It most certainly does. That matter we spoke about a few weeks back—well, it wasn’t easy, but with the help of some associates in Australia I found the solution we’re looking for,” he replies. His expression quickly changes from sullen to cheerful as he turns on his flash-screen and explains.

* * *

At the headquarters of the former Pinian government, Shadow is meeting with delegates from the World Coalition. Gathered outside, thousands of everyday citizens fervently chant his name. “Judging by the overall reaction of the Pinian people, it’s very clear you’re the man they want in command,” one of the delegates says to Shadow.

“And I’d be elated to take on such a prestigious position, provided it is acquired under a democratic process,” Shadow says as he leans out a window and salutes the crowd. The crowd roars back with applause.

Leaving the building through a back exit, Shadow and Jessica make their way to the hospital to visit Ulu.

“I really can’t wait to see her,” Jessica exclaims.

“I tried to get an update from the hospital, but their communication system has been down all day,” Shadow says, frustrated. “I realize it’s best to remain optimistic, Jessie, but the child is—”

“I know, Shadow. That’s why I haven’t let go of this from the second you gave it back to me,” she says as she opens her hand to display her dragon-stone necklace.

“Yeah, little good it did you back in New York,” Shadow sighs.

“Well, in the end I’m still in one piece and here with you, right?” Jessica smiles.

When they arrive at the hospital, the attending doctor greets them with a pleasant smile. “Come into my office,” he says, leading the way. “Please, have a seat.”

“How is she, Doctor?” Jessica asks, tightly squeezing Shadow’s hand.

“I must tell you it was touch and go for a while there, but thanks to the specialist from World Medical, I’m pleased to tell you the child is going to be fine.”

“That is incredible news,” Jessica says, her voice light with joy. “Can we see her?”

“Of course, by all means,” the doctor replies.

As Jessica and Shadow are about to exit his office, he signals them back. “There is one thing, however,” he says, looking concerned. “Although the hospital has contacted Ulu’s sponsor on several occasions, we’ve yet to hear from them. And with the child being released from our care in a few days, this really complicates things.”

“Well, we’ll make things a lot easier for everybody,” Shadow says, giving Jessica a smile. She smiles back. “We’ll make the

necessary arrangements so the hospital can release her into *our* care,” he adds.

Jessica gasps, and her face lights up. “Are you sure, Shadow?” she asks excitedly. “I mean, would it be fair to your mother, now that she’ll be returning to Pinia to live with us?”

“I know for certain my mother will be thrilled. She’s always wanted another chance to raise a child,” Shadow says.

Her eyes shining with happiness, Jessica takes Shadow’s hand and they go to Ulu’s hospital room together.

“Miss Jessica! Mr. Shadow!” Ulu shouts with joy, sitting up in her hospital bed.

“Hello, Ulu,” Jessica says, approaching the smiling child. Shadow blows a kiss to Ulu and quietly exits the room. “I missed you so much,” Jessica adds as she squeezes her tightly.

“I missed you too, but I knew you were always with me,” Ulu says, placing her hand over her heart.

“I’m so glad to hear you’re feeling all better now,” Jessica says as she gently brushes the child’s hair away from her face.

“Yeah, Dr. Bridgette made me feel better,” Ulu says happily, referring to the World Medical specialist. “She was really nice to me—look what she gave me,” she adds as she hands Jessica a pendant.

“Do you know what this is, Ulu?” Jessica asks as she studies it.

“Dr. Bridgette said it’s called the Liberty Bell.”

“Yes, it is.” Jessica smiles. “And one day I’ll tell you all about it.”

Peering through the window of the hospital room door, dressed in her World Medical uniform, Dr. Bridgette, formerly known as Anya Ahar, smiles with absolute delight.

* * *

Today’s the day. The dreaded deadline. America’s Judgment Day. We always knew this day could come, but as with all things we hope to avoid in life, we prayed it wouldn’t. Besides, why should we worry? We’re the mighty America: compassionate and tender as a

loving mother, and as tough as nails when the need arises. I guess we can sometimes also be overly assuming.

“I call this meeting to order. Would everyone please take their seats,” says a grinning Macdonald as the key members of both the PBA and MAA assemble in the Freedom Home’s main conference room. “My oh my, the world just keeps getting stranger day by day,” he adds, looking down at his flash-pad. “Pinia appears finally ready to live in a real democracy, the people of the HKM are opening their hearts to the Gold Star Federation, and, well... here *you* are.” He pauses and slowly gazes around the room as he rolls up the sleeves of his maroon cardigan, which looks at least a size and a half too big. “Endings: they’re inevitable, and yes, most of the time they are sad.”

I sigh. *Look out, he’s in lecture mode.*

“Every beautiful sunset eventually fades to nothingness, and every glittering star at some point succumbs to the darkness of night. It’s a fact of life, folks. And now we’ve learned that even the United States of America is not immune to mortality.

“I realize how difficult it is for all of you to accept this, but you must embrace the idea of a new beginning. Please take solace in the fact that the Outer Commission will do its best to ensure that many of your former country’s laws and customs will be considered by your new overseers.

“Now, before I end these proceedings and officially declare the termination of the United States of America, I will be glad to answer any questions from the floor.”

I raise my hand.

“Ah yes, Ms. Kratz.”

“Having spent quite some time here in America during the last few years, would you agree that Americans for the most part have a fighting spirit?”

“Well, though I don’t see what this has to do with the matter at hand, I’m glad to answer your question,” he replies with a smirk. “Fighting spirit? Hmm. I’d say your people have a very *overzealous* fighting spirit. I would say it’s the very thing that has led to your

country's demise—and actually, it's the very thing that has brought us here today.”

“That may be true, Mr. Macdonald, but there's a reason we tend to be 'overzealous.' We may not always agree about what's best for America, but at least we sincerely care. This man to my right, Andy Pemberton—we've known each other since we were children, and truth be told, up until just the other day, due mostly to our political differences, we were disgusted at the very sight of each other.”

“I don't know where you're going with this, Ms. Kratz, but I suggest you please get to the point,” Macdonald warns.

“As I was about to say, there is one thing Andy and I have always shared, and that's a deep love and appreciation for our country.”

“Bravo,” Macdonald responds, clapping his hands like a trained seal. “Now, since there will no longer be an America, I guess you and Mr. Pemberton will have to search within yourselves and find something else in common.”

“Interesting that you say that, because we have. What we've found is a *united* fighting spirit, which in getting to my point, has led us to a miracle. Do you believe in those, Mr. Macdonald?”

“I've had enough of this insanity,” Macdonald mumbles. “I now declare the United States of—”

“Andy,” I say above Macdonald's infuriating squeal. I turn on the flash-screen at the front of the room, and Andy approaches.

“Thank you, Nicole. Today, Mr. Macdonald, we are not Militants, we are not Peace-Bringers... proudly, we are Americans!” he says passionately as he walks toward the screen with his mischievous grin intact. “What you're about to see are several forest areas across the country. Thanks to a benevolent mysterious power lurking above, and our friends from the land down under, who allowed us to test a series of newly developed machines, within a period of three days we were able to uncover load after load of these glittery pebbles.” The view-file shows a close-up of the strata. “These are the very same minerals that compose the VX drug.”

With a mad rush of adrenaline, I rise and take hold of the sound-blast. “And here, Mr. Macdonald, is a detailed list of advance

payments made by countries around the world,” I announce with elation. “So now, with one press of a button, America’s debt will be paid, and even more importantly, generations of our friends around the globe will reap the benefits of our miracle—heck, there’ll even be enough funds left over to help get you a plane ticket back to wherever the hell it is you came from.”

“What... what is this?” Macdonald cries, squirming in his chair.

“We call it the Preservation Plan,” I say with pride as I gaze around at the smiling faces of my fellow Americans.

= END =