



THE
METHUSELAH
MAN

A Wes Franklin Novel
Will Dresser

FERRA

The Methuselah Man

Will Dresser

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DEDICATED TO...

The memory of my father, who died in 2005 of Mantle Cell Lymphoma, a rare cancer linked directly to his participation in nuclear tests while in the Navy in 1945. He and his shipmates were anchored 12 miles from ground-zero.

What readers are saying about *The Methuselah Man*

Ready for the Sequel

...non-stop suspense and careful development of the main characters...left me longing for more... I'm hooked on Wes Franklin---another sequel cannot be published too quickly for me!

— **Snow Diz, Williams Bay, WI**

Get Your Work Done!!!

...once you pick up this book...it will become very difficult to put it down, for even a moment!! The suspense and energy will have you carrying this book with you until you have finished the story...Book groups...get this book!!!

— **Gail, Green Bay, WI**

Thinking person's beach book

Loved it!...tough to put down. Lots of twists and turns right up to the end...Wes Franklin is a great lead character and I can't wait to meet him again.

— **Lakelady, Lake Geneva, WI**

This book will make you think!

...a really smart and engaging international thriller...an unforgettable journey...embracing a variety of worlds including politics, espionage, corruption, medicine, science, and religion, while adding a rich play on ethical and moral dilemmas....Every scene is so well detailed with sights, sounds and character descriptions I feel as though I am watching a movie.

— **Mary, Chicago, IL**

A Real Page Turner

...not only entertaining on multiple levels, but timely as well...If you're a fan of Clive Cussler, Ken Follett, Jack Higgins...you're gonna love this book.

— **Ron, Las Vegas, NV**

Awesome

...Suspenseful, thrilling, catches you right from the start- loved it, loved it. Pick it up immediately, you won't regret it!!

— **BetaOri, Heidelberg, Germany**

You Will Not Be Able To Put This One Down

...hold on to your seat, you are about to take off on an adventure the likes of which you have never experienced before...a fast moving story with many twists and turns...I am hoping for a sequel!...Recommended with enthusiasm!

— **Kathleen, SW PA**

What an amazing story of intrigue, deception and honor

...more twists and turns than Lombard Street in San Francisco. You will be kept on the edge of your seat...After you finish the book go back and re-read the opening chapter and you will be left smiling at the way this story all came together...I loved this book.

— “Pastor Dan”, Wichita, KS

A very good and entertaining book

...I enjoy this genre of story and this particular book was an excellent example and fun to read...excitement, love, mystery and purpose...Jared Cain could command a series unto himself ...Highly recommended!

— Larry (Lake Forest, CA)

A Great Read

...a wonderfully masterminded tale of...Jared Kennan Cain...interleaves the single-minded machinations of high ranking political brokers against those wanting to do `the right thing' for mankind. Immortality and nuclear irresponsibility...leads us on chases and, at last, culminates in an extremely satisfying ending...A great read for anyone interested in thrillers. I'll definitely be re-reading it again....

— NickP (Tucson, AZ)

This author has a line on the human senses

...once I picked it up I did not want to put it down... sent my imagination reeling...grabbed me from the beginning and just kept it coming with great story telling adventures and enthusiasm in what and how the author wrote this book...this author has a line on the human senses that left me wanting to read the next book he writes...a movie on this would be fantastic!

— Kathryn (Ingram, TX)

Fantastic Novel!

...a magic carpet that swoops down and carries one away on a grand journey...a macabre dance of international intrigue on a cross-European continental railway...[that] honors the great classic cinema railway scenes of the past, such as those found in North By Northwest, From Russia with Love, and The Silver Streak...O'Henry himself would be proud to call this ironic and unexpected ending his own.

— Marcus Hill Shelz (Burlington, WI)

The Methuselah Man

“Big Stick diplomacy ensures our safety for only as long as our side has the biggest club. The day those we would dominate obtain their own Big Stick, we should pray our past words were gracious and our past actions benevolent. If archaeology has taught us anything about ourselves, it is that we have been slow to learn this lesson.”

Prof. Robert Reid Clark
University of Edinburgh
Co-Founder, The Cloister of Akhenaton, 1926

1

“GOD, I NEVER KNEW A MAN who wanted so much to be dead...or deserved it more.”

Joe Rosenfeld gazed down into the shallow hole at the plain, unmarked, lead container, slightly larger than a cigar box. A thick marine layer hung tight to the ground, swirling a puff of foggy cloud as Rosenfeld tossed a shovelful of wet dirt into the hole and handed the shovel back to the groundskeeper. The funeral service—if one could call it that—was small, only three people: Dr. Joe Rosenfeld, his secretary Liz Charles, and Jefferson the groundskeeper.

“That’s it?” said Liz Charles. “An entire lifetime comes down to a dozen words or so, one sentence?”

“What am I going to tell God He doesn’t already know?” said Rosenfeld.

“I don’t know, but damn, that’s it?”

“Look around, Liz. Do you see throngs of people wailing? Have the masses gathered for a tearful farewell? Is there a wife overcome with grief at the loss of her dear husband? Children, grandchildren, their eyes reddened by the loss of the family patriarch? A business friend, a best buddy? No. There’s you, me, and the groundskeeper. And Jefferson there is on the clock.”

The groundskeeper remained silent.

“God, that’s sad,” she said.

“You know, for the first time since we met Jared Kennan Cain, I’m starting to think maybe he was right. Maybe God *can* abandon some people. I always used to think no one was beyond His reach; that even the smallest sparrow couldn’t pass without His taking notice. Now I don’t know. Is it all just a fairytale, self-delusion, a nice bedtime story to scare away the dark?” Rosenfeld looked down at the grave and asked the groundskeeper, “Do you believe in God, Jefferson?”

“Jus’ Jeff, sir. Do I believe in God? In this business? Yes, sir!” chuckled the groundskeeper quietly. “If I didn’t, I guess I’d be little more than a garbage man,” he said, hesitating a moment before giving a more considered answer. “Yes, sir, I believe there’s a good and righteous God.”

“Well, tonight when you get home,” said Rosenfeld, watching the fog swirl around the hole, “light a candle, or a novena, or whatever you do, and thank Him for making you imperfect.”

The groundskeeper didn’t really understand the suggestion, but acknowledged it.

“Yes, sir. Imperfect. We sure are that! Only made one perfect one.”

Rosenfeld lifted his eyes from the hole in the ground with an ironic smile but let the statement pass. “Jeff, you can wait till we’re gone to finish this.”

“Yes, sir. But what about a headstone, sir? I don’t have any instructions about a headstone or ground plate.”

“There won’t be one. Also,” Rosenfeld looked around the grounds, “are there other places available where this could be buried? Some remote out of the way spot?”

“Yes, sir,” said the groundskeeper beginning to point. “There’s a couple plots over...”

“No, that’s okay. I don’t want to know,” said Rosenfeld, pushing the groundskeeper’s hand down. “After we’re gone I want you to put this someplace else. You can put it anywhere you want. I just want to be able to say honestly that I don’t know where these remains are buried. Understand?”

Jefferson nodded.

“And if anyone should come around asking about this, you don’t know anything about it, right? You don’t know where the exact site is, you don’t know who’s buried here, you don’t know anything. Okay?”

“Well, on that one, sir, I’d have kind of a tough time. We keep good track of where we lay folks; got to, it’s the law.” Jefferson fidgeted where he stood, uneasy that he was being drawn into something that could only get him in trouble.

“Okay, okay, I understand,” said Rosenfeld. “I’m not asking you to break the law, Jeff. I just want to make sure those remains never see the light of day again, wherever you decide to put them.”

Jefferson wore a worried expression as he looked down at the hole.

“Look, Jeff, most likely no one will come nosing around anyway,” said Rosenfeld, taking a different tack, trying to find some compromise language that would put Jefferson at ease and still get him to comply with the request. “But if they do, try to take your own sweet time about finding the place, all right?”

“Yes, sir, I ‘spose I could do that,” said Jefferson, sticking his hands in his pockets, nervously stretching the coveralls. “Memory’s not all it once was,” he seemed to be rehearsing what he’d say if asked. “And with an unmarked grave this small, it could take a little

time to get the exact spot.”

“Good,” said Rosenfeld. “I have every confidence in you, Jeff. And here’s a little something for your trouble.” Rosenfeld extended two folded fifty-dollar bills.

Jefferson looked at the money. A hundred bucks! he thought. They really don’t want this guy found! He smiled and stuck the money in his coveralls. “Yes, sir, don’t worry about a thing, sir. I’ll take care of everything as soon as you and the lady are gone.”

Rosenfeld and Liz Charles took one last look at the grave, gave the groundskeeper a smile and a good-natured pat on the arm, then turned and walked back to their car.

Rosenfeld said “I’m glad that’s over” then went quiet. After a moment he said, “Liz, when we get to the office, we need to do a little cleaning up. I want you to take Cain’s file home with you tonight.”

“Then what?” she asked, shifting in her seat to look at him, curious at the instruction.

“Get rid of it.”

Rosenfeld’s eyes stayed glued to the road ahead in an effort to avoid eye contact with her.

“Get rid of it?” Liz was surprised by her boss’s order. In fifteen years she had never been asked to do anything like this.

Rosenfeld was adamant. “Yes, get rid of it. Don’t hide it. Don’t throw it away. Don’t shred it,” he said. “Just take it home and burn it!”

“Joe, are you sure you really want me to do that?”

She asked this half-heartedly. She already knew he was serious. And the truth was, if he hadn’t come up with the idea himself, she might have given him a suggestion along those same lines.

“Yes, absolutely!” said Joe, who then added a softer explanation. “I already started a dummy file; before we left for Vegas. I pulled the intake form and a couple of pages from the real file. That will now be the official version.”

Liz gave him a quizzical look.

Rosenfeld became somewhat defensive and annoyed—as much at himself and the circumstances as anything Liz might have said or done—so he feigned irritation at having to explain what to him was obvious.

“The Feds already know he was a client,” he argued out the car window to no one in particular, “so I have to have some record of treating him or they’ll pile all kinds of legal BS on me for tampering with—or worst case destroying—evidence.”

That thought made Liz bristle.

“I can’t believe they can just come in and demand to see your records. What happened to Doctor-Patient Privilege?”

Damn PATRIOT Act! thought Rosenfeld, his irritation churning inside over the misguided clarion call for heightened security, especially when it came at the expense of certain liberties and expectations of privacy. “National Security,” he fairly spat the words under his breath as they reached the car, “...trumps everything these days.” Rosenfeld opened the door for her, babbling as Liz climbed in, “In a post-nine-eleven-world, blah, blah, blah,” he said.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” said Liz, doing less than Rosenfeld to hide her anger. “It’s just a lot of trial-by-fear if you ask me! No patriot came up with *that* act!”

Rosenfeld had to smile at her passion. “I know, but for now it’s the environment we live in,” he said, as if surrendering, “so let’s at least keep up appearances. Besides, as far as the dummy file is concerned, if I ever did go to court, I’d have a much easier time discussing the dummy notes than the real ones.”

“You sure got that right! No one in their right mind would believe the truth.”

Rosenfeld said, “On the other hand, I think we’ve already established that the people who’d want that file aren’t necessarily *in* their right minds. Anyway, let’s just hope it never gets that far, that the Feds just drop the whole thing. I mean, the guy’s dead! Isn’t that

enough for them?” He shook his head and tried to refocus on trying to go about their business as usual. “Who’s on my schedule for today?”

“I cleared your morning appointments. I thought you might like to ease back into it.” Liz studied Joe’s face and watched it tense up at each name. “You’ve got Betty Murphy at one, Jill Edwards at two, and Jo Haggerty at three. I left four o’clock open in case you’re exhausted by then.” Liz could see him struggling with it. “If you want I can call and cancel them all.”

Rosenfeld took a deep breath as if to brace himself against an onslaught of reality.

“No, let’s keep things at least looking normal.”

Liz laughed. “Normal! Nice word for a shrink!”

Rosenfeld gave her a cynical smile. “Yeah, well, don’t worry,” he teased, “it’s no term I’d ever apply to you!” Rosenfeld had to laugh. She could see right through him.

Their fifteen-year relationship was, to say the least, atypical. It was strictly platonic; there was never anything physical between them. Their feelings were familial, not sexual, and had been like this since day one. In front of the clients, they were consummate professionals, always on their best behavior, tended to communicate in full sentences. But when it was just the two of them, they seemed to slip easily into characters out of the screwball-comedies of the 1930s and ‘40s; if Joe threw out a line from a Spencer Tracy movie, Liz would be right on top of it with her best Hepburn; if Joe gave her Bogey and asked if she knew how to whistle, Liz was right there with a pretty good Bacall and the perfect response, “Just put your lips together and blow.”

She was priceless! And almost always right!

Liz fluttered back a coquettish smile. “Hey, sweetie, I keep your life interesting, so don’t knock it!”

Liz Charles was, by all standards, a very attractive and engaging young woman. Blonde hair, blue eyes, a thin nose set against soft

lush lips, and a thirty-six year-old body that wouldn't quit—generally draped in a wardrobe of dubious business acumen that tended to advance that notion. She routinely wore thick black mascara that ovaled her eyes then flared to a point where someday she would have—from a lifetime of smiling—shallow crows' feet—but not yet! Her eyelids were always painted blue, a soft blue. But the combination of that soft blue and heavy black outline, which would have screamed *whore* on the average woman, appeared on Liz Charles more like the understated elegance of an ancient Egyptian queen, the royal consort to a pharaoh. She was, all things considered, probably the perfect synthesis of both.

And where competent secretaries were concerned, Rosenfeld didn't know what he'd do without her!

Joe Rosenfeld turned left out of the Hills of Eternity Jewish Cemetery, aiming the Prius south on El Camino Real for the thirty-minute drive from Colma to their Menlo Park office. It would have been faster to take 280 or 101, even at this time of day, but he wasn't in any particular hurry just now. In fact, after the last five days, he just wanted the whole world to slow down again. And a quiet drive back would go a long way toward meeting that objective.

"Can you believe it's been less than four weeks since this all started?" He glanced over at her and half whispered, "How's your shoulder?"

Liz Charles stretched and twisted her right shoulder, testing it. "It's fine," she said, massaging it with her left hand. "Unbelievably fine, actually." And after giving it some due consideration, she gave her final judgment. "Better than new, I think."

Rosenfeld took in the answer absently, his thoughts already drifting back to early November and the first time he set eyes on Jared Kennan Cain.

2

GEORGE S. AUSTIN WOULDN'T HAVE BEEN President Treem's first choice as Vice President, wouldn't even have made the short list, except that the party needed a victory badly and George S. Austin was the one man who could deliver it. A brutal intra-party primary fight had all but made certain there would never be a *President* Treem without a *Vice President* Austin, and as distasteful as that proposition was, both to Treem's campaign team and party elders, politics was politics. Treem, an altruist at heart, was also a pragmatist at politics and acceded to party demands.

As the great-great-great-grand nephew of Stephen F. Austin, the Vice President's roots in Texas lore went all the way back to the early days of the Texas Republic and counted as much in western history as having ancestors on the Mayflower did for the eastern establishment, maybe more. George S. Austin, as shrewd and calculating a power force as Washington had ever known yet somehow endearingly charming to his constituents, could guarantee the entire southwest; meaning Texas, New Mexico and Arizona, plus Nevada and Utah, Colorado, Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, Wyoming, Montana, and Idaho; a total of 87 electoral votes that

Treem needed to win. But perhaps as important as Austin's ability to deliver those states on a cold November Election Day was his ability to withhold them if he didn't come away from the convention with his self-declared birthright—the Vice President slot. At seventy-two, the Presidency had already slipped out of reach, would never be his. He was resigned to that 'personal failure' but had loudly proclaimed behind closed doors at the party's convention, "By-God-in-heaven, I will not be denied the number two position," a declaration the party leadership rightly perceived as a valid threat.

George S. Austin had been an Annapolis graduate, a naval aviator, and a much-decorated Vietnam War hero. Six times an ace, he rose to the rank of Lt. Cmdr. in five short years on the strength of his air combat prowess: two Purple Hearts, a Navy Cross with oak leaf clusters, the Distinguished Service Medal, and the Congressional Medal of Honor. By his thirtieth birthday his heroism had made its way to the silver-screen starring a young Paul Newman. Austin was an American legend by the age of 27, but far from being proud of his achievements, he felt the underachiever because he was already two years older than the minimum age to be a congressman. Elected to the Texas 10th Congressional District seat three days after his 27th birthday, George S. Austin was already guaranteed a comfortable life in politics. But George S. Austin wasn't interested in comfort; he had a destiny to pursue, and he was determined to legislate his way to immortality.

And destiny was fully prepared to cooperate in that endeavor.

A year and a day into his second congressional term, George S. Austin left the House of Representatives forever when six-term Texas Senator Ellis Watson died suddenly of a massive heart attack and it fell to Governor James Whitfield to appoint Watson's successor. What followed for George S. Austin was a nearly *Faustian* rise through the congressional hierarchy. He was appointed to prime subcommittees, subcommittee seats that more-senior party loyalists would have died for—more to the point, would have killed

for. He became the chairman of the two most powerful senate subcommittees through the death of one senator and the early retirement of another, and was eventually made Senate Majority Leader. George S. Austin was a perennial favorite on the Sunday morning talk show circuit, which provided him the perfect springboard to the ultimate national prize: President of the United States of America.

Then came Treem. Seemingly out of nowhere. And the dream was over. Treem was to the political world what the band Revolver was to the world of pop music: a phenomenon. Sinatra, Elvis, The Beatles, U2, and now Revolver transcended all others in their genre, had an inexplicable attraction for the masses. In politics it was Washington, Jackson, Lincoln, FDR, JFK, Reagan...and now Treem.

Now the best George S. Austin could ever hope for was second best, a position he had never been satisfied with. To his credit, he threw himself into being the best No. 2 man he could be, learning everything he could about being the world's most powerful understudy on the world's most prominent stage. It was in this effort that knowledge and opportunity collided with fate once more, and the brass ring of power appeared within his grasp for perhaps one last grab.

George S. Austin, barely into his first term as Vice President, discovered Dr. Cornell Bridger and the Genetic Discovery Corporation, a front for an ultra-secret military operation in Palo Alto, California, whose covert mission it was to know everything there was to know about biogenetic and chemical weapons in the world—and to develop the next generation of those weapons.

3

THE TRAINS IN THE UKRAINE STATION hissed and creaked like a cacophonous, industrial orchestra quietly tuning up as dozens of passengers climbed into the vibrating coaches. Even now, in mid November, an unseasonable arctic cold front had the people bundled up tight; gloves, scarves, and hats holding off the chill as they huffed and puffed clouds of human steam, making their way quickly from the station-house to the warmth of the cars. The smell of cold diesel fumes hung in the air, stinging their nostrils with each frozen inhalation. At irregular intervals along the platform, pairs of uniformed police slapped at their arms and breathed hot air into their cold, cupped hands, dancing in place to generate some heat, joking with each other as they perused the crowds for nothing in particular. No one gave the police much thought today; it was too cold even for the most ardent of officers to hassle anyone without real provocation. This suited Taras Ostrovsky just fine.

Taras Ostrovsky was two days away from becoming a very wealthy man as he boarded the train in Kiev. Rich despite the fact

that of the men involved in this particular business deal, T.O., as he liked to be called, was at the bottom of the money pile, a mere courier in a world of CEOs. For the next two days, T.O. would zigzag his way from Kiev to Bucharest to Istanbul to deliver his oversized briefcase to a trio of Arab entrepreneurs in exchange for a Swiss account number and password worth fifty-million Euros, ‘earnest money’ against future such shipments. Ostrovksy’s share would be in the neighborhood of one-million Euros, a nice neighborhood by any measure, a neighborhood where a twenty-seven-year-old Ukrainian boy with little education, strong, handsome masculine features, and an iron-sculpted body would be sure to get a bit of culture and respectability; a respectable front for his occasional courier duties.

Ostrovsky surveyed the platform for anything out of place as he stepped onto the coach. His eyes swept the people in the seats, as well as the activity out the windows, as he made his way down the aisle toward the next car. He registered a couple of men who he’d pay close attention to during the trip, but nothing set off any particular alarms. He crossed into the Club Car, the air smelling vaguely of stale cigarettes. The bartender, his back turned, wiped and stacked glasses, preparing his station for the inevitable rush once the train got underway. Once across the Club Car, Ostrovsky crossed the coupling transom to the First Class section. Hugging the windowed wall past the common lavatory, he made his way through the narrow corridor to his room four doors up on the left.

Taras Ostrovsky was traveling First Class, though in this instance that merely signified privacy not luxury. He slid open the door and stepped into the small compartment where for the next couple of days, except for meals, a drink or two, or an occasional stretch of his legs, he had been instructed to spend most of his time alone. The appointments were simple: to his immediate right, a small sink and built-in counter for his briefcase and travel bag; to the left, twin padded couch seats hiding a pull-down bed and an overhead storage

bin. The sink comprised a small basin with hot and cold running water, above which was an arched mirror outlined by two red tube lights and flanked by four electrical plates bearing switches and outlets. A red towel bar near the door rounded out the presentation. The padded seats were covered in a light gray bottom cushion and dark gray back, each with horizontal one-inch accent stripes of white, blue, red, and orange. The walls—simulated wood paneling—approximated some designer’s idea of pine or oak. The azure blue curtains on the windows were open.

Ostrovsky placed the briefcase and travel bag on the counter, turned back to close and latch the door, then quickly went to the window and closed the curtain. He stripped off his overcoat and scarf and laid them on the counter. He pulled down the seat back exposing the bed, put the briefcase on the mattress, and closed it up tight again. Ostrovsky reopened the curtain, lit a cigarette, and sat looking quietly out the window at the diminishing activity on the platform. At 9:26 the train began to move and wouldn’t stop again till they reached Cernauti at 6:56 that evening. It was safe to assume no one was getting on or off this train for the next nine hours or so. As they cleared the train yard and headed for open countryside, Ostrovsky exhaled the last drag, stubbed out the butt, and started for the club car. It was time to toast himself, his future, and this wonderful undertaking.

In two days T.O. would be a very wealthy man.

4

WES FRANKLIN STOOD QUIETLY reading the names of the dead, waiting for the friend who had asked to meet him here. The list seemed to go on forever. Fifty-eight thousand two hundred sixty names; men and women; some shot, some blown to pieces, some tortured; twelve-hundred still missing, probably dead; all the rest, definitely dead, irrevocably dead, eternally dead. Many of them had been mere teenagers or barely in their twenties when they were savagely killed; others were fathers, some mothers; all sons and daughters. And no matter what anyone said, no matter what euphemism was applied, there could be no mistake: these dead did not give their lives; for these dead their lives were taken from them, wrenched from them, forcefully, brutally, horribly. Wes was stunned by the magnitude of the cataclysm, the sheer stupidity and waste of it all. Of the fifty-eight thousand two hundred sixty names listed, all were important to someone, but only one had special significance for Wes, though he had only been three-years-old when the man was killed. Dennis Greenwald was a cousin once or twice removed—Wes wasn't quite sure how the whole family-tree thing worked. Dennis Greenwald had actually been his father's cousin, which

probably made Dennis a second cousin. The man had been three days shy of his nineteenth birthday when his body was recovered, *MULTIPLE FRAGMENTATION WOUNDS* neatly typed on the meticulous report form.

A deep but quiet voice reached out from behind Franklin. “Know anyone?”

Wes turned to see Crandall Forsyth standing behind him. He looked back to the list of names. “Yeah, Dennis Greenwald, panel 30E, line 48, Southfield, Michigan,” said Wes. “You?”

“Dale Plote, panel 18E, line 6. From South Elgin, Illinois.”

“How’d he die?” asked Wes.

“Small arms fire.”

“Where?”

“Thua Thien, south of Hue. Dennis?”

“Dak To, Kontum Province, 173rd Airborne Brigade.”

“Ah, the Skysoldiers. When was he killed?” asked Forsyth.

“November 20, 1967.”

“That was one hell of a mess, probably the bloodiest November of the whole war.” Crandall Forsyth shook his head in disgust. “We should have pulled all our people out of there and just nuked the whole damn country.”

Wes, stunned, turned back to the man. “You’re kidding right?” Forsyth said nothing. “You can’t possibly be serious. Nuclear weapons? The Secretary of State of the United States of America thinks nuclear weapons are a viable option?”

“Everything’s on the table, Wes. That means in the final analysis, we win or they lose.” His expression was as cold as the autumn air. “Why, you have a problem with that?”

“Oh, c’mon Crandall, you can’t possibly mean that.” Wes studied his friend’s expression for a hint of sarcasm but saw none. “You’re telling me that if you had been Secretary of State back then, you would’ve advocated nuking Vietnam?”

Forsyth said, “Take another look at the Wall, Wes,” nodding

toward the endless stretch of names etched in the black granite panels. “You know,” he reflected, “more than twenty thousand of those names wouldn’t be up there if, on the day McNamara finally understood we couldn’t win, he had done everything he could to convince Johnson to pull all our people out of there and just bomb the whole damn country back to the stone-age like some of our politicians and generals wanted to?”

“That’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard; and probably the scariest thing I could ever imagine coming out of the mouth of America’s chief diplomat! My god man, you’re the final line of rationality, the last bastion of civilized thought to protect us little guys when all around you have lost their minds! What could you possibly be thinking? You weren’t like this in school!” said Wes, referring to their days at Harvard some twenty years earlier. “If your great-great-grand-uncle—who you were always so fond of quoting, as I recall—could hear you now, he’d rise up from his grave and smack you with his boney, decomposed fingers, slap some damn sense into you!”

Crandall Forsyth smiled at the image. “Come on, Wes, let’s walk a bit. It’s getting cold standing here.” He took Franklin by the arm and led him off toward the Lincoln Memorial. “Nuclear weapons are our strength, Wes. It’s the ‘super’ in super-power. Why shouldn’t we use them? And if we aren’t going to use them, why do we keep them?”

“We don’t use them because they shock our sensibilities to think of the destruction they cause. We don’t use them because the fallout would make us all glow in the damn dark for ten thousand years. We don’t use them because we used them twice on human beings and we’re revolted by the misery and suffering they left in their wake, or should I say crater? We don’t use them because we’re Americans, Crandall, and Americans are better than that.”

The two shuffled slowly along the cement path, the leafless branches of the now-dormant trees wagging cold tendrils at them in

the fall breeze.

“And the other question?” said Forsyth.

“What other question?” asked Wes.

“*Why* do we keep them?”

“Hell if I know! If it were up to me, I’d get rid of every damn one of them tomorrow.”

“You’d leave our country unarmed, vulnerable to our enemies?”

“What *enemies* would you use them on?” asked Wes. “Russia? The cold war is over and they have more to worry about than some ridiculous fear the US will attack them. They’re too busy trying to get enough food, trying to stay warm, trying to overcome nature. North Korea? What are they going to do, blow up a bunch of fish? Who could they reach even if they had an arsenal of nukes? They have no delivery system,” flashed Wes. “They might as well be lobbing nuclear hand grenades! India, Pakistan, Israel, France, Britain? It’s a small club, Mr. Secretary. Which of them should we fear most, which of them should we allow to make us so paranoid we’d risk our own destruction? And by *our*, I mean the whole damn planet!”

“You left one out, Wes,” said Forsyth impassively.

“Who?”

“China. How long you suppose it is before it’s their turn to be the world’s dominant culture?”

“I don’t know but they sure couldn’t screw it up any worse than the west has!”

“What about terrorists, Wes?”

“All right, what *about* terrorists? If a terrorist group sets off a nuke in New York, who are you going to launch against? They aren’t a nation-state, Crandall; they’re a group of street thugs with the ultimate Saturday-night-special.”

Crandall Forsyth lit up in a cryptic smile. “You always were one hell of a bright kid, Wes. I knew that the first day I met you. And not just because you were one of the youngest doctoral candidates

Harvard had ever seen. What were you, seventeen? Eighteen?”

“Nineteen,” said Franklin, almost embarrassed to admit it.

“Oh, *nineteen*, excuse me. What took you so long? Had a little set back in preschool?” said Forsyth in a warm, wry drawl. “Couldn’t quite get the hang of milk-and-cookies and nap time so they held you back a year?”

Wes Franklin had been one of those true rarities: A child prodigy who seemingly came out of the womb already knowing more than most people could learn in three lifetimes. It was like he had been born with the Encyclopedia Britannica uploaded in his head and a direct software link to the Ethernet for everything else. The only thing he seemed *not* to know was just how smart he was. Crandall Forsyth, on the other hand, had gone through Harvard pretty cocksure of himself, ready to take charge of the world. Ready, that is, until the day he was summoned to the chancellor’s office, introduced to a teenage doctoral candidate named Wes Franklin, and told the greatest thing he, Crandall Forsyth, could ever do for the world was to take young Franklin as his charge and make sure nothing bad happened to him. This he did with relish, taking an instant liking to the young Wes. Wes Franklin seemed anything but a prodigy; an engaging young man, far from a burden to Forsyth, who was some eight years senior. And rather than be an albatross to Forsyth’s social life, Wes was actually an improvement; a curiosity everyone wanted to get close to, and a real charmer once they did. Forsyth chaperoned Franklin into adulthood and Boston social life, and Franklin, for his part, served as escort and liaison to Forsyth’s higher self, his true intellect, not just the academic stuff they both excelled at.

Crandall Forsyth thoroughly enjoyed his role as mentor to this amazing youngster, imparting life-lessons to Wes through quotations he attributed to his ‘great-great-grand-uncle’ John Forsyth, the first Secretary of State in the Forsyth family, who served in that capacity for both “*Andy Jackson* and *Marty Van Buren*,” as Crandall Forsyth familiarly referred to the past Presidents as though longtime friends

of the family. *The* John Forsyth, whose thirty-year career in service to his country was pure Georgian legend. In reality, most of the quotes Crandall Forsyth used to inspire Wes were probably just made up, had never really been uttered by his famous relative, but Forsyth expressed them with such a wonderful southern charm and flare that the young Wes was always an attentive, appreciative audience, nonetheless.

So it was even more troubling to Wes that his friend could have wandered so far from his roots, so far from one of the greatest statesmen Georgia ever produced.

“I just can’t believe what you’re saying, Crandall. Was Lord Acton so right that even *you* have become tainted by power—and after just one year?”

“Now, don’t jump to too many conclusions, my friend. Things aren’t always what they seem; maybe I’m not quite as corrupted as you may think,” said Forsyth. “Tell me, you ever heard of Nash Equilibrium?”

“Yeah, John Forbes Nash, game theory. Why?”

“Well, that’s a start. But what do you know about his theory on equilibrium,” asked Forsyth.

“Basically, it’s a solution concept,” answered Wes.

“Go on.”

“All right, you have two or more players in a game, and each has his own strategy for winning—or at least for not losing—and each player knows and understands the strategy of the others. Nash says that, if each player has a specific strategy and no player can benefit by unilaterally changing his strategy if the other players don’t change theirs, then the universe of choices and possible payoffs is frozen, constitutes equilibrium, if you will. The question Nash poses is, ‘Knowing the strategies of the other players, and treating the strategies of the other players as set in stone, can I benefit by changing my strategy?’ Right?”

“Perfect,” said Forsyth. “I wouldn’t have expected anything less

from you, Wes.”

“So?” puzzled Wes. “So how does that change the fact that you’d have to be a raving, friggin’ loon to be willing to launch nukes on the world?”

Forsyth laughed openly. “A ‘raving, friggin’ loon’! Good one.” He shook his head, smiling. “But I’m *not* willing to, Wes. And neither is President Treem. I just had to be absolutely certain you were in accord with that belief before asking for your help.”

Wes looked at his friend, relieved a bit, but curious.

Forsyth asked, “Why do you think I asked you to meet me at the Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial?”

“I don’t know; you needed to get some fresh air? All those power people around you were sucking all the oxygen out of the office?”

Again Forsyth smiled. He knew Wes Franklin had a deep, abiding mistrust of the Washington power brokers and wannabes. At the same time, Forsyth believed Wes had a greater love for the underlying philosophies at the foundation of this city than almost anyone Forsyth knew; the same core values both his President and he shared.

“The 1960s were a dynamic, dangerous time for the world,” said Forsyth. “The Wall *is* the decade of the ‘60s, Wes; all the horror, all the tribulation, all the honor and sacrifice, all the best and all the worst we could be. At the beginning of that decade, we raced to build missiles with the potential to destroy us all; by the end of it, we built missiles to take us to the moon, to the stars, and beyond; there was seemingly no end to where we could go and what we could achieve. And always—*always*—we were willing to pay the price.”

Wes watched and listened to his friend, happy to see the man he once knew and loved resurfacing, though he still wasn’t certain where this was all leading.

“Do you remember what our nuclear policies were called back then, Wes?”

“Yeah, mad!” said Wes.

Forsyth smiled at the double entendre. “Right. M-A-D, Mutual Assured Destruction.” Forsyth's whole face lit up, “Now *there* were some raving, friggin’ loons for you; the people who came up with *that* concept.” He paused a second, looking pensively at the icons of history all around them. “But maybe that acronym helped to keep things sane, you know? I mean, what better deterrent to the use of such horrendous force than to know its futility, to know that one wrong move and this beautiful blue planet would be reduced to a cinder? That’s all changed now, Wes. The surreal threat of a thousand ICBMs raining down on us from the sky is gone, replaced by the nightmare scenario of a briefcase full of Plutonium left in a New York waste can on Broadway and Seventh and detonated at the height of rush hour by a lone fanatic with a joystick ten miles away.” Forsyth shone a worried, almost helpless look to Wes. “You were right, you know. Who do we attack with our missiles when *that* happens? The threat is no longer the nation-state, or the city-state; it’s the state-of-one! It’s a fringe lunatic with a pound of ²³⁹Pu—weapons grade Plutonium—strapped to his chest.”

“What do we do then?” asked Wes, almost rhetorically.

“Then? Nothing,” said Forsyth. “Now, Wes. NOW is when we do something.”

“I’m listening. What did you have in mind?” asked Wes.

By now the two had ambled their way over to where Lincoln was sitting, vigilantly keeping watch over the Union he had preserved.

“He said it best,” Forsyth threw his chin toward the marble President. “A house divided against itself cannot stand.” He looked back to Wes. “I’m afraid we have a severely divided house, Wes. The President and Vice President are no longer on the same page on this one. I’m getting worried how and where this rift will end.”

“What’s going on Mr. Secretary?” asked a concerned Wes. “How can I help?”

5

JOE ROSENFELD RETRIEVED THE FOUR-INCH FILE on Jared Kennan Cain from the closet floor. They had all left in such a big hurry seven days earlier that the bottom of the closet, under a stack of old APA journals, was as close to a real hiding place as he could manage under the circumstances. In nearly two decades of practice Rosenfeld, who kept meticulous notes, had never felt compelled to write even in a year of sessions what Jared Kennan Cain generated in less than three weeks. Rosenfeld knew after the first two sessions that his next book would be dedicated to this one patient and was determined to capture Cain's final flights of fantasy word-for-word.

Now all he could think was to get Jared Kennan Cain's life as far away from his own as possible.

Rosenfeld said, "Here, Liz" and handed her the file.

She took its heft with both hands. She knew this was necessary but part of her wished it weren't. She hadn't heard the sessions, so she didn't know exactly what Cain had said, but five days on the road with Jared Kennan Cain told her whatever was in this record was pure gold. In reality, it was a treasure beyond mere gold. Joe's

willingness to give it up was impressive; spoke volumes for his own integrity.

She took the file and left without a word. There was nothing to say really.

Rosenfeld put his feet up on his rosewood desk and flipped through the pages of the skinny fictitious file. He didn't invent stories for this file; the ones who would want it would see through any lies he tried to write. No, he didn't lie; he abridged. Abridged the hell out of it. Only the intake sheet was original; the rest he sketched loosely from memory, enough to be interesting without actually getting to the truth. Rosenfeld had to smile as he was reminded of the favorite phrase of a close friend: Truth never happens in real time! That sure applied here. But it wasn't likely the real truth about Jared Kennan Cain would ever happen—in real time or any other kind of time!

Liz Charles had conducted the intake interview; the entries were in her hand and her words but Cain had signed it.

NAME: Jared Kennan Cain.

ADDRESS: various residences in the U.S., Switzerland,
The Netherlands, India, Japan, Iraq, North Africa.
Space on the form ran out before the list of Cain's
homes did.

OCCUPATION: Venture Capitalist.

[Sufficiently vague, Rosenfeld thought, but in a minimalist sort of way was perfect.]

SEX: Male

RACE/ETHNICITY: none listed.

SSN: none listed.

AGE: none listed.

He appeared to be in his early forties, though the cancer made him look older, worn out. There were three numbers written in the space for a birth date: 1 5 18. At the time Rosenfeld overlooked it, figured it was just sloppy handwriting. If it was supposed to be a birth date—maybe 1/5/78—it meant he was thirty. Couldn't be, not this man. If it was 1918...no way this guy was born in 1918. He'd have been over ninety. Impossible, no matter how old and worn the disease made him look, he didn't look ninety.

GENERAL HEALTH: Rosenfeld had filled in this section himself based on what Cain said, as well as what Eddie had told him on the phone immediately after that first meeting. Stage 4 small-cell lung cancers, metastasized, pleural effusion affecting breathing. Clinical prognosis for 5-year survival rate: less than 2%. In this instance, the prognosis was death within a month. Patient should be given liberal access to morphine for pain—there are no side effects that could outweigh the obvious inevitability. Patient reports declining other treatment modalities as 'unnecessary.' 'Seems resigned and rational, if not fatalistic', was written in the margin.

That assessment would soon change.

Rosenfeld slowly swiveled his chair and stared absently out the window at the green foothills beyond Hwy 280. In retrospect, that whole day was bizarre from the get go. After his first session, he probably should have hung out a GONE GOLFING sign but he had no way of knowing what was coming, and once it started, it just kept pulling him in deeper and deeper. He knew the phrase 'the price of celebrity' but never knew his own would be so costly—or so dangerous.

* * *** * *

SOME 50-MINUTE HOURS LAST A LIFETIME!

Dr. Joe Rosenfeld was well versed in every major therapeutic approach, from traditional to pop. His own technique was a synthesis of everything he'd learned, blended smoothly into his own personality, which was basically *realist*. He was a great listener, empathetic, sympathetic, kind, but with a low tolerance for bullshit and a personable manner of directly confronting the bullshitter. Sue Thompson was precisely one of those clients who came along every so often who, no matter how much progress you thought you were making with her, would always come back the following week even more screwed up than when she started. After six months of weekly sessions, she was back to square one, talking about trying to work things out again with her abusive, loser ex-husband. Rosenfeld, generally sanguine and infinitely patient, was uncharacteristically fit to be tied, ready to bang his head against the wall of crap she was throwing up in front of him this morning.

Minute-by-excruciating-minute Rosenfeld's complexion became redder and redder until it almost matched his full-faced, fire-red beard, his voice growing more New York nasal as he choked back his frustration and tried to reflect a little reality back at her.

"So what you're saying is that basically you like it when he treats you like shit."

"No."

She was unconvincing.

"Has he hit you again?"

"No!"

This time she was more forceful but that only aggravated Rosenfeld more. She defended this loser more adamantly than she defended herself.

"You aren't going to let him move back in, are you?"

Sue Thompson said nothing. She was on the verge of tears.

"What happened the last time you let him back in?"

"It was good at first. He really tried. He's just weak; he has weak

moments. That's all. He's a good man, really. He just has weak moments." Her eyes pooled.

"Within three weeks he broke your nose, Sue. Doesn't sound too weak to me."

"Not that way," she said. "Weak in the spirit. He's had a tough life and sometimes he just goes off, but he's a good man Dr. Rosenfeld."

This went on for the entire hour. It was classic, which meant tragic, because Rosenfeld knew that nothing he could do today was going to alter the collision course she was on. He couldn't stop her and she wouldn't stop herself. The only thing in the room that had the power to stop anything today was the clock, and it was now *buzzing* its determination to do just that.

Sue Thompson left red-eyed while Rosenfeld remained red-faced, muttering obscenities at the distant hills once the door closed behind her. This was exactly when he should have put out the GONE GOLFING sign and headed over to Stanford for a quick eighteen.

But he wasn't quick enough.

A single, light tap on the door and Liz Charles stuck her head in.

"Joe, there's a Mr. Cain here to see you. He doesn't have an appointment but he's a referral from Eddie."

Rosenfeld swiveled to look at her, still decompressing from Sue Thompson.

"Have him fill out the intake papers and work him in some time later this week."

Liz whispered, "Joe, I think you should see him now if you don't mind."

Rosenfeld frowned but Liz made her own facial gestures that said waiting wasn't the best option. Rosenfeld took a deep breath and relented. "All right, give me five minutes then send him in."

Rosenfeld shoved Sue Thompson's file in a drawer, straightened his desk almost in OCD fashion, and prepared himself to meet his new referral.

No amount of preparation would have been adequate for their first meeting.

Liz opened the door and ushered the man in as Rosenfeld stood up, professional courtesy. She placed the intake folder on the desk and quietly left. Rosenfeld was transfixed by the image of the man standing in his office.

“Dr. Rosenfeld, my name is Jared Kennan Cain. Thank you for seeing me on such short notice. I am truly sorry for the inconvenience. Dr. Bertaccini was kind enough to give me this referral, at my request actually. He seemed to feel there was some urgency,” Cain laughed awkwardly and with some effort, “but if this is a bad time for you, I would be happy to schedule something later.”

The two men did not shake hands, almost by unspoken mutual agreement. The depth of Jared Kennan Cain’s disease was profound and self-evident, perhaps accounting for the men keeping a comfortable distance; Cain from self-consciousness, Rosenfeld from a level of discomfort that surprised even him, hardly the reaction of one in the *helping* professions.

“Please, Mr. Cain, have a seat,” said Rosenfeld, gesturing to one of two high-back leather chairs. “What can I do for you?”

“You can help me die.”

He said this with such a creepy nonchalance and a faint grin, as if to make light of the statement, that Rosenfeld was inwardly nonplussed.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Cain, but I’m not that kind of doctor. Perhaps a hospice...”

“No, no, doctor. I was only trying to...no, I’m afraid a hospice isn’t what I need. Besides, I’m not interested in a place where people sit around waiting to die. Actually, if I had a choice, I would prefer not to wait, but at any rate...”

Rosenfeld bristled and interrupted him. “Mr. Cain, I do not practice medicine and I certainly do not practice *that* kind of medicine. I’m a psychiatrist. I help people by listening and talking

with them. Frankly, Mr. Cain, I'm afraid my humble skills would be of limited help to you."

Jared Kennan Cain sat rigidly still for a moment, his eyes closed tight against a rush of pain, his breathing difficult, labored and loud, his skin grayish and clammy, eyes bloodshot, jaundiced, and tired. Cain opened his eyes after a few seconds and stared out the window for a few more. "Beautiful view," he said, gazing at the lush green hills for a minute before adding, more to himself than to Rosenfeld, "but I've seen enough." He turned back. "Your book intrigued me and I thought we might talk about it some."

"My book? Which one, I've written five?"

Cain smiled through another stab of pain and took a breathless moment to respond. "Yes, of course. I've read them all, very good writing. But I think you'll appreciate my interest in your most recent work: *Death: Just a Stroll in the Dark*."

The book Cain referred to was a compilation of near-death experiences gleaned during a year of interviews with people who had been pronounced clinically dead then revived to go on to live extremely happy, productive lives. They were a diverse group of subjects, ranging in age from nineteen to sixty-three, from various cultural and religious backgrounds and of different socioeconomic groups. The only thing they had in common for this study was that they had all flatlined for at least seven minutes before being resuscitated. But their differences seemed only to hold relevance *before* their 'death'; after their revival, their differences seemed to disappear; it was like talking to one person, with only slight variations on a theme. Across the board they expressed a certain reluctance at returning to the land of the living, generally doing so because of the effect their departure would have on someone else and all genuinely looking forward to the time when they would complete that journey. They lost their sense of time, too. Not the daily kind of time—appointments, work, seasons, holidays—but the eternal kind of time; life-death, then-now, and all the fears and

concerns that are a usual part of the process of living.

Rosenfeld suddenly had an insight, thought he understood Jared Kennan Cain a little better. Cain has a sort of jealousy for these people, he thought, death-envy. It wasn't so much that he wanted to die, as that he wanted to *be* dead. Looking at him, the obvious pain the man must be in, the inevitability and proximity of death, of course he wanted to be finished with this life; the thought of crossing held such promise—and relief! And now Rosenfeld had a better handle on what Jared Kennan Cain wanted from him, what he, *Dr. Joe Rosenfeld*, could offer this man in his last days: comfort and hope. And all within his 'limited skill set': talking and listening.

"Mr. Cain, I am truly sorry that you have to go through this. Do you have family nearby, friends to spend your remaining time with?"

"Family? No, no, too long ago to remember. They're all gone now. And friends?" Cain shifted in his chair at another stab of pain, "I make business friendships, doctor. Hardly the kind of friends to turn to for, uh, comfort, so to speak. And none I would trust to help me now. Right now I need a very public, much publicized death, in the company of strangers, for all to see. Only then will I be able to elude these evil men, the ones who feed on the misery and death of others."

These last comments caught Rosenfeld by surprise. Did this guy have some kind of persecution complex? Was this some kind of morphine psychosis, paranoia induced by the very thing that should be giving him some relief?

"I'm afraid there is really nothing much I or medical science can do for you at this point, Mr. Cain. I think you know your disease has reached a point where the most we can offer you is a little relief from your suffering."

"This?" Cain seemed to shrug off the obvious. "This is nothing, really. I've had worse. No, this will pass doctor. The problem is that I won't. But we can talk about all this later, if you don't mind. I'm feeling a bit tired right now, I'm sure you understand. Perhaps we

can talk some more tomorrow when I'm not so—distracted? I'll make an appointment with your secretary. We can talk then. I'll look forward to it, actually."

Rosenfeld thought immediately of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and the five stages of dying: denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. This guy is definitely in denial! I'm just not sure he has enough time left to run the course! "That will be fine, Mr. Cain. Have my secretary schedule whatever time is convenient for you. In the meantime, may God watch over you."

"Thank you for the sentiment, doctor, but that's not likely. I don't think there is a God. And even if there is, I'm quite convinced He hates me," Cain's voice trailed off into silence, "to have abandoned me, stranded me for so long, left me so singularly alone." He slowly rose from his chair, gave a slight nod, and left without another word.

Rosenfeld scribbled some notes to recap the session for what he figured would be the shortest file in his cabinet. A couple minutes later Liz opened the door, came in and plopped down on the leather chair.

"Pretty sad, huh? He made an appointment for tomorrow at two. Would you believe he also had me write him in for the same time every day for the next two weeks? I'll give you ten-to-one he doesn't make them all." She casually tugged at the hem of her already-too-short skirt, which was leaving a little too much skin in contact with the leather. "What d'ya think?"

"Honey, I think you're a lot more in touch with his condition than he is."

"Well, how sweet, you called me *honey*! Maybe there's a chance for us after all!" she teased.

Rosenfeld ignored her.

"Did Bertaccini say anything when he referred this guy?" he asked.

"Eddie?...talk to *me*? Eddie *makes* referrals, he doesn't call them in himself, sweetie! Shirley called and said she was sending the guy

over on Eddie's instructions, that the guy wanted to talk out some things, and that he could definitely pay. Eddie figured you'd be able to deal with the guy's issues better than anybody."

"What's to deal with? You saw the guy! I can't believe he's still walking around in his condition. He's got to be on more morphine than Courtney Love at a Larry Flynt house party."

"Well that's pretty damned insensitive!" said Liz. "Besides, other than looking like death warmed over, he was pretty lucid. His answers in the intake seemed right to the point. He didn't space out or anything. What did he say to you?"

"We didn't really get into anything," said Rosenfeld, reaching for the phone. He punched in some numbers and waited a few seconds for the answer.

"Eddie, Joe...listen, I just met with your latest referral...Yeah, he sure is, so why'd you send him to me?...Oh c'mon, you must know at least one other shrink in the area!...What? Yeah, I know he asked for me...Yeah, yeah, world famous author!...No, I've never seen the guy before in my life...Well, thanks for the vote of confidence but I don't know what you expect me to do...Tell me something about the disease."

Liz Charles scooted to the edge of her chair listening to half a conversation and shooting exasperated looks at Rosenfeld every other second.

"Did you get the lab results back?" he continued. "That bad, huh?...Oh, man! So just how much medication is he on? You're kidding, right?...And?...No shit!"

Liz was ready to explode.

"Well look, he's got to be the world's greatest optimist. Can you believe he actually made appointments every day for the next two weeks? If he makes it that long I'll give you a call...Okay, you too...Yeah, talk to you later."

Rosenfeld cradled the receiver and stared silently at the phone.

Liz was beside herself.

“Well?” she said, unable or unwilling to hide her frustration.

Rosenfeld looked at her with a puzzled expression but didn’t answer.

“What did Eddie say?” she said through gritted teeth.

“Is there another client?” asked Rosenfeld distractedly.

“No!” she yelled, “And if you don’t answer me, I’m coming right over this desk and...”

“Good,” he said calmly. “Have a seat.”

“So I’m sitting already! Now what did Eddie say?” said Liz, jerking the chair closer to the desk.

“Eddie said Cain came in to see him in his Los Altos office a few days ago. Cain self-diagnosed himself as having cancer, asked Eddie to take x-rays and a biopsy to verify it, and asked for a referral to me.”

“Specifically to *you*? Why?”

“Because of my book. He wanted Eddie to verify his disease then send him here. And get this, he didn’t ask for any drugs of any kind.”

“What! You’re kidding! Does he have his own supplier? I mean, c’mon, anyone in that condition would have to be in miserable pain. He has to be on something.”

“Not according to Eddie. Cain told him to hold off on the referral until the lab results came back.”

“And?” she asked.

“And this is one sick guy. His lungs are fried, it’s a wonder he can even breathe, let alone walk around. The cancer has spread to other organs, as well. I hope you wrote his appointments in pencil.”

Liz shot a disapproving look at the insensitive quip.

“Eddie can’t imagine him making it through another two weeks in the shape he’s in,” said Rosenfeld, ignoring Liz’s non-approving glare.

“And he didn’t want any drugs?”

“Nope; none! Eddie was ready to admit him to the hospital and

get him on morphine immediately but Cain said that ‘wouldn’t be necessary.’ Can you believe that? Wouldn’t be necessary! Eddie asked if he wanted a prescription for anything. Cain told him no, that Eddie should look closely at the lab report and he’d understand.”

“Understand what?” she asked.

“That’s what knocked Eddie’s socks off. When the lab report came back, it verified the worst as far as the cancer was concerned. But the real kicker was that the guy’s body is apparently producing endorphins like a damn pharmaceutical machine. Eddie said he’s never seen anything like it in his life—and in his years in oncology he’s seen some pretty wild stuff. Cain is producing so much natural pain killer you’d probably get a contact high just shaking his hand!”

“Okay, so the guy is feeling no pain—or less, anyway. I still don’t get it,” said Liz. “Instead of coming directly to you—for whatever reasons he has for specifically wanting to see you—he goes to Eddie for a biopsy and a referral and schedules appointments he probably won’t live long enough to keep. What’s that all about?”

“You got me! I guess we just wait a couple weeks and see what happens. To tell you the truth, I almost hope he doesn’t make it. Considering what he looked like today, the next two weeks sure aren’t going to be pretty! And besides, I may be good, but I’m not that good; there’s nothing I can do for him. He’s in denial now but he can’t stay that way for long. Reality will set in soon enough.”

6

WHEN IT CAME TO THE STATE DEPARTMENT, one could only hope they put more creativity into their policies than they did their architecture. The C Street building was, to put it diplomatically, a functional-looking building, white, square, flat, in short, uninspiring. But step off the elevator at the eighth floor these days and you get a whole other experience, one that leaves you feeling like Dorothy stepping from her sepia-toned living room smack into Munchkin Land, a museum-like presentation of 18th and 19th century furnishings and décor of pure Americana. From the Edward Vason Jones Memorial Hall to the John Quincy Adams State Drawing Room, the Thomas Jefferson State Reception Room to the Benjamin Franklin State Dining Room, the eighth floor was a work of art and grandeur. Crandall Forsyth just had to give Wes the personal tour of his new digs before they settled into some serious work in the Secretary's office, itself an unabashed tribute to the white male founding fathers that preceded him. Wes was duly impressed but anxious to finish the discussion they had started at the Lincoln Memorial.

“How much do you know about Vice President Austin, Wes?”

“About as much as the next guy, I suppose,” said Franklin. “I’ve seen him on Meet The Press over the years, seemed like any other senator, vague answers, mostly talking points, stays to the party line most of the time, a liberal but I never got the sense he was married to it. If you believe the talking heads, he leveraged the number two spot with his considerable influence, especially in the western states.”

“Did you happen to see him with Russert—rest in peace” Forsyth crossed himself “—during the primaries, the Sunday before Texas, when nuclear energy talk was hot and heavy?”

“Yeah, probably; I watched Russert religiously. Sunday mornings he was basically my church. But nothing stands out.”

“Let me refresh your memory,” said Forsyth. “Nuclear energy was in the news a lot that week, in part because of the new revelations about the Air Force screw-up flying nukes over the heartland the previous September on a route from Minot, North Dakota to Barksdale Air Force Base in Louisiana, six live warheads—without knowing they were onboard! And of course the nuclear waste dump at Yucca Mountain had been on the public’s radar since about 2002, gas prices were still climbing, some people were clamoring for offshore drilling, others for windfall profits taxes on the oil companies.”

“Right,” said Wes. “And Austin was calling for more nuclear plants, rather forcefully as I recall.”

“Exactly! And Treem’s position on that?” coaxed Forsyth.

“Then-candidate Treem was extremely articulate in opposition to nuclear power, both for energy and defense,” remembered Wes, “too dangerous, with so much movement of nuclear waste across the country the odds for mishap definitely portended some kind of eventual catastrophe.”

“Right, estimates from DOE were that, over the course of just under four decades, there would be almost a hundred and ten thousand shipments of nuclear waste from sites all across the country.”

“Holy cow!!” exclaimed Wes.

“Yeah, well think about it, we’ve got a hundred and thirty-one commercial reactors, private research sites, and let’s not forget the Navy and all their nuclear powered ships. This stuff would pass through about forty-three states over that time, and many of those states are opposed to having sites within their own state lines to begin with, so they sure as hell don’t want this stuff passing through their neighborhoods. Add to that concern the fact that through the nineties there were about thirty accidents a year, that about ten thousand people a year were evacuated from their homes because of hazardous material spills from train wrecks, and we have some real threats to consider.”

Wes interjected, “And you haven’t even mentioned our nuclear arsenal, yet!”

“You said it, my friend! Land-based strategic weapons, sea-based, air-based, non-strategic nukes like our Tomahawks, the B-61 gravity bomb, where do you want me to start? And it’s not like we have blinders on regarding the potential for consequences. Ever hear of Broken Arrow?” Wes shook his head. “Nucflash, Bent Spear, Dull Sword, Faded Giant?” Wes shook ‘no’ to each. “These are all names for exercises to deal with nuclear incidents and accidents. I mean, my god, how many different scenarios for screwing yourself do you need to come up with before you start questioning what the hell you’re playing with in the first place?”

“And we get all hot and bothered over Iran and North Korea because they’re trying to develop nukes,” said Wes.

“Yes, but I—and the President—think it’s important to convince them to back off their efforts, too. The real question is, how? How do you tell someone else not to do something that you are doing in spades?”

“Good point,” said Wes. “Do as I say, not as I do’ didn’t even cut it when we were kids.”

“Precisely. Which is why the President has called for a world

summit of all countries that have, or are trying to get, nukes or nuclear material.”

“And Austin?” asked Wes.

“The Vice President is old school on this one, Wes. He’s willing to try carrots but he definitely likes the big stick. And that brings us to our ‘house divided’.

Crandall Forsyth told Wes Franklin about the Oval Office session six weeks earlier when Treem told Austin about the proposed summit and the message the President intended to deliver. George S. Austin had gone ballistic. And President Treem didn’t back down, either. The thick Oval Office walls gave little insulation to the decibels generated by the first and second most powerful people in the world. The ensuing shouting match spilled into the foyer and practically down the halls of the West Wing. For a half hour they kept up their relentless verbal harangues, sprinkled liberally with language more suited to a couple of drunken sailors confronted by the shore patrol and MPs. Personal attacks motivated, finally, as much by the cap being blown off the bottled-up hostilities left over from the primaries almost eighteen months earlier as by the difference in policy philosophies. Their shouts reverberated in the outer office, practically rattling the plates in the china room.

“I would have hated to be waiting to talk to the President next,” quipped Wes.

The Secretary laughed out loud at this. “Hah! It was the Minority Whip, Jensen, that little prick. He was there to give the President a ration of shit over offshore drilling. Got his courage up with a couple of lunchtime martinis—which had long since worn off by the time the red-faced Vice President emerged—then tried to reschedule in light of the President’s ‘focus on other matters’ but Treem would have none of that, in fact was quite looking forward to meeting with Jensen, who quickly went from Minority Whip to President’s Whipping Boy!”

“And after the confrontation?” asked Wes.

“In the two weeks following it, the two didn’t say so much as Hello in the halls. Then all got quiet; Austin seemed to calm down. He even apologized and, as an act of reconciliation, offered to take on the security planning for the summit. He drafted General Wahl, an old pilot acquaintance, to help him. That’s when I decided to get you involved. I was going to call you last week but you were otherwise tied up with our friends at The Hague.”

Wes gave an inquisitive look to his friend. “How’d you know I was in The Netherlands?”

“Duh, Secretary of State?” Forsyth paused then shrugged. “Passport control? I can find almost any American any time, Wes.” Now it was Forsyth’s turn to give Wes a ‘tell me more’ look. “So...Syria, The Netherlands, France...kind of an unusual vacation,” he said, with a curious glint.

“It’s a long story, Crandall.” Wes knew how to get his friend off the topic quickly. He said, “I’ll tell you over a bong someday.”

Forsyth scowled. “I don’t do that shit, Wes.”

“I know,” said Wes, patting Forsyth on the shoulder. “And I don’t tell state secrets out of school.”

Forsyth smiled. “You know, somehow that’s actually comforting!”

Wes laughed. “So what’s the story with this General Wahl?”

Forsyth pushed a button on the intercom. “Carole, send in The Mailman.”

“The mailman?” smiled Wes. “You have a sudden need to send a letter?”

The door opened and in strode Marine Corps four-star General Ryan Wahl.

“Mr. Secretary,” said the general.

“Wes, meet The Mailman, General Ryan Wahl.”

Wes stood to shake hands and take measure of the man in front of him. At five-ten, about an inch shorter than Wes, General Ryan Wahl cut a strong Marine figure in his dress blues. The general’s left

chest was full of ribbons and various military insignia, as all generals will have garnered after more than thirty years of service. But Wes's eyes were drawn to four that said something extra about this particular man: a distinguished flying cross; a purple heart with two small oak leaf clusters; a silver star; and, most coveted of all, a blue silk ribbon with five small stars, two above, three below—the Congressional Medal of Honor. Over the right breast pocket was the pilot's insignia that hinted at how his decorations had been earned; as a lone combatant, a modern-day knight riding a steed with thirty-five thousand pounds of thrust, attacking with controlled-abandon dragons on the ground and demons in the sky, all at mach 1.8. An Annapolis grad, General Wahl had been in the thick of every American danger zone—Kosovo, Iraq I and II, Afghanistan—from 1980, when he was just a twenty-two-year-old hotshot fighter pilot, to the present.

Wes had taken the measure of the man and found him wanting nothing.

“Dr. Franklin, it's a pleasure to meet you, sir.”

Wes felt humbled by this simple salutation from such a true hero. “Mailman?” he asked with a curious grin.

The general smiled modestly; Forsyth offered the explanation.

“Seems rather tame compared to nicknames like Maverick, Ice Angel, Vader—as in Darth—and the like.” Forsyth gave an almost reverential glance at the general then back to Wes. “In these days of smart-bombs and laser guided missiles, every fighter pilot can hit his target, Wes. But even as a young captain, the general, here, was in a class by himself; Davy Crockett, Daniel Boone, and Alvin York all rolled into one. His squadron buddies gave him the name Mailman. They said that where they could hit a mailbox with a Stinger from five miles out,” (Wes could feel a punch line coming) “Ryan could fire a three-shot burst from his M61 Vulcan cannon from the same distance and not just hit the mailbox, but lower the door, raise the flag, and blow the stamp off a postcard!”

The general laughed outright. “My flight team did a lot of heavy drinking in those days, Dr. Franklin.”

“Please, general, just Wes. And from what I know of fighter pilots, you’re probably right; they can drink with the best of them. But I also know they don’t lie, they generally don’t need to exaggerate, and they sure as hell don’t impress easily.”

The Secretary said, “Now you know why the Vice President enlisted the general; fellow Annapolis grads, fighter pilots, both CMH winners. You’d think he might have vetted him a little better for the job, though.”

“What do you mean?” asked Wes.

“My wife, Mary Ann,” said the general.

Wes looked blankly from one man to the other.

“Her maiden name is Forsyth, Mary Ann Forsyth,” said the general.

Wes raised an eyebrow, “Forsyth?” and looked at Crandall.

“My aunt,” offered the Secretary.

“Your aunt!” exclaimed Wes.

“She’s my father’s baby sister, about seventeen years younger than him. We grew up together then went our different directions when she scooted off to Vassar three years before I left for Harvard. She doesn’t play the family-name card.” Forsyth smiled. “Whereas, I play the whole deck!”

The three men made their way over to the couches where they could sit comfortably and talk. General Wahl narrated the account of the Vice President calling him in one day to enlist his help in security arrangements for a nuclear summit meeting some six weeks hence. The Vice President said this would be an especially dangerous trip for the President given the countries that would be represented, the location of the meeting—Tehran—and the exact nature of the President’s message. “Vice President Austin didn’t elaborate on this last part,” said General Wahl. “The security contingent would comprise two dozen Secret Service, plus one

highly classified ‘courier’, who would be carrying an extremely sensitive message for all in attendance. Every detail, every movement was to be choreographed by the Vice President so there would be no question as to exactly where the President would be at all times. The meeting was to last three days, with the classified courier leaving after the first.”

General Wahl had a troubled look. “I asked what I thought was a simple, reasonable question about this ‘courier,’” said the general, “and got what almost amounted to a dressing down. Vice President Austin told me in no uncertain terms that I didn’t need to concern myself with this aspect of the mission, that he would make all the necessary arrangements, and that I was absolutely not to mention this to anyone. I guess I didn’t hide my reaction too well. Austin immediately backed off saying that he may have come on a bit strong. He lightened his tone but the edge was still there. He said he only wanted me to know this so the addition of one person at the last minute wouldn’t come as a surprise or raise a lot of questions, especially since this person would be in and out in one day.” General Wahl shook his head as if in a quandary. “You know, if he had just said this in the course of laying out the mission, I would probably have accepted it all without another thought. But the way he said it...well, I’d heard he could be difficult to work with, had a temper problem sometimes. I don’t know, sir,” the general said to Wes, “maybe I’m making too much of nothing.”

“General, you’ve been in combat—more than two hundred missions, if I’m not mistaken, right?” asked Wes.

“Yes sir.”

“And I’m guessing that for a fighter pilot instinct—intuition, sixth-sense, whatever you want to call it—is a big part of staying alive.”

“Yes sir.”

“And your instinct on this one says...?” Wes coaxed.

The general looked at Secretary Forsyth then back to Wes,

“Something isn’t right.”

“What exactly is your role in this operation?” asked Wes.

“Three functions: I will be in charge of the secret service agents in terms of where they are to be positioned, shifts, logistics, billeting, that kind of thing; I’m to serve as the personal aide to President Treem and make sure that a tight schedule of meetings is adhered to; and I’m to make sure the courier gets in and out of the meeting on the morning of the first day.”

Wes said, “Don’t take this the wrong way, general, but why you?”

The general laughed. “To tell you the truth, I’ve asked myself that question more than once. I don’t know if it’s reward or punishment.”

Forsyth said, “General Wahl has never been shy about expressing his opinions in staff meetings, Wes. Everyone knows he’s been a big advocate for reducing our nuclear arsenal for several years, even before this administration. This hasn’t gone down well with some of his fellow officers, but the fact is, some of our generals are still fighting the last war, still stuck in the Cold War mentality and thinking in terms of strategic and tactical nuclear deterrence. It’s possible the Vice President really is coming around to the President’s point of view on this issue and figured General Wahl would be the perfect man for the job because he and the President are of like mind on this one.”

Forsyth’s face said this wasn’t the only explanation.

“Or...?” said Wes.

“Or the leopard still has his spots and the general’s gut knows it.”

Wes was quiet for a moment then said, “Seems we should go after the forbidden fruit.”

“Sir?” said the general.

“The courier,” said Wes. “Why is that so secret? What is Austin trying to hide? We need to find out everything we can about the courier. Is there a file on this operation?” asked Wes.

“Yes sir,” said the general, “but nothing about the courier—not

even mention of there being one. If there's anything about it at all, it's either in the Vice President's head, or on his laptop."

"Do you have access?" asked Wes.

"To his laptop? No," answered the general. "Besides, I don't have his password!"

"I'm sorry, I probably wasn't clear," said Wes. "I'm not worried about his password. Do you have physical access to his computer?"

"It's always in his office. I'd never be left alone with it," said the general.

"Then I guess we need to do this in his office," said Wes. "Can you get him to log on, then get him out of the way?"

Forsyth chuckled, "What are you going to do, stage a fire in the Eisenhower building?"

"Better than that," said Wes. "A virus. A few years back there was a big computer problem in the Vice President's offices and extensive security measures and firewalls were installed to protect his privacy and security. The IT guys did a great job but high tech being what it is, I'm afraid those firewalls have been breached and there's an extremely destructive worm making its way through cyberspace."

"There is?" said a surprised Forsyth, who, after a brief pause, got it. "Ah, right, a new virus. Should I contact our IT people for you?"

"Actually, I brought my own IT guy, or should I say, IT gal?" Wes smiled. "A.J. is at the Watergate waiting for me."

"A.J. is here?" said Forsyth. "Why didn't you bring her with you? I'd love to see her again!"

"And so you will," he said, then turned to Wahl. "General, Ashley Jordan is as good as they come when it comes to computers. She's so good, in fact, that this afternoon she is going to cure the Vice President's computer of the most powerful worm virus ever to crawl through the internet. It will take her about a half-hour or so. All she needs is a brief cover story and an introduction from you. And if I know how A.J. works her magic, you and the Vice President won't

even have to leave his office while she does it. Do you suppose you can find a reason to meet with the Vice President about, let's say, three-thirty this afternoon?"

The Mailman gave a devious smile. "I think that can be arranged."

"Good," said Wes. "Crandall, A.J. and I will see you this afternoon at the Eisenhower building."

7

THE HUMAN BRAIN DIES LIKE A SUPERNOVA, with a slow-motion explosion of light and sound. The stellar explosion expels its material at a velocity of nearly a tenth the speed of light over a period of several weeks or months, with only God as its witness. The brain explodes its 1,000 trillion connections over a shorter period of time, but to the sole witness of this event, the period seems to last from the alpha to the omega, from before the beginning of the universe till beyond its end. Dr. Joe Rosenfeld knew this through the reports of his near-death subjects in the research for his award-winning book, *DEATH: JUST A STROLL IN THE DARK*. Joe Rosenfeld, *the doctor*, knew this would be the same course for Jared Kennan Cain and intended to help guide this poor suffering man through as much of the experience as he could. Joe Rosenfeld, *the man*, didn't know, could not have imagined even from all his research and study, the nature and detail of events Jared Kennan Cain's brain would produce during the couple weeks of its supernova. And at the end of the process, Joe Rosenfeld, *the mortal*, would be left wondering who had guided whom through the experience.

Their second meeting, the next afternoon, began much the same as the first, without physical contact and with limited expectations for the outcome of these sessions. Rosenfeld, having been fully briefed on the disease and prognosis by Eddie Bertaccini, understood that, at best, he could merely provide some distraction from what must surely be center-stage in Cain's mind: Jared Kennan Cain's imminent demise. He thought perhaps hypnosis might alleviate some of the pain—though from what Eddie had related, Cain's body was already handling most of that quite successfully—and, depending on Jared Kennan Cain's personal belief about reincarnation, might offer him some emotional comfort. After all, if there were such things as past lives, then surely there must be future ones. Cain's reaction to this was that, first, he had only this one life—none before it; none after—and second, he was incapable of being hypnotized. Nonetheless, he was willing to humor Rosenfeld and go through the motions.

Rosenfeld had Cain lie on the couch and took him slowly through the stages of relaxation, moving deeper and deeper into the dark solitude of his mind. For a man who was 'incapable of being hypnotized,' Cain proved a very susceptible subject. Rosenfeld gradually suggested that Cain search the inner recesses of his thoughts and go back in time as far as he could. For the average subject in a first hypnosis session, to reach back to his early teens or even grade school age would be a highly successful regression. For a novice subject to become comfortable with both the therapist and the experience itself and reach past life impressions—whether real or simple fantasy—could take several sessions. Jared Kennan Cain's first recollection was that of a young man, perhaps in his twenties.

"Can you tell me your age?" asked Rosenfeld.

The answer at first seemed garbled, unintelligible, so Rosenfeld repeated his question. The answer came back the same as the first time but now Rosenfeld seemed to recognize the response as being in another language or dialect, though he could not be sure, nor

could he say from what culture.

“I’m sorry I still couldn’t understand what you said. Can you tell me once more,” suggested Rosenfeld, “how old you are?”

Cain seemed to recalibrate his speech. “I am a grown man.”

“Can you tell me what you are doing?”

“Preparing for battle,” said Cain.

“For battle?” Rosenfeld felt a reference to conflict probably related to the ‘war’ his physical body was going through. “You are at war?”

“Yes. It will be a glorious victory. With these new weapons,” said Cain, “our army is invincible.”

“What new weapon, what kind of weapon do you have?”

“It is copesh.”

Copesh? What the hell is copesh? thought Rosenfeld but quickly decided to come back to that later. If Cain was about to do a symbolic internal battle, there were likely more important issues than the kind of weapon he was using.

During the next forty minutes Jared Kennan Cain went into excruciating detail of a massive battle, describing a level of mayhem that seemed unimaginable even for today’s Hollywood special effects wizards. If this was the product of a brain in agony, Cain was experiencing a level of physical suffering that went far beyond what Eddie had prepared Rosenfeld for. Cain painstakingly described events leading up to this monumental clash. Cain spoke with detailed accuracy about troop locations and strength, tactics and maneuvers. He provided intricate descriptions of uniforms, weapons, and vehicles. He recounted movement and close-quarters combat with a level of granularity that would have made Cecil B. DeMille proud. Perhaps the most telling, and certainly the most useful information from a therapeutic standpoint, came near the end of the combat. The culmination of the battle found Cain, in his own words, “splayed at the guts, lying on the bloody hacked bodies of friends and enemies,” anticipating his own end. As he lay in a brutally scorching sun, pain

oozing from every pore, he thought back to his anticipation of glory and victory at the onset of this battle and of all the battles in which he had been victorious before. He had had a knack for generalship and a taste for blood through war after war. Today he lay mortally wounded and the excruciating agony of his wounds, the first ever of such a horrific nature, brought to him an epiphany that war is never glorious; it produces only pain and suffering. As he lay bleeding and dying, he thought back to the days and months leading up to this battle, of the reasons and justifications for the approaching slaughter. He had been convinced his enemies must be destroyed or they would destroy his own people. The weeks leading up to today's fight were exhilarating, thoughts and visions of triumph filled the people in the streets with euphoric energy. Now, writhing in agony, the outcome of the war in doubt, he could only wonder at the depth of the pain he felt. In this agonizing moment he vowed never again to participate in such an undertaking—though the lesson was learned too late. Somehow he should have found an alternative to this barbaric form of conflict resolution. He had no clue what that alternative could be, but in the absence of an alternative—even in the face of the destruction of his fellow men, regardless of their tribe—he would be resolute: never would he inflict this level of suffering on anyone ever again.

Cain reported lying in the sun for hour after agonizing hour, his hand tenuously clutching at his belly wound, squeezing it closed to contain the length of intestine struggling to escape. By the next morning, with the odor of death wafting throughout the entire blood soaked valley, his ordeal was nearly at an end. But not in any way Rosenfeld might have guessed. Cain said that by the ensuing dawn his wounds had closed, his body had become whole again to the point he was able to stand and survey the scene of death surrounding him. He drank in the stench of decay so as never to forget. He wept for his fallen brothers-in-arms. He even wept for those who had marched against him, feeling their pain to the same extent he had

earlier felt their insults. Weak, but alive, he turned and walked out of the valley of death.

Rosenfeld was so enrapt in the tale that he took no notice that his subject seemed to come out of the hypnosis on his own.

Jared Kennan Cain opened his eyes and sat up on the couch. Through the graying flesh and yellow-red eyes, he seemed to smile, faintly, but a smile all the same. He stood and took a shallow, labored breath. "I'll see you tomorrow, Dr. Rosenfeld. I hope this session has been of value to you." With that he turned and walked out of the office.

Rosenfeld sat silent. The strength of the imagination, especially as the product of a dying brain, was an incredible thing to witness. He felt a profound sympathy for the level of suffering Cain must be going through. As he reflected on the story and read through his notes to be sure he had captured everything correctly, his eyes drifted across the word he had scribbled in the margin: copesh. He pressed the intercom button.

"Liz, would you Google this word for me please. C-o-p-e-s-h? Let me know if you get anything."

A minute later Liz Charles came in.

"Nothing under that spelling, but I found something in Wikipedia for K-h-o-p-e-s-h. Pretty strange item," she opined. "What's that all about?"

"I don't know. Let me see what you found."

She handed him a printout and as Rosenfeld read it, the color slowly drained from his face.

Khopesh (*ḫꜥš*) is the Egyptian name of the Canaanite "**sickle-sword**" (actually a type of axe). Its origins can be traced back to third millennium Sumer. A typical khopesh is 50-60cm in length (though smaller examples also exist) and is composed of three main parts: the hilt, a straight and unsharpened section of blade finishing in a curved crescent shape with the sharpened edge. The khopesh evolved from the epsilon or similar crescent shaped axes that were

used in warfare. This makes the khopesh not a true sword (which evolved from daggers), but a specialized battle-axe.

The khopesh went out of use around 1300BC.

Rosenfeld quietly read the last sentence again to himself. The khopesh *went out of use* around 1300BC. His eyes jumped to the top of the paragraph once more. Its origins can be traced back to third millennium Sumer, he thought. To third millennium Sumer?

8

GENERAL WAHL MET ASHLEY JORDAN at the east entrance of the Eisenhower Executive Office Building opposite the West Wing of the White House. The general escorted A.J. through the various security posts to the Vice President's office, where George S. Austin busied himself with affairs of state. He was curt on the intercom when his secretary buzzed to announce that General Wahl was here to see him, not hiding his irritation at the disturbance. The Vice President didn't like unplanned interruptions and was about to make that sentiment clearly known when the general walked in accompanied by a lovely young woman. When it comes to beauty, a man's eyes never age and even at seventy-two George S. Austin had an appreciation for a pretty girl. The sight of Ashley Jordan quickly turned the unwanted intrusion into a pleasant diversion.

A.J., a natural blonde who had recently gone brunette just to 'try a new look', was even more radiant and beautiful than usual. Though the Vice President had no idea why she was with the general, he was immediately on his best behavior.

"Mr. Vice President, I'm sorry to interrupt you unannounced like this but there is a security issue that needs immediate attention," said

the general. “Miss Jordan can explain.”

“*Miss Jordan?*” smiled Austin, rising to extend his hand.

“*Ashley Jordan, sir,*” said A.J. with just enough feminine charm as to entice without being overly flirtatious. “I know how busy you must be, sir, so I’ll make my visit as brief as possible.”

“Yes, yes,” said Austin, not knowing what this was about but not wanting to seem unaccommodating. He threw the general a look that begged an explanation.

“Sir, Miss Jordan has just come from the West Wing. There is apparently some kind of computer virus going around, and well, you’ll recall the last time this kind of thing happened, in the previous administration, a few years ago,” the general looked quickly to A.J. then back to the Vice President, “I don’t really know...”

A.J. picked up the beat, taking over from the general. “Sir, you’re on a wireless connection here for Internet access and there’s an extremely dangerous red worm virus going around...” yada, yada, yada. She threw out terms like Blue Tooth, WiFi, connectivity, ‘wipe out your hard drive,’ and a couple other troublesome sounding terms designed to obfuscate the issue and mystify the Vice President, who was basically a cyber neophyte. Her cyber-speak double-talk had the instantaneous desired effect. Austin smiled and stammered a bit, freely admitting his ignorance about all this ‘high tech mumbo-jumbo.’ A.J. immediately disarmed him with a sweet smile and the assurance that what she had to do would only take a few minutes and he wasn’t to worry about a thing.

“If you need to close down files, please go ahead,” she said soothingly. “Your files aren’t important for what I have to do.”

The ruse worked like a charm. Austin directly closed the files he was working on and turned his desk over to A.J. as General Wahl and he adjourned to another area of the office while she worked her Silicon Valley magic on his allegedly infected computer. A.J. inserted an eight-gig Flash stick into the USB port on Austin’s computer, hit a couple keys, and launched a program comprising an

algorithm of her own design that even the US intelligence community would kill for, the computer programming equivalent of “kicking-ass-and-taking-names” and which had the immediate effect of scouring every file in the computer’s database and extracting files fitting certain time, frequency, and ‘open-close’ parameters that would, in later analysis, yield everything they wanted to know about the Vice President’s covert activities. The whole process took about twenty minutes, after which the general and A.J. offered apologies for the inconvenience and quickly left the Vice President’s office. In almost no time at all, they were out of the EEOB and on their way back to the Watergate where Wes and Crandall Forsyth waited.

* * *** * *

Back at the hotel A.J. plugged the Flash stick into her computer. “This will take about twenty minutes to download, then another twenty or thirty to analyze and characterize the data,” she told them. It took a little longer, but that was good; she had captured even more data than expected. In the end she struck gold.

“I designed this program to evaluate these files based on several parameters: proximity and longevity, frequency and source, and content,” she said. “Proximity data will show us what he’s been doing most recently and longevity data will show what he’s been focused on over the longest period of time. Frequency data will show us who he’s been in contact with most and where his contacts have come from and we can analyze the content for subject matter.”

Within the hour the screen flashed to life with its booty, a list of files sorted into eight categories. Now it was up to the four of them to put some human intelligence to the data. This took considerably longer than A.J.’s algorithm but after about three hours they had what they were looking for. Since early May, Austin had had a significant number of contacts with a group called the Genetic Discovery Corporation in Palo Alto, California for no obvious reason. It represented the Vice President’s one and only contact with

a scientific program in an area in which he had never shown any interest before. Within that group was a file that was both intriguing and enigmatic; a file named THE METHUSELAH MAN full of genetic data on an unnamed human—who looked to be more theoretical than actual—with a number of documents pertaining to airborne communicable diseases—both ancient and modern—their potential for fatal transmission, and their resistance to treatment. The third folder contained emails dating to the first week of the Vice President’s term filed under the heading OPERATION: STAR COVER, a series of exchanges between President Treem and a half-dozen people in Ukraine that George S. Austin had intercepted, including one email address that read `astar@ankh.net.ur`. Wes Franklin instantly recognized this email address as belonging to someone in his Ankh Network, a member of The Cloister of Akhenaten, though he didn’t know whom, or the significance of any of the emails other than the fact the Vice President, as near as could be determined, had pilfered them.

Wes flicked open his cell phone, pushed a couple of buttons, and waited for an answer. Three rings later his friend, bodyguard, and special investigator, Rouzbeh Aryana, said hello.

“Aryana, I want you to find out what you can about a company in Palo Alto called Genetic Discovery Corporation on El Camino.” The address in the file put the company just south of Stanford University. “We’re interested in anything you can get on THE METHUSELAH MAN.”

“Who’s the Methuselah man?” asked Aryana.

“Not a *Who*; a *What*. It’s a file. It could be a research project. A.J. and I will be back tomorrow night sometime. Don’t take any unnecessary chances and don’t raise any suspicions. If you can’t get something easily, we’ll find another way when we get back.”

The Persian strongman acknowledged the instruction and hung up.

Crandall Forsyth asked, “Where do we go from here, Wes? You

think I should discuss this with the President?”

“At this point,” said Wes, “I don’t think we should alert anyone. Let’s keep this between us until we actually know something. So far the only thing we know is that Austin has an uncharacteristic interest in a field of science. Not exactly an impeachable offense—rather a refreshing difference from the previous administration, actually. And as to the Ukraine emails, we don’t know how he came by them or what they’re about.”

“What do you want me to do?” asked General Wahl.

“Keep your friends close and your enemies closer,” quoted Wes.

“Machiavelli?” asked Wahl.

“Don Corleone,” said A.J. with a sly smile.

“We still don’t know anything about this courier,” said Wes. He looked at the general. “We need you to become George S. Austin’s number one wingman. He needs to feel he can trust you with everything, especially the security of the nation—as he conceives it.”

“I’d like to echo Wes’s point,” said Secretary Forsyth. “So far the only thing the Vice President has done is have a scream fest with the President, arouse our suspicions, make contact with a scientific research company for reasons that are completely unknown at this time, possess a few Ukrainian emails—that for all we know President Treem passed to him freely—and be an asshole to work for. And if being an asshole boss was a crime, well, everyone in politics would be in jail.”

“Oh, ‘twere it only that simple to lock you all away,” said A.J. smiling comically.

“Hey,” objected Forsyth.

Ashley stroked his cheek in mock tenderness and purred, “Oh, not you Crandall.”

“Now everyone, stay sharp,” said Wes. “General, the summit is scheduled for the last week in November. If by Thanksgiving you still don’t know who this courier is or what his real mission is,” he looked at Ashley Jordan, “then A.J. you’re going to have to pay a

follow up house call to the Vice President's computer for one more sanitizing pass.”

“And if that still doesn't yield anything?” asked Forsyth.

“Then The Mailman, here, is going to need a contingency plan,” said Wes.

“Contingency plan for what?” asked Wahl.

“For the unknown,” said Wes. “For whatever behind-the-scenes trap your ex-fighter-pilot boss might have cooked up.”

Crandall Forsyth asked, “How's he supposed to do that, Wes?”

Wes said, “Like any good Marine: improvise, adapt, overcome.”

Wes looked at the general for confirmation. “Semper Fi?”

General Ryan Wahl gave the only answer a real Marine could.

“Oorah!” grunted Wahl.

9

FOR TEN DAYS JARED KENNAN CAIN MET ROSENFELD punctually for their two o'clock sessions. Each day Cain seemed to noticeably deteriorate from the previous session, the cancer consuming more and more of his body, seemingly accelerating the rush to Cain's inevitable destruction. If Cain presented any surprise at all to Rosenfeld, it was that he never got beyond Kübler-Ross's first stage of dying; denial and isolation. At any expression of concern by Rosenfeld for his comfort level, Jared Kennan Cain waved it off, dismissed it with 'this will pass,' leaving Rosenfeld to wonder when the next stage, anger, would kick in. Time was running out, though, and it seemed quite possible Cain would cross without ever resolving his denial issues. And, as established in their first meeting, Jared Kennan Cain adamantly clung to the idea that God did not exist, contradicted almost in the same breath by the belief that this non-existent God was actually punishing him, though he was yet to make clear for what.

Rosenfeld continued their regressive hypnosis approach, each session starting with Cain reaffirming his resistance to hypnosis, then subtly turning the tables on Rosenfeld, mesmerizing the doctor

with fantastic ‘recollections’ that kept Rosenfeld a rapt listener throughout. For a man who didn’t believe in past lives, that he only had the one he was living, Jared Kennan Cain narrated accounts of past-life events from ancient Egypt to early Europe, across the Asian subcontinent and deep into China, from Scandinavia to the ‘new world’ of America, and always with a level of personal involvement and minutiae of detail that Rosenfeld had never witnessed in any patient before. Each story contained at least one piece of information that would not generally be known but which Rosenfeld could verify in subsequent research, verification that always left Rosenfeld more than a little uneasy, almost wondering if Cain was doing research before these sessions for the sole purpose of manipulating his therapist. This, of course, made no sense to Rosenfeld, who then had to resolve his own doubts and paranoia before the next session. Slowly but surely, session after session, Cain was inching toward death as Rosenfeld tumbled toward questions of his own mental stability.

In one such episode, Cain reported a major battle of the American Civil War taking place near Hanover, Pennsylvania. Rosenfeld, something of an amateur Civil War buff with an extensive home library that included soldiers’ diaries and other writings of the time had no recollection of a major battle taking place in Hanover. Yet Cain related an account of being a non-combatant passing through that city on his way west when a group of Confederate soldiers raided the town in search of badly needed shoes for their army. They were followed three days later by a Confederate Army detachment under the command of a general whose name Cain (conveniently?) could not recall. A Union Army force encountered them and a battle ensued, leaving several dead and forcing the retreat and diversion of the Confederate general’s forces. It also left Rosenfeld with the nagging suspicion that a dying man was intentionally screwing with his head—and no clue as to what could possibly motivate Cain to do that.

That evening when Rosenfeld got home he went straight to his library to learn what he could about Hanover. He was more than a little unnerved to find a series of entries in the diary of a Confederate Lt. Col. Elijah V. White, whose cavalry had raided Hanover early on the morning of June 30, 1863 in search of horses, food, supplies, clothing—and shoes! White's forces had been dispatched from, and soon rejoined by, the army under the command of General J.E.B. Stuart. At the same time a Union army arrived from the east and fighting ensued. But in the scheme of Civil War battles, this could hardly be considered a major battle; Union dead were tallied at nineteen, Confederate losses at nine. But as Rosenfeld continued to read, he felt his stomach turn. The skirmish, though light in casualties, had forced Stuart to back up, which delayed him from linking up in time with his own commander a few miles away at Stuart's intended destination. The delay had a dramatic impact on the entire war. The commander waiting for Stuart just a few miles away was General Robert E. Lee, who would the next day begin a dramatic campaign without Stuart's flanking maneuver. General Stuart's intended destination—Gettysburg!

Rosenfeld slept little that night, struggling with his own confusion and doubt, and resolving to confront his patient the next day, to get to the bottom of this feared subterfuge.

On the eleventh day at the appointed hour Rosenfeld was ready for their next session, ready to challenge Jared Kennan Cain—dying or not—when Liz Charles poked her head in the door.

“Joe, there's an FBI agent here to see you. He's asking about Cain.”

Rosenfeld asked if Cain was out there too. Liz shook her head. Rosenfeld was at first distracted by the thought that Cain's absence might mean he had died the night before. Liz said again, “Joe, the FBI?” to which he responded absently, “Yeah, show him in.”

The clean-cut man in his mid-thirties stepped confidently into the office and approached Rosenfeld. Flipping open his government

identification the man introduced himself as Special Agent Victor Samson. Rosenfeld gave a cursory glance at the ID, noticing more the three large letters 'FBI' than the name and grade of the agent, and looked back at the man. "Yes, what can I do for you Agent Samson?"

"Doctor, we have reason to believe a man by the name of Jared Kennan Cain has made or will make contact with you."

Rosenfeld gave no answer, didn't change his expression.

"Sir, this is a grave matter of national security, so I must ask you, has Mr. Cain contacted you, either by phone or in person?"

"Agent Samson I'm sure you realize that even the name of one of my clients is privileged information and that, even if I had a client by that name, I would not be at liberty to discuss that with you."

"I understand your professional concern doctor, but I must impress on you the serious threat this person poses not only to our country," he paused for effect "but to anyone he comes in contact with."

Rosenfeld maintained an even demeanor, saying nothing.

Special Agent Samson continued.

"Doctor, this man was a scientist working on an extremely sensitive research project for the government involving certain biological strains that, if not contained immediately, will pose an unimaginable threat to our country—and soon thereafter, the rest of the world. Please note sir that I did not say it *could* pose a threat; I said it *will* pose one."

Rosenfeld listened attentively, still unwilling to expose his client.

"Doctor, you've heard of the Plague of Justinian?" Samson asked.

Rosenfeld did not mask his sarcasm. "Sounds medieval," he said.

Victor Samson either didn't pick up on Rosenfeld's attitude or chose to ignore it. "No sir; much earlier. It struck the Byzantine Empire in the 5th century, creating a pandemic caused most likely by the bubonic plague. Ten centuries later it would be known as the Black Death. A secret government lab isolated a strain of this all-

but-extinct germ. Cain was the chief biologist on the project. A little over two weeks ago he accidentally infected himself with a mutant strain. He put himself in voluntary quarantine, then suddenly chose to leave the treatment facility without telling anyone. The other researchers knew the disease would take a severe toll on his body, but it seems also to have affected his mind in ways they did not anticipate. The problem, doctor, is that an antidote has not yet been developed for this particular mutation and if Cain is in contact with the population-at-large, he could send us all back to the Dark Ages. It's imperative we find him as soon as possible and get him back to the lab to try to develop a vaccine before it's too late."

Rosenfeld's outward calm belied his inner turmoil. Already suspicious Cain was lying and manipulating him, he now had the possibility of a devastating pandemic thrown into the mix. Still, he was not one to leap to conclusions; and certainly not one to easily shed his duty of doctor-patient privilege. He remained, for the time being, outwardly noncommittal.

Special Agent Samson scribbled a number on the back of a business card and extended it to Rosenfeld, instructing him to call immediately if Cain made contact. Samson moved toward the door to leave, but as he reached the door, he turned back to Rosenfeld. "Doctor, I understand your dedication to your client's privacy. That's very noble of you; stupid but noble." Special Agent Samson paused, giving added weight to his next statement. "I need to impress on you, sir, that under these circumstances, Section 215 of the P.A.T.R.I.O.T. Act allows us to secure Cain's files by whatever means necessary." Now he tried to sound more conciliatory. "That, of course, would require a court order, though, and frankly doctor, we don't have the luxury of time on our side. You have my personal number, sir." With that Samson left.

Rosenfeld sat at his desk fixated on the government calling card, rubbing his thumb over the embossed FBI logo in the upper corner and wondering just how to handle this when Liz slipped in.

“What was that all about?” she asked.

“That was about our dying Mr. Cain, Liz. It seems his disease may carry some complications with it—national security complications. And if what Agent Samson says is true, you and I may be at some risk...along with a whole lot of other people.”

Liz Charles saw the tension lines on Rosenfeld’s brow and knew she didn’t want to ask her next question because she wasn’t going to like the answer.

“What *risk* for you and me, Joe?”

Rosenfeld didn’t get a chance to answer the question. It was answered for him.

“I pose no risk to you, Miss Charles, nor you Dr. Rosenfeld; no matter what that man said.”

Jared Kennan Cain stood in the doorway, his breathing labored, his knees appearing ready to buckle at any second. Liz Charles’ nurturing instincts took over as she rushed to assist the man, but as she reached to grab him, Rosenfeld yelled at her “No, don’t touch him!” and she recoiled in shock at the force of the command, her eyes jumping now from man to man, tears of fear and confusion starting to pool in her soft blue eyes.

“Back away from him Liz.” Rosenfeld gestured her away. “Mr. Cain you owe us an explanation as to why we suddenly have the FBI knocking on our door looking for you. And this time, sir, I would appreciate the truth. Are we going to end up like you?”

Cain fell into the nearest chair, struggling for air and looking worse than a cadaver, yet somehow more concerned for the welfare of these two frightened souls than for his own.

“I’ve been honest with you from the start doctor.”

“Bullshit!” shouted Rosenfeld. “Then why is the damn FBI here telling me stories about you and a centuries-old disease that’s about to kill us all?”

“FBI?” said Cain. “That man said he was with the FBI?”

“Read it yourself,” said Rosenfeld, flipping the agent’s card into

Cain's lap.

Jared Kennan Cain stared vacantly at the card through glassy yellow eyes. His head shook faintly but it wasn't clear to Rosenfeld if it shook from nerve fibers and muscles dying, or from an attempt on Cain's part to communicate some lost thought in his brain as it approached its super-nova.

"One more day...please," said Cain softly. "One more day and I can explain everything."

"From where we sit," said Rosenfeld, "you don't have one more day! And if what Agent Samson said is true, how long will it be before we follow you to the grave?"

Liz gasped and recoiled at this pronouncement.

"This will pass," said Cain, repeating softly, "This will pass."

Rosenfeld exploded! "This will pass! This will pass! You keep saying that day after day. Don't you understand? Don't you get it? Can't you finally, once and for all, accept it? It's YOU that will pass, Mr. Cain; *you* will pass. And thanks to you, so will we!"

"Tonight..." Cain paused to gulp air. "Tonight, doctor. The cancer will be finished tonight. I can feel it. It's run its course. Tonight it will be finished and tomorrow..."

"And tomorrow what? All our questions will be answered?" growled Rosenfeld. "Tomorrow you'll be dead, and without an antidote, so will we!"

"No," said Cain softly. "Tomorrow your questions will not be answered. Tomorrow your questions will only begin. No more hypnosis games. No more of the superficial questions you've been asking while waiting for me to die and clear your calendar. Tomorrow your questions will truly begin."

Jared Kennan Cain got to his feet with some effort. At the door he turned to face Rosenfeld and Liz Charles once more, as they stood frozen in the middle of the room.

"And the irony," said Cain, "is that, tomorrow your questions will run so deep, you won't even know what to ask. What was it you said

in our first session, that statement of your friend's? Ah yes, Truth never happens in real time." Cain smiled faintly. "How true! How true!"

10

ARYANA PICKED UP WES AND A.J. AT SFO and drove them to Palo Alto to see the Genetic Discovery Corporation building on El Camino Real. They parked across the street, studying the building from inside the car as Aryana briefed them on what he had learned. He had approached the company under the ruse of being a science beat reporter with the San Francisco Chronicle, doing a story on genetic researchers in Silicon Valley. There were a number of Nobel recipients in the area—at Stanford, the Lawrence Berkeley Labs, and several private companies—but he'd never heard of this one. Within minutes of presenting himself unannounced at the reception desk, a Dr. Cornell Bridger emerged all smiles and personality, offering a quick tour of the lab facility and an overview of their research projects. When it turned out Bridger was actually the President of the company, Aryana was left wondering how it was this man had free time to escort him around their facility. It struck him as a little too easy, that they were being a little too helpful.

As a cover story Aryana cited to Bridger a recent call from Kaiser Permanente for some two million volunteers to donate blood and saliva to help explore possible links between environmental factors

and genes and diseases like Alzheimer's, cancer, and autoimmune disorders. Aryana wanted merely to know if Genetic Discovery Corporation was participating in this endeavor.

"No, I'm afraid our projects are rather more esoteric," said Bridger, adding "mostly worms, flies, mice; not exactly the sexy Hollywood stuff" he said with a laugh. "Mutations in the gene for IGF1R and the relationship to longevity are what get our people all hot and bothered these days. We're learning how to make mice live longer, Mr. Aryana."

"He was playing with you," said Wes. Aryana looked puzzled. Wes went on, "C'mon a science reporter investigating genetic research and you don't know anything about genetic science?"

"Hey, I was just trying to check out the building like you asked me to," said Aryana. "I'm not going to break into a building where I have no idea what kind of security they have. I didn't expect to drop in unannounced and be given the fifty-cent tour like some kind of big shot. So how was he playing me?"

"IGF1 refers to a particular growth hormone: insulin-like growth factor 1. It seems some people have a rare genetic mutation that causes their cells to use less of this growth hormone. The result is that while these people are generally smaller than usual, they tend to live longer. The mutated gene is called the Methuselah gene. Bridger told you they weren't doing sexy Hollywood-type research but we're talking Fountain of Youth stuff here, my friend. Eternal youth...doesn't get much sexier than that," said Wes.

"Eternal youth?" said Aryana.

"Well, that's an overstatement, but increased longevity is the next best thing. I've seen some research suggesting we could live to about a hundred-twenty, maybe a hundred-thirty. Probably not much more than that, but can you imagine," said Wes with an ironic smile, "how that will screw up social security? And if people are living longer, they're working longer, which means less job turnover for the workforce. If we start manipulating our genes, we're going to have

to make some significant changes in our socioeconomic structures at the same time, or it could just be that ‘death by natural causes’ will mean being killed in a war for scarcer and scarcer resources.”

A.J. asked, “Do you think this is that METHUSELAH MAN project Vice President Austin was interested in?”

“I don’t think so, Ash,” said Wes. “Methuselah gene research has been around for about a decade. Besides, most of the actual research has been confined to non-humans. There have been studies involving Ashkenazi Jews, some Icelandic groups, and a couple of others, but no one has dared to try gene mutation on humans. We don’t do basic research like that on our own species till we know the effects on other species.”

“But the data we saw from Austin’s files suggested a person,” said A.J.

“A theoretical one,” countered Wes.

“Maybe,” suggested A.J.

Wes shrugged a ‘yeah, maybe’ then asked Aryana how easy it would be to get in there for a closer look. He knew that somewhere in there was a file with some answers.

“No chance, Wes,” said Aryana. “There are cameras everywhere, and I don’t have a clue where the control room would be. I didn’t see a lot of people around, but I have no information regarding shifts or manpower. Maybe with a week or two to study the layout...but I get the feeling you need something sooner than that.”

“Yeah, a lot sooner,” said Wes.

“Now what?” asked A.J.

Wes looked out at the building trying to think of an answer.

None came.

11

TARAS OSTROVSKY STEPPED CAREFULLY to the gentle rocking of the train as he wove his way to the Club Car for a drink. Sliding the door open he ran a quick inventory of the car's occupants, a dozen or so, mostly males, huddled at small tables, engaged in lively conversation. Two of the men, in their early fifties sitting at the far end, were the two who had caught his attention when he first boarded the train. He positioned himself in a corner, his back to the rear wall, so he could keep a cautious eye on the men. They had done nothing in particular to warrant his caution, but given their size it made more sense to stay guarded than to be surprised later.

Cigarette smoke wafted in the air, sucked toward the ventilation system, which did a reasonable job of evacuating most of it. T.O. lit a Donskoy Tabak Dark and blew smoke toward the ceiling thinking in two days I will be able to buy Gauloises by the carton; no more of this Russian shit. When the steward came by, T.O. ordered a Katskova vodka, then settled back to imagine richer days ahead.

Midway up the car his eye caught a pretty little thing sipping what appeared to be a cup of tea, staring out the window at the passing countryside. Thin white cords fell from her ears to a pink iPod on the

table. Now this could be an interesting diversion, he thought. The girl, in her early twenties, with short-cut brunette hair and a slim petite body, was sitting alone, a good sign, and would be a pleasant addition to his room for the next couple of days. If she was only going as far as Bucharest, so be it; he would at least have one lustful night followed by a clean break. If she continued on to Istanbul, all the better for him, though it would end up being, unfortunately, fatal for her—he didn't want anyone to be able to identify him as having come there by train from Ukraine, especially since this trip would be repeated several times over the next six months or so.

Ostrovsky rose and ambled his way to her table, sat down, and, with a fair bit of histrionics, flicked an ash into the empty ashtray. The girl took no notice, continuing to study the hazy green and brown countryside, her thoughts miles from him. He waved to the steward and pointed at the table to indicate this was where to bring his drink. Over the clacking of the wheels, he said loudly, "my name is T.O." which got no response. He smiled at her resistance. He had enough success with girls to know he was a desirable sex partner and assumed she was just playing hard to get. She would pay for this later with a little rough sex but for now the dance was to be enjoyed. He playfully blew smoke at the window to ricochet it gently into her face. She swiped the cloud away and shot him a stern look, which only caused him to smile more broadly. He said "What is your name?" to which her response was to return to gazing out the window. This only heightened his desire for the girl. He reached across the table and rapped his knuckles to get her attention. When she looked back toward him with her best 'go away' look, he gave her a toothy smile and comically signaled with his hands for her to remove the headphones. At last she produced a coy smile and pulled the white plugs from her ears.

Transferring the cigarette to his left hand, he extended his right to her. "My name is Taras Ostrovsky but my friends call me T.O."

She shook his hand. "Mr. Ostrovsky," she replied rather too

properly.

“Oh, please...T.O.” he implored. “*Mister* sounds so formal and we are nearly the same age.”

His confidence was too much for her and he was, after all, good looking and very well built. Finally she smiled for real, “Anzhela, Anzhela Starkova.” Her voice was smooth and pleasing.

“Much nicer,” he smiled and winked. “And what is your destination Anzhela Starkova?”

“Istanbul,” she replied.

How unfortunate, he thought, but said, “Wonderful! Then we have two days to become life-long friends!” He smiled confidently, knowing this was true but that in this case a *life-long* friendship would be cut tragically short. Still, he would make her feel wonderful all the way to Istanbul.

“What are you listening to,” he said pointing to the iPod.

“REVOLVER’s new CD, Rage Against the Politburo,” she said. “You know them?”

“These days everyone knows REVOLVER. But I tend more toward Zeerok,” he said.

She smiled and nodded. “Yes, they are very good. Not as subtly intelligent or caustically incisive as REVOLVER, but I have their new album KompoZtor on here as well. It has many good cuts.”

“And what takes you to Istanbul?”

“I have a short job as an *au pair* until after the New Year,” she said.

“Is this what you do full time,” he asked “care for children?”

“No. I am a student full time but the job of *student* does not pay very well,” she joked dryly, “so I take care of rich kids while their parents run off on holiday to Karachi or Crete or Cypress or wherever these *nouveau-riche* go for their fun.”

“What do you study when you are not baby-sitting rich kids?” T.O. asked, feigning actual interest as his seductive web wrapped slowly around her.

“Geopolitics, with a special interest in the world’s energy supplies,” she answered.

“Whoa! Such a pretty girl with such a good brain! I’m impressed,” he said, raising his eyebrows.

“Why so surprised?” she challenged. “Are you one of those relics who think a pretty girl cannot be intelligent too?”

T.O. laughed innocently. “Anzhela Starkova, you should meet some of the pretty girls I know, then you would not ask this question. Pretty as picture but dumb as posts! I do not think beauty and brains are mutually exclusive, but you must understand that in my circles, the chasm is great! To meet someone so lovely and at the same time so intelligent as yourself is a rare treat for me. And what can you tell me of the world’s energy supplies?” he asked, not really caring but preferring to let her talk than to perhaps expose his own lack of education and maybe have her judge *him* as being dumb as a post. Still, once the talking stopped later in the evening, it would not matter. He knew where his talents lay and when they got down to business, she would not be crying out for his brain!

“Depends,” she said. “To our left, only a matter of miles, is the Caspian Sea, one of the richest oil fields in the world. If the idiots bordering it would learn to resolve their petty disputes, this could be a source of wealth and energy for the entire region. But they would prefer to fight and argue than to prosper. Morons! Then there is nuclear energy. Big problem! Since the breakup of the Soviet Union, the world has gotten more dangerous, with too much nuclear material gone missing. It can only be a matter of time before this stuff shows up in the hands of terrorists who are too stupid to understand the full impact of their actions.” Taras Ostrovsky’s smile had slowly faded and his eyes gone blank. The girl took notice and decided to change the subject. “But this is all too boring for you,” she said. “Tell me something about yourself. What do you do?”

Ostrovsky knew he could be anything he wanted to be with her; by Istanbul it wouldn’t matter. “I’m a businessman,” he said.

“That covers a lot of territory,” said the girl. “What kind of business?”

“I’m an exporter...of...how shall I say, hard-to-come-by goods.”

“Okay...and what goods are taking you to Istanbul?” she asked, now feeling like she had to pry information from him.

“I am delivering some semi-precious material to a group of Arab businessmen. But enough about business. Surly we can find something more interesting to talk about than our work!”

She smiled and let the awkward moment pass. Obviously he did not want to talk about his work, and why should she care; she knew that after Istanbul she would never see him again. They chatted casually from then on about friends and movies and travel and never got much below the surface, a silent mutual agreement to allow this to be simply a passing dalliance for each of them. They remained lost in each other’s company until the announcement came over the speakers they were arriving at Cernauti.

Ostrovsky looked at his watch, “Seven o’clock! Amazing how time passes in such lovely company,” he said. “I should like to freshen up a bit, if you don’t mind.”

With the train stopping, he did not want to leave his precious cargo unattended. He had already spent far more time away from it than he had intended, a lapse in judgment he would not make again.

“You will join me for dinner, say, at eight?”

She agreed.

As he stood, the two men from the far corner brushed past him. They made momentary eye-contact and the older of the two glanced down at the girl then back to Ostrovsky with a particularly salacious grin. It was probably an appropriate assessment by the man, given what was on Ostrovsky’s mind, but for some reason Ostrovsky took offense and told the man to “keep your eyes to yourself,” at which the man grunted and intentionally bumped Ostrovsky a little harder than necessary as he passed.

Ostrovsky looked down at the girl apologetically, saying,

“Degenerate swine! There’s always one or two on every train.”

“Pay them no mind,” she replied. “They just envy you,” which brought a smile back to his face.

By the time Ostrovsky entered the First Class car, the two men were already halfway up the hall, standing at Ostrovsky’s cabin, fumbling with the handle.

“Hey there!” he yelled. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

One of the men looked up at the number on the door then down at the key in his hand and flashed an awkward smile.

“Sorry, they all look alike.”

The other man, the one with whom Ostrovsky had exchanged unpleasantries, sneered and the two men continued further down the hall.

Ostrovsky hurried to his door and let himself in, now cursing himself for having stayed so long away from his treasure. He closed and locked the door behind him, pulled down the curtain, and hurriedly retrieved the briefcase from the bed. He quickly opened it and, seeing the four metallic half-spheres, breathed a sigh of relief. He suddenly remembered there was another possible fate awaiting him in Istanbul. If anything went wrong on this mission, in another day-and-a-half he would not become a rich man; he would become a dead one!

12

JOE ROSENFELD DID NOT SLEEP WELL THAT NIGHT. All night long he tossed and turned until he finally reached a difficult professional decision. He knew that if he was convinced a client posed a threat to himself or others, he was not only free to override his doctor-patient privilege, he was duty-bound to do so. In the morning he would go to the FBI office in San Francisco to see Agent Samson. If, when he got there, he found that he had second thoughts, he could simply report that Cain had contacted him and scheduled a session for some later time. If he was still uneasy about Cain, he would arrange for Agent Samson to come and get his client that afternoon. At 4:00 A.M., with the decision made, he was finally able to fall asleep for a few hours before the alarm rudely jarred him awake at 7:30.

* * *** * *

That morning shortly after eight, Special Agent Victor Samson arrived at the home of Sarah Jenkins in a peaceful little neighborhood in Mountain View. Miss Jenkins was about to sit down to her usual breakfast of tea and yogurt before heading to the

Palo Alto lab where she worked as a technician, when the doorbell rang. Opening the door to see an FBI badge waving in her face was not how she had hoped to begin her day, but she invited Agent Samson in, offered him some tea and excused herself as she continued to get ready for work. Agent Samson didn't mention Jared Kennan Cain by name but asked, rather, if Jenkins or any one else at the lab had seen any unusual blood or tissue samples come through there in the past few weeks. She said that she had not worked directly on anything herself but that two of her colleagues had gotten all excited over some biopsy samples from a cancer patient about two weeks earlier. She provided the names of her lab partners, Sanjay Parvati and Luis Gonzales, but did not know where they lived.

"Luis starts at one today but it's Sanjay's day off," she offered.

Agent Samson also asked the name of the doctor who had ordered the lab work, as well as any assistants who might have been involved or had contact with that particular patient. She didn't need to think long about this one.

"Dr. Bertaccini," she said. "Dr. Eddie, we call him," then spent nearly a full minute singing his praises. She also provided the names of the two nurses who regularly worked with him, Shirley Dunphy and Brianna Eastland. Agent Samson thanked her, asking if there was anything else she could remember or offer before he concluded the interview. She couldn't think of anything but said she was more than happy to help the FBI and would call if she remembered anything else. Agent Samson assured her she had been an enormous help already and watched as she gathered up her breakfast dishes and stepped to the kitchen sink. While she rinsed the cup and bowl and spoon, Agent Samson, standing a couple feet behind her, quietly removed a small metal cylinder from his coat pocket, screwed it onto the end of his service revolver, and silently put a bullet through the back of Sarah Jenkins' head. He already had the names and addresses of Sanjay Parvati and Luis Gonzales, both of whom he had

visited the night before. Bertaccini, Dunphy, and Eastland were still on his list, but they would have a short workweek.

* * *** * *

Joe Rosenfeld arrived at the San Francisco FBI office on Golden Gate Avenue, between Polk and Larkin, near the theatre district, about 9:30. He asked to see Special Agent Victor Samson and flashed the card he had been given. The receptionist said she wasn't sure if he was in yet, instructed Rosenfeld to have a seat, and then stepped away from the desk. A moment later she returned, followed by a short, gray-haired man with a neatly trimmed mustache.

"Yes, sir, can I help you?" he said.

"Actually, I'm looking for Agent Samson," said Rosenfeld, standing to address the man.

"Yes, sir, what can I do for you?" repeated the man.

Rosenfeld had a moment of confusion.

"I'm sorry; I probably should have been more specific. I'm here to see Special Agent *Victor* Samson."

"Yes, sir; I *am* Special Agent Victor Samson. What can I do for you?"

Rosenfeld was nonplussed as he related the visit of the day before. "This card," he said, holding it up for *this* Agent Samson to see, "was given to me in my office yesterday by a man identifying himself as Special Agent Victor Samson. He told me an elaborate story about a client of mine named Jared Kennan Cain; that the man posed a serious health threat to the community, and that it was a matter of national security that Cain be turned in to him as soon as possible."

"What kind of health threat?" asked the agent.

"Some kind of plague," said Rosenfeld, who, as soon as he heard the words come out of his mouth, felt like a complete idiot, yet continued, "The Plague of Justinian."

To Rosenfeld's surprise, the agent didn't laugh, or worse, arrest

him on the spot for playing games with the FBI. He simply repeated what he'd been told, "The Plague of Justinian."

"I know, I know. I should have seen through that," said Rosenfeld. "I feel like an idiot now, but at the time it sounded real."

The agent ignored the comment.

"Is your client actually sick?"

"Yes, sir, but with cancer not the plague. Actually, he's extremely sick; could already be dead. But if he *isn't* already dead, he won't last much more than another week."

Agent Samson turned to his receptionist, "Diane, tell Brad to join us in Picasso. Dr. Rosenfeld, follow me please."

Rosenfeld was taken to a conference room where *this* Victor Samson was soon joined by another agent, Brad Andrews, to hear Rosenfeld's story. They didn't know what the impostor was up to and had never even heard the name Jared Kennan Cain, but impersonating an FBI agent was enough to get their attention. They decided the easiest way to locate the fake Victor Samson was first to see if the phone number scribbled on the back of the card was real, and then, if it was, arrange for this man to come to Rosenfeld's office a little after two o'clock when Cain would be there for his regular session. The two agents would be waiting in Rosenfeld's parking lot and when the impostor showed up, they would quietly take him into custody for questioning.

Rosenfeld took out his cell phone and punched in the number from the back of the card. On the third ring a female voice answered.

"FBI, how may I direct your call?"

Rosenfeld said, "Special Agent Victor Samson, please" and was put on hold.

A moment later the female voice returned to say Agent Samson was currently not in the office but if Rosenfeld would leave his name and number she would arrange to have Agent Samson return the call as soon as possible. Rosenfeld gave her his cell phone number and hung up.

“Now what?” he asked the agents.

“Give it a minute,” said Agent Andrews. “She’s obviously at a relay post. He’ll most likely get back to you in...”

Rosenfeld’s phone vibrated before Andrews could finish. He looked at the two agents, who both gave him a look that said “Well, answer it!”

He flipped open the phone and said “Rosenfeld.” There was a brief pause and then he said “Yes, Agent Samson...” throwing a puzzled look back and forth between the two agents “thank you for getting back to me so quickly. I wanted to let you know that Mr. Cain called this morning to set up an appointment.” There was another brief pause. “Yes, sir, I told him we could work him in at two this afternoon.” Another pause. “Yes, sir, 2:15. That should give us enough time to settle in and be sure that he is going to show up for the appointment.” Rosenfeld closed the phone. “I think you got that,” he said to the two agents.

Agents Samson and Andrews took down a description of the fake agent and told Rosenfeld not to worry. By two o’clock they would be in Rosenfeld’s parking lot waiting for the impostor. They had made many such arrests and there was no cause for concern. Once they had him in custody, they would ask Rosenfeld to come out and make a positive ID, and that would be that; Rosenfeld would not have anything more to do until the trial, if there even was one.

It all sounded so simple, so cut-and-dried.

Rosenfeld thanked the agents for their time and help and left. Forty minutes later he briefed Liz on what had happened, and what to expect, and told her not to worry. By one o’clock Rosenfeld was back behind his desk meeting with his afternoon client, Betty Murphy.

13

BETTY MURPHY DESERVED BETTER than what she was getting today and Dr. Rosenfeld knew it. From the time their session started, Rosenfeld's attention was on the clock, not on Betty Murphy's problems. She talked; he pretended to listen. With a nod here and an 'uh-huh' there, they made their way through each tick of the clock, but today she could have been talking to a cardboard cutout of the doctor and a tape recorder that played back an arbitrary soundtrack of random grunts and *hmm*'s and gotten just as much help.

Yesterday had begun badly—with a visit from the FBI—and gone downhill from there, ending in an angry confrontation with a client; a dying client at that! And today was already making yesterday look good. Now there were more FBI involved, and one of the three was apparently an impostor. Jared Kennan Cain had left an aborted session the previous day declaring that his cancer would have 'run its course' by today and that Rosenfeld's questions would then just be beginning. And in the next ten minutes yesterday and today would collide in an FBI arrest outside his office and either a no-show by a now-dead client or another confrontation with a still-dying one!

Could it get any worse? thought Rosenfeld.

Joe didn't know the half of it!

Rosenfeld's session with Betty Murphy came to an end with the *buzz* of the timer at 1:50 and she left none-the-wiser about her therapist's preoccupation. Rosenfeld cleared his desk and prepared for Cain's arrival, giving it less than a fifty-fifty chance of actually happening. At the same time, he peered out to the parking lot wondering what was going to come of the FBI action. On an otherwise beautiful California day, he saw a man in a light gray business suit walking briskly toward the front door of the building. There was something vaguely familiar about the man but before Rosenfeld had a chance to take a better look, he caught a glimpse of Agents Samson and Andrews sitting in their car, waiting for the arrival of the fake Samson. He felt his heart beating faster, could almost hear it pounding in his ears, as he braced for the inevitable.

At 1:59 P.M. on November 16, 2009, Dr. Joe Rosenfeld's reality was forever turned on its head.

Rosenfeld's door burst open as Liz Charles practically ran into the office with a look of both panic and exhilaration on her face as a young man in a light gray business suit followed closely behind. Liz said nothing—probably couldn't have if she wanted to—and stood frozen in the middle of the room while Rosenfeld's eyes jumped back and forth from her to the young man standing just inside his door.

The strong, clear voice of the man said "Hello Dr. Rosenfeld" in a manner that suggested they knew each other. Rosenfeld's puzzled expression little by little morphed into one of incredulity as he stared at the face of the familiar stranger and a sense of recognition set in. Rosenfeld felt his knees quiver ever so slightly as he reached a hand back behind him, groping for the arm of his chair. He eased himself down, careful not to avert his eyes from the man for fear the illusion would vanish if he looked away.

Rosenfeld finally spoke.

"Cain?"

"Yes, Dr. Rosenfeld, it is I."

Already Jared Kennan Cain's prediction for today was coming true: Rosenfeld's questions ran so deep he literally did not know what to ask.

Cain shut the door and gestured to Liz Charles to have a seat, which allowed her to look away long enough to find a chair. When she looked back at him again, her face still held an expression of amazement, fascination, and brightness that prompted him to say "You have a unique beauty, Miss Charles. You remind me of someone I once knew, a long time ago—a very long time ago." He smiled warmly and genuinely at her. "I meant to tell you that earlier but the opportunity never presented itself." She managed to smile back. "Dr. Rosenfeld, I want to thank you for the compassion and caring you showed during our sessions. I know it was not always easy for you. I hope you'll forgive me but I'm sure you'll understand there was really no way for me to tell you the truth at that time; it was something you would only believe in the seeing. It's why I took particular enjoyment at your friend's expression: Truth never happens in real time. For you the 'truth' was that I was dying and unable to accept that fact; for me, there was a different 'truth'—with no way to explain it; I could only show it. I visited your colleague, Dr. Bertaccini, not to prove to myself that I had cancer, but rather to prove that fact to you for when this time came. And I did, in fact, seek you out because of your book, as I said. I do hope we can continue our discussions along those lines before this is all over."

Cain's smile and gentleness of voice were now as mesmerizing as had been his stories during their hypnosis sessions, and Rosenfeld's apprehension and confusion changed to a sort of 'calm witness,' though he still could not speak.

Cain continued, "But I'm afraid those discussions will have to take a back seat for the time-being, as I did come here with a different need, one which must take priority for now. As I said in our first meeting, what I need is a very public, much publicized death, in the company of strangers, for all to see. And I need your help to

achieve this.”

Rosenfeld’s thoughts went crashing into themselves trying to make their way to his mouth but couldn’t find a vocal cord to ride out. He wanted to say But you are alive and healthy! Why would you want to die now? All he could manage to get out was “But...”

At that moment there was a loud *BANG*, followed in rapid succession by two more loud pops out in the parking lot. All three jumped in their seats, exchanged bewildered looks, and in an instant rushed to the window to see what was happening. They saw one man lying on the ground, another bent over him, reaching in his pocket for a cell phone. In the distance behind them, a third man was running to his car, which he clamored into and sped away. Squealing tires could be heard in the distance as he hit the 280 entrance ramp.

Only Rosenfeld recognized the two men on the ground as Agents Samson and Andrews—the latter now blood soaked—and the fake Samson driving away.

Only Cain recognized the fleeing man not as FBI Agent Victor Samson but as Tony Porter, the chief of security for Genetic Discovery Corporation.

“Liz, call 9-1-1,” said Rosenfeld, “and tell them an FBI agent has been shot. Cain, you stay here; I don’t want you involved with the FBI—and I get the strong impression you don’t want that either.”

Rosenfeld ran to the parking lot to assist the agents while Cain watched from the office window. Rosenfeld stayed with the two agents until the ambulance arrived, then watched it drive off with the wounded agent, sirens blaring. Agent Samson and Rosenfeld talked briefly in the parking lot. Rosenfeld lied to him, saying his sick and dying client never showed up, which in a way was actually true. Rosenfeld, now afraid for his life, told Agent Samson he was going to close his office for a few days and leave town so the fake Agent Samson wouldn’t find him. He assured the agent he would contact him as soon as he got settled somewhere. They shook hands and the agent hurried to his car to speed off after his partner. Rosenfeld went

back in the building to set a course of action and get them all out of there fast.

Back in the office Rosenfeld quickly filled in Liz and Cain on what had transpired in the parking lot, then picked up the phone and punched in the number of a friend. It took four rings before the familiar voice on the other end said hello.

“Wes, Joe Rosenfeld. I need your help.”

Rosenfeld gave Wes Franklin a short version of events, impressing on him that, no matter what case he was working on at the moment, *none* would be more compelling than this. Franklin was of a mind that helping the President of the United States would likely trump anything Joe had going, but finally relented, agreeing to give him a couple of hours. It didn't help that Rosenfeld wanted his friend to meet him at the Big Sur Lodge, south of Carmel, but somehow Joe overcame Franklin's objections and convinced him to join them that evening.

Once off the phone, Rosenfeld barked a couple quick orders to Liz and Cain, then looked around the office for any loose ends before they left. “A-ha,” he said and rushed over to his filing cabinet. He withdrew the file on Jared Kennan Cain, marveling at its size after such a short time, then suddenly realizing *why* it was so thick. He removed several pages and transferred them to another folder. It was clear he couldn't lug this huge file around with them. He scanned the room for a suitable place to stash the folder and walked quickly to his closet. On the floor of the closet, shoved off to the corner, was a stack of American Psychiatric Association Journals that he had been meaning to get rid of but just never got around to. He crammed Cain's file behind them snug against the wall then closed and locked the door. He took one last look around to be sure he wasn't forgetting anything. Over the weekend they could contact clients to reschedule sessions. For now they just needed to stay alive.

Finally Rosenfeld said “Okay, let's get the hell out of here” and closed the office.

14

AS ROSENFELD LEFT 280 AND GOT ON HWY 85 heading south for 101 toward Monterey, he called Bertaccini.

“Eddie...Joe,” said Rosenfeld from his car.

“Joe, I can’t talk right now, we’ve got cops all over the place,” said Bertaccini. “Three of our lab techs were found murdered this morning. This place is nothing but chaos and tears right now.”

“Eddie, this can’t wait,” replied Rosenfeld with a tone of urgency. “There’s a guy going around impersonating an FBI agent and not a half hour ago he shot a real one outside my office. He’s been looking for Cain. He fed me some crap about Cain having the plague and how we had another Typhoid Mary in the making if Cain wasn’t captured. And get this; Cain showed up this afternoon in perfect...”

Just then another doctor poked his head in the door interrupting Bertaccini at his end.

“Joe, hang on a minute. What is it David,” said Bertaccini to Dr. David Sinclair, the Director of Lab Services. Sinclair said there was an FBI agent needing to talk to Bertaccini, and Eddie waved Sinclair into the office. “Come in and close the door, David. Go on, Joe, what were you saying?”

“Cain showed up for his appointment today in perfect health!” said Rosenfeld.

“What do you mean ‘perfect health’?” asked Bertaccini.

“I mean the guy is healthier than you and me. Tell me something, did your dead lab techs have anything to do with Cain?” asked Rosenfeld.

“One of them did that I know of. Luis Gonzales brought me the lab results and could barely contain his excitement. I can’t blame him; Cain’s blood work was extremely unusual, Gonzales had never seen anything like it. Neither had I for that matter.”

“Listen, Eddie, you need to get out of there! Get as far away from the hospital as fast as you can. And whatever you do,” warned Rosenfeld, “stay away from a guy identifying himself as FBI Agent Victor Samson.”

“Joe, there’s an FBI agent here right now wanting to see me.”

“Alert the cops, Eddie. This could be who they’re looking for! Cain and Liz and I are on our way down to Big Sur.”

“Big Sur!” exclaimed Bertaccini. He told Rosenfeld to hang on a second then barked an order to Sinclair to tell the cops on the floor to detain the FBI agent. As Sinclair made a hasty exit, Bertaccini said “Joe, I’m going to check out this FBI guy while the cops are here. I’ll call you later and tell you what happens. If this is your man, and the cops arrest him, you can come back out of hiding.”

Bertaccini hung up and walked quickly to the door. When he opened it, he saw Sinclair talking to a man in a black suit near the nurses’ station. Two uniformed police were standing across the hall from Sinclair and the other man, talking to each other, completely uninterested in Sinclair or the other man.

Something wasn’t right.

Sinclair made a gesture over his shoulder back toward Bertaccini’s office then practically shoved the man the other direction. The man took the stairwell exit and as soon as he disappeared, Sinclair walked calmly over to talk to the men in

uniform.

Bertaccini approached Sinclair and the cops and asked where the FBI agent was. One of the cops told him the agent had just left by the stairs.

Sinclair said, “I got rid of him” as if Eddie would be happy about this.

He wasn’t.

“I told you to get the police and hold him. The guy’s an impostor, dammit!” Bertaccini looked around the floor. Other than some red-eyed staff, it appeared things were reasonably back to normal. He turned to the police officers again and said, “Try to catch the man that just left. I have reason to believe he isn’t a real FBI agent. If you find him, treat him like he’s armed and dangerous. He may be the same guy that just shot a real FBI agent.”

Bertaccini told Sinclair he was leaving for awhile. Sinclair asked if he was going to Big Sur, too, which gave Bertaccini pause. Bertaccini studied Sinclair’s face for a moment then said, “No, and don’t mention Big Sur to anyone, you understand? No one!” There was something about the way Sinclair had pushed that man toward the exit that didn’t set well with Eddie. Maybe he was overreacting; maybe the lab killings were making them all a little crazy, but for the moment Eddie had to trust his instincts and his instincts told him to get out of town.

By five o’clock DC-time Cornell Bridger was on the phone to the Vice President—and George S. Austin was fit to be tied. The news of the dead lab techs didn’t particularly faze him, but the fact that an FBI agent had been shot and the principal objective had made yet another escape sent him ballistic, though he was soon forced to curb his explosive nature as General Wahl came into the office for their scheduled meeting. Austin signaled the general to have a seat on the couch across the room, then spoke quietly into the phone, controlling his anger, though hardly able to hide the red in his face.

The Mailman knew something was up and remained still, trying

his best to pick up anything he could about what had set off the Vice President. The way Austin was doing everything he could to mask the conversation would have been enough for anyone to try to listen in. The behind-the-scenes game Wahl was playing doubled his curiosity. All he could manage to pick out of the Vice President's half of the conversation was FBI, Big Sur, and the name of the caller—Bridger. The urgency of 'two weeks' could, he supposed, relate to almost anything—he wasn't privy to everything on Austin's schedule—but as it intersected his own dealings with the Vice President, the time period stood out in his mind for only one reason: President Treem's departure for Tehran.

After only a minute or so on the phone, the Vice President hung up, in no mood for a conversation with anyone, least of all General Wahl. He snapped that their meeting would have to be postponed till morning in a way that didn't invite queries from the general. The Vice President was no one to be around when he was in this kind of foul mood, so The Mailman could use the Vice President's distraction as an excuse to make a hasty exit. General Wahl wanted to call the Secretary of State immediately about the situation and pass along the mood of the Vice President, as well as the few words he had overheard. The words didn't have any specific meaning for the general but Forsyth might have more intelligence on the matter. And in any case, it was always better to over-communicate than ignore something as meaningless that might later prove important.

15

THE CURTAIN WOULD RISE in two hours on *WICKED*, the Tony Award winning musical about ‘the untold story of the witches of Oz’ before Dorothy arrived, and which cautioned theatre-goers to forget everything they thought they knew about that fable. Crandall Forsyth and Sylvia Bergstrom, the newest head of Central Intelligence, sat in JW Marriott’s National Restaurant on the corner of 14th St. NW and Pennsylvania Ave across from Freedom Plaza excitedly looking forward to seeing the play that had been the talk-of-the-town for the past couple of years but which never quite fit into their schedules until this evening. They had read dozens of reviews over the years—reviews which had started out as glowing and only gotten better with time—and had even seen a presentation of the show-stopping song ‘Defying Gravity’ on Letterman in the early days of its Broadway run, so their enthusiasm was at a fever pitch when Forsyth’s phone rang. The interruption was unwelcome but necessary.

The Mailman briefed Forsyth on overhearing the phone call that had upset the Vice President, relaying the few words he was able to pick out. The news of the shooting of FBI agent Andrews would be a hot topic around the water-coolers the next day but had happened too

late in the afternoon to reach Forsyth's ears before he left for dinner. Even DCI Bergstrom hadn't heard about it yet. The reference to Big Sur had no particular significance, either. The name of Bridger had a vague familiarity to it but not enough to fire any synapses in Forsyth, though it raised an eyebrow with Bergstrom when Forsyth asked her, "Does the name Bridger mean anything to you?"

"Bridger!" she said in surprise. "Cornell Bridger, the geneticist?" she asked. Forsyth shrugged his uncertainty. "How does Austin know Bridger?"

Forsyth said into the phone, "See what else you can find out about Austin's link to Bridger and get back to me" then on a personal matter said, "Yeah, we're still planning to come early Thursday morning to help with the turkey. You sure you don't need us to bring anything? Okay but we'll bring an extra case of wine just to be on the safe side. With that group you can never have too much wine on hand. Right," he said to a comment from the general. "Thanks Ryan."

Once he closed his phone, Sylvia Bergstrom asked again, "How does Austin know Bridger? Austin is one of the most unscientific guys in this town and Bridger, if it's the same Bridger I'm thinking of, is in a scientific world of his own!"

"Who is he?" asked Forsyth.

"A genetics wunderkind the Company recruited in '88 after Saddam conducted his chemical reign of terror on the Kurds," she said. "Let me tell you, killing 50,000—maybe as many as 100,000 people from some estimates—put Saddam on our radar big-time," said Bergstrom. "Bridger went straight to the top of the pecking order on our chemical and biological weapons research programs. We even built him a state-of-the-art research lab in California so he could stay close to his academic home and maintain his school ties. It made sense anyway; genetic research was exploding all over Silicon Valley, so it kept him tight to the network of genetics-nerds. In the mid '90s we created a company called Genetic Discovery

Corporation as a front for our chemical counter-measures programs. This allowed Bridger to maintain an open profile, at the same time recruiting the best and brightest in his field. Their payroll is astronomical but it's the only way we can keep the people who are in the vanguard of genetic research." The DCI wore a mystified expression. "But that brings me right back to my original question: what is Vice President Austin's connection with Bridger? Those two wouldn't even go to the same social functions, let alone have anything to talk about when they got there."

"I don't know," said Forsyth. "I just know that, shortly after taking office, Austin suddenly started having a lot of communication with your Genetic Discovery Corporation."

"That would make it a little over a year ago," said Bergstrom. "Interesting," she mused.

"What's interesting?"

"If I remember right, that was about the time Bridger started his fountain-of-youth rants," said the DCI.

"Fountain-of-youth rants?" asked Forsyth.

"Well that's what some of the Langley crew dubbed it. Some of my people thought Bridger was finally starting to lose it, not that that's so unusual for mega-brain types. They get so caught up in their own world they can barely communicate with anyone outside it. Anyway, Bridger started taking a big interest in Methuselah gene research and going on and on about human longevity and the body's ability to rejuvenate spontaneously. Everyone just kind of nodded and let the mad-scientist have his say until he got tired of talking. For most of us, the focus of his work was supposed to be learning how to kill or not be killed by genetics; not how to live forever!" Sylvia Bergstrom laughed, "Hell, having worked in this town for the last twenty years, I've learned too much about the world to even *want* to live forever?"

Bergstrom's comment about Methuselah genes reminded Crandall Forsyth of something A.J.'s investigation had turned up.

“Have you ever heard of something called THE METHUSELAH MAN PROJECT?”

Bergstrom thought for a moment but came up with nothing.

“No. Doesn’t ring a bell with me.”

“Well, nose around for me a bit will you and see if you can find out anything. But keep it on the down-low.” Forsyth chuckled at the irony. “Look who I’m advising to keep a secret!”

Sylvia Bergstrom smiled back then shot a quick glance at her watch.

“Hey, we need to get going. The curtain goes up in twenty minutes. And from what I’ve heard, we don’t even want to miss seeing the curtain; I hear it’s a real Land of Oz treat in itself!”

Forsyth flagged the waiter for the check as their enthusiasm returned for Wicked.

16

THE NINETY-FIVE MINUTE DRIVE TO CARMEL was silent, each of the three occupants of the Prius quietly lost in their own thoughts. From Carmel, Big Sur Lodge was about a twenty-minute drive along Coastal Highway 1, one of the most beautiful and awesome drives anywhere in the world. The road hugged the rocky coast from the southern outskirts of Carmel-by-the-Sea all the way down to Santa Barbara—all the way to Mexico if you were going that far—with only intermittent interruptions to a direct view of the ocean. On a sunny day, the water shone a beautiful white-capped mix of teal, aquamarine, and turquoise hues, with waves lapping gently around sculpted rock formations jutting up from the Pacific floor, or crashing gloriously into naturally carved grottoes, then rolling powerfully back out to sea. At this time of day, however, the setting sun glistened off the calm water like twinkling diamonds rolling out for miles. The sky was aglow in soft pastels of orange and pink, with sea and sky converging at the blue-black line of the horizon.

The beauty of the scenery went nonetheless unnoticed this early evening, or at least witnessed without comment, given the events of just a few hours before.

A left turn to an angling dirt road took Rosenfeld, Liz Charles, and Jared Kennan Cain back into the Redwoods and shortly up to the Big Sur Lodge, where Rosenfeld quickly registered them and obtained the electronic keycard for Cabin 22. They followed the signs counterclockwise along the back row of cabins to their secluded hideaway.

“Perfect” thought Rosenfeld as they approached Cabin 22. It was the last cabin of its conjoined group, with an open space between their cabin and the next set of cabins to the right. In front and to the left of their door, a giant oak stood with its huge base and three trunk-sized branches extending outward and upward. Twenty yards from their front door, the Coastal Range climbed at a steep angle. The trees were thin but dense, with covering-brush scattered between. Out the back door was a small porch with a view of the Conference Center and pool off to the left, both closed for the season.

Inside the cabin, Joe Rosenfeld sat on a sofa contemplating the events of this tumultuous day. Liz Charles sat on the floor poking at the flaming logs in the fireplace, rotating them to expose more unburned area to the fire. Jared Kennan Cain sat on the couch directly in front of the fireplace, watching the orange flames jump and pop amber sparkles as Liz jabbed methodically at the logs. They sat as quietly as they had on the drive down here until Cain asked softly in an uncharacteristically familiar and intimate tone, “Are you fond of the early Egyptians, Liz?”

Liz Charles looked up from the fire with an expression of childlike curiosity and affection and said, “I’ve never really thought about it. I don’t know much about them beyond the things I’ve seen in movies.”

Studying her face in the firelight, his eyes gazing hypnotically into hers, Cain said, “They were a wonderful people, Liz. You would have fit their time very easily.” Cain saw a quizzical look on her face and hesitated for a moment before explaining. “It’s the way you

apply your eye makeup that made me think of it. The coloring has an Egyptian quality; beautiful and distinctive.” Cain paused for a moment as if lost in time, then asked, “You’ve heard of Ramesses II?” to which she nodded tentatively. “And his Great Royal Wife, Nefertari?” he continued. This time Liz shook her head. “Well, it was a very long time ago and easy not to remember,” he laughed. “More than three thousand years ago.” He seemed to lose himself again momentarily, then said, “She was the love of his life, his friend and closest companion; a true ‘soul mate’ I think is the term you might use now; an expression that truly captures how they felt about each other. They believed absolutely in the transmigration of the soul and felt they were eternal companions traveling across space and time, stopping temporarily to incarnate as divine rulers to impart leadership, guidance, and protection to the people.” Cain smiled at Liz Charles saying, “I can’t attest to the truth of this belief but it certainly describes the depth of their love for each other, as well as the depth to which they felt responsible for the welfare of their people.”

Liz shifted her position on the floor and moved closer to Cain. She leaned against the couch and looked up at him with a gaze of curiosity mixed with a certain level of affection as he told the story of the Pharaoh and his Queen.

“Ramesses II was perhaps the greatest Pharaoh of Egypt, the great Builder of Cities that would forever stand as testimony to the majesty and power of their civilization. His people loved him very much, not just because he was their Pharaoh, but because they knew in their hearts that he and Nefertari truly loved them back. He was, to them, the unbounded strength of the desert made manifest in the body of a man; she, an image of womanly beauty and grace, the life-giving waters of the Nile. They were not much more than teenagers when Ramesses II ascended the throne following the reign of Seti I. Much of his reign was spent in peace, though in the early years of his rule, challenges presented themselves and his strong arm was put

to the test for the safety and security of the Egyptian people.”

Liz seemed to hang on Jared Kennan Cain’s every word, her mind transported to an ancient and lush land as clearly as if she were watching it on a television. Even Rosenfeld was drawn into the imagery, mesmerized by the soothing tones of Cain’s voice as deeply as the trances the doctor had tried to induce during their hypnosis sessions. As though caught in a bubble of time, the three danced through a wave of mental images conjured from days gone by. There were even moments for Rosenfeld and Liz Charles when their storyteller held as much, if not more, fascination than even the story he was telling.

Jared Kennan Cain recounted the famous Battle of Kadesh, a battle that any student of Egyptian history would necessarily know, but in a manner more as an eyewitness than a historian. He told of the four divisions of chariots—Ramesses II’s personal Amun division, P’re, Suteh, and the newly-formed Ptah division, as well as the Nea’rin division of Amurru, of which little is known but which contributed significantly to Ramesses II’s success in the battle. Two thousand chariots, designed to hold only two men instead of the traditional three so as to be light and fast, comprised Ramesses’s four divisions, followed by an army of nearly twenty thousand foot soldiers. The opposing Hittite force outnumbered Ramesses with thirty-five hundred chariots and thirty-seven thousand foot soldiers, with the added element of surprise.

False intelligence reports had placed the Hittite forces of Muwatalli at Haleb, when they were in fact lying in wait at the Tell of Kadesh.

The trap sprung, Ramesses’s forces were scattered in retreat and disarray, his camps overrun and now in the process of being pillaged before he could turn to rally his men. “Historical accounts are difficult to sift through,” said Cain, who, smiling, glanced over to Rosenfeld and added, “Even then truth did not happen in real time.” Rosenfeld smiled faintly, too engrossed in the tale to have much

external reaction. “Egyptian accounts had the Pharaoh making multiple charges at the Hittite army, virtually defeating them single-handedly.” Cain’s account gave significant credit for the Egyptian victory to the sudden appearance of the Nea’rin division, a complement of chariots from Amurru, though even then ‘victory’ was an equivocal term; both sides tried to claim it for their own. Nonetheless, Cain explained, the conflict soon led to peace between the two countries, not insignificantly influenced by a series of letters written by Nefertari to Pudukpra, the wife of King Hattusilis.

“The secret letters of Nefertari urging a peaceful solution to their differences were sent by a courier, Iset-Nofret, under the personal protection of the general of the Nea’rin division,” said Cain. “Even in those days,” he added with a smile, “the women were the peacemaking force behind their men.” Liz beamed with a certain gender pride and Cain went on. “Many such secret missives were transmitted, but even after the first such clandestine mission, the Nea’rin general and Iset-Nofret had fallen in love. As peace became the norm between the Egyptians and the Hittites, the secret missions stopped and the Nea’rin general asked permission of Ramesses to take Iset-Nofret as his wife. Since the days of Kadesh, the young Pharaoh and the middle-aged general had become close friends, so it was easy for Ramesses to give his blessing to the union.

“For nearly twenty-five years the lives and fates of the two men and their loving wives were intertwined. By now, the four seemed all to have become the same age, the Pharaoh, Nefertari, and Iset-Nofret growing out of their teenage bodies and joining the general in the activities and energies of middle age. Their lives were idyllic together; the world their own special playground of power, wealth, and glory, but always with an eye to the benefit and welfare of the people entrusted to their care.

“Then in an instant, the hearts of both men were shattered,” said Cain with a touch of sadness in his voice. “Nefertari, the Great Royal Wife of Ramesses II, took ill and died at the age of about forty. Iset-

Nofret was, at nearly the same time, killed in a tragic accident when an errant arrow from an archery range missed its target, took a deflected glance off a shield lying against a nearby tree, and pierced her right shoulder. While the wound itself did not seem to be life-threatening, an infection set in a few days later and Iset-Nofret died.

“The Pharaoh and the general were nearly inconsolable. Even the strength of their friendship could not fend off the overwhelming grief of the two men. For a period of weeks, the Pharaoh retreated into silence and isolation, emerging only long enough to tend to necessary affairs of state. It was nearly forty days before he returned to his court full-time, and then only to have his heart broken one more time when he learned that the general, in his grief, had wandered off into the desert never to be seen or heard from again. The Pharaoh sent search party after search party out to look for his friend but not so much as bleached bones were ever found. For another fifty-two years, till his death at the age of ninety-two, Pharaoh Ramesses II carried the loss of his Great Royal Wife and his beloved general and Iset-Nofret in his heart.”

Liz spoke for the first time since Cain’s story began. “What was the general’s name?” she asked, moving closer, nearly touching Cain’s leg.

Cain hesitated for a moment then smiled and said what sounded like “Yor Fahr.”

Liz questioned what she had heard, “Yor Fahr?”

Cain spoke more slowly and distinctly, “Your fire...it needs tending.”

Liz turned to look at the fire, which had burned down considerably. The spell they had all been under was broken now as Liz moved to stir the embers and grab another couple logs from beside the fireplace. As she positioned them and rekindled the flames, a knock at the front door forced their final return to the present.

Rosenfeld moved quickly to the door and called out before

opening it, “Who’s there?”

“It’s Wes Franklin,” came the reply.

Rosenfeld opened the door.

“Wes!” he said, then seeing another man added, “Aryana! Please, gentlemen, come in.”

17

WES FRANKLIN PERUSED THE ABBREVIATED CASE FILE, consisting only of the intake form and a few fabricated first-session notes that had been hastily thrown together, while Rosenfeld brought him up to speed on the previous two weeks that culminated in the shooting of the FBI agent earlier that day. The 1 5 18 scratched in the Date of Birth section of the form caused Wes to look up and do a cursory scan of Jared Kennan Cain. He quickly dismissed it as an obvious mistake. The idea that this man had been dying of fourth-stage lung cancer until the previous day was, at best, unbelievable. Wes had known Joe a long time, since their sophomore college days in fact, so he had to give him the benefit of a doubt on this, but there was nothing in scientific reality to support the claim. Sure, there were always periods of remission with the disease—short or otherwise—but never a full and complete recovery that left the survivor in apparently better health than he had started with, and the contradiction registered fully with Wes. There was no need to push the issue just now, though; the truth would find its own time to offer explanations, and there were other avenues to explore until that time.

When Rosenfeld reached the part about the FBI shooting and it

was clear that someone was after Cain, Wes looked over to Aryana and gave him an almost imperceptible head gesture that sent Aryana outside to reconnoiter the grounds and establish a watch for the night. The first time Wes spoke since the initial introductions he asked the obvious question: why was someone after Cain, and more to the point, why did they want him dead.

“They don’t intend to kill me; they have other plans for me,” said Cain. “But I believe they do intend to kill anyone who has had extensive contact with me. The lab techs that were killed last night were killed because of what they knew about me. Dr. Bertaccini knew for sure that one of them had been involved with my blood work and I think it’s reasonable to assume the other did as well. If they are willing to shoot an FBI agent, you can bet they won’t think twice about...” Cain froze in mid-sentence and looked over at Liz, who was hanging on his every word. He realized he was about to be brutally frank and caught himself in time to soften his assessment. “These people will stop at nothing Dr. Franklin.”

“Please, just Wes. How did you get involved with these people in the first place?”

“I can assure you it was quite by accident.” Cain laughed softly at his own choice of words. “Literally by accident,” he added. “Two years ago I was in an auto accident with a drunk driver. It was an early morning accident up on 280 near the Sand Hill exit. The other driver was killed outright and I was in critical condition. I was rushed to Stanford Hospital a mile or so away where they put me in the ICU with massive internal injuries, as well as head trauma and broken bones. I wasn’t expected to make it to sunrise. The doctors attending me thought I would be dead within four hours and were simply taking measures to keep me comfortable until then. It was their sworn oath to do so but they took no extraordinary measures to save me, fully expecting the extent of my injuries to be fatal. If anything, they were amazed that I had even survived the collision. The primary physician went about his regular rounds, tending to

patients he could actually help and waiting for the nurse to summon him for the official call as to the time of my death. Each half hour he inquired as to my situation, and each half hour for the first two hours he heard the same report: no change. In fact there *were* changes, but on a level they could not see or measure with the machines I was hooked to. By early morning the staff was in a state of excited confusion at what was happening to me. Two hours after I was admitted I stirred for the first time. That I could move at all sent the night staff scurrying to find the doctor—I believe his name was Hobbes—who was at a loss to explain my condition but conceded there was bound to be some improvement, though in the end the damage was catastrophic and the improvements would be, at best, superficial and inconsequential. By the third hour my vital signs had stabilized and, almost unnoticed, several bruises and cuts not severe enough to require bandaging had disappeared. One of the nurses was the first to notice this change. She called over another to confirm whether she was seeing things—or, in this case, not seeing them—and perhaps confusing my injuries with those of another patient. With so much physical damage occupying their attention, the little things hardly seemed to matter—until they vanished. When the second nurse confirmed this fact, they decided to have another look at some of the more severe wounds. They gingerly lifted a bandage from my arm to have a peek underneath. What they found was so unexpected it almost frightened them. When they lifted the bandage they saw perfectly undamaged, unscarred flesh; a small zigzag string of sutures clung to the underside of the bloodstained gauze but there wasn't a trace of evidence that those sutures had ever been stitched to this body. They immediately paged Dr. Hobbes with an 'urgent' code number. This time when Hobbes examined me he was less clinically objective in his observation. His hands shook almost like he had palsy as he examined me.

“At first Hobbes was furious that someone was playing a practical joke on him with a patient who he believed would be dead in a

matter of hours; such incredibly bad taste in pranks. Hobbes performed another general exam, the results of which caused him to give a tongue-lashing to one of the nurses for mixing up my records with someone else. The nurse adamantly stood his ground, denying he had done any such thing. Hobbes didn't apologize or back down but turned his attention back to the body in front of him, trying to think of what to do next. Slowly his anger turned to bewilderment. What was happening to me was not possible in the rational world of medicine. He was confused by the things he *could* see, so he ordered some more x-rays and blood work to find out what was going on in the areas he *couldn't* see. He would never get a chance to see the second set of x-rays and tests.

"It was hours before I regained consciousness after the accident and when I did I felt like sh..." Cain again looked at Liz and checked himself. "I felt horrible. I felt like I was going to die, and frankly, would have preferred to, it would have made things so much easier for me."

Rosenfeld shot a quick glance at Wes to see how he reacted to this last statement.

Wes was impassive as Cain went on.

"The second set of lab tests never made it back up to the Intensive Care Unit. Instead, I found myself being wheeled out of the ICU, packed into an ambulance, and taken—sirens silent—to a facility a few blocks from the hospital. I learned months later that Dr. Hobbes had passed by the ICU room where I had been, saw I was gone, presumed I had died as expected, and continued his rounds content that rational science had been correct in my prognosis. Ordinarily he would have inquired after my demise but I think he was too unsettled by his earlier exam to ask right away. Ironically, Dr. Hobbes would die that very afternoon, the victim of a hit-and-run driver on El Camino Real.

"The Director of Lab Services—a Dr. Sinclair—had arranged for my transfer as soon as he saw the results of my second lab work. He

had seen the x-rays when I was first brought in and couldn't believe the second set was from the same patient. The spleen that had been crushed almost beyond recognition was, two hours later, in a pristine state. Similarly, other organs were in a state of advanced healing, bones already showed early signs of fusing, and my blood chemistry, though anything but typical, was a textbook profile of normalcy—actually better than that; a 'state of unprecedented perfection' was the way it was stated in my file.

"My time at the new facility was initially a fascinating learning experience for me. For the first time in my life I was getting a scientific explanation for my curse."

"Curse?" said Wes. "The ability of your body to regenerate and rejuvenate is a curse?" Wes gave a curious smile. "I think most people would consider that a blessing!"

"Wes, one man's blessing is sometimes another man's curse," said Cain. "People need to be careful what they wish for. And I say this as one profoundly affected by the outcome of this adage." Jared Kennan Cain made this statement with a kind of melancholy as he studied the faces of the three people around him. "For months the scientists put me through every type of evaluation they knew to study how my body reacted to various stimuli and stresses. The head of the facility was excited by whatever it was they were learning. I think they thought they were unlocking the secrets of eternal youth. Usually they would take my blood or tissue samples, expose them to some toxin, and then study them under a fancy microscope that made movies of the process. I watched their movies with fascination, not generally knowing what I was watching but intrigued all the same. I was free to come and go during those first eight or nine months. We had a good relationship and all they asked of me was that I not discuss this work or the facility with anyone; apparently all hush-hush government stuff. It wasn't until the tenth month that things took an ugly turn. One of the lab techs injected me with something that could have killed me. The lab director was furious with the tech,

ripped him up and down in front of me and the other staff, and told him to get out of his sight. He apologized profusely for the mistake, repeatedly said it was an accident, and that they would do everything they could to find a cure for what I had been given, which they explained was a rare strain of some kind of bacterium they called Yersin...”

“Yersinia pestis?” interrupted Wes.

“Yes, that was it; Yersinia pestis,” said Cain.

“What’s Yersna pectis?” asked Liz.

“Yersinia pestis, the Bubonic Plague,” said Wes. “The Black Plague that killed by some estimates anywhere from 75-200 million people in the 1400s; roughly a third of the population in the Middle East—Iraq, Iran, Syria—and upwards of forty-percent of Egypt’s population. In a four-year period it took out between forty-five and fifty percent of Europe, soaring in the South of France and Spain to something closer to eighty-percent. There were actually three strains: bubonic, pneumonic, and septicemic, each more deadly than the other, all with gruesome symptoms and effects. Bubonic, the one we usually think of when we hear about ‘the plague,’ produced fever, headaches, and vomiting. The appearance of buboes in the groin, neck, and armpits that oozed pus and blood pretty much marked you for death. Of these unlucky ones, four out of five would be dead within the week. Pneumonic plague was worse. Fever, cough, free-flowing bloody sputum and your odds were ninety to ninety-five percent that you’d be dead in the same period. The least common but most deadly was septicemic plague, producing high fever and purple skin patches. Almost no one survived this.”

“My God,” said Liz, turning to Cain. “How did they save you?”

“*They* didn’t,” said Cain. “My body saved me.”

“How is that possible?” asked Liz.

“There is a simple explanation, Liz,” answered Cain. “Do you remember getting a smallpox vaccination when you were a child?”

“Yes, sort of, I was very young, but I remember getting a lot of

shots when I started school, and I think that was one of them.”

“Right, well, a vaccination works by introducing a small amount of the disease into your body so your body can learn to combat it when the disease is too weak to overtake your immune system. Then, if these toxins ever enter your system again, your body knows how to fight it off. This was the same for me. My body had been exposed to this disease and was able to quickly fend off the attack. You may also remember from your childhood the game of Ring around the Rosie?”

“Oh sure, I played that as a little girl, but what does that have to do with the plague?”

“Humans are good at making light of tragedy, probably as a defense mechanism against fear. That little game of yours came from that terrible time. You recall the words?”

Liz replied, “Sure” then in a sing-song voice said, “Ring around the Rosie, Pocketful of posies, Ashes, Ashes, We all fall down.”

“Very good,” smiled Cain, as Wes and Joe laughed at the rendition. “But what does it mean?”

“I have no idea,” said Liz. “It’s just a nursery rhyme song as far as I know.”

“Well the first line described a ringed rash or discoloration of the skin, which was an early symptom of the disease. The second line, Pocketful of posies, referred to the flowers people carried in their pockets to cover the stench of death all around them. The third line—you said Ashes, Ashes, but sometimes it was Achoo, Achoo—was the sound of sneezing, one of the initial signs that you had the disease. And of course, the last line told of everyone falling down—dead. Rather a cheery little game, don’t you think,” smiled Cain before going on with his account. “They said it was an accident that I had been injected with this stuff but I don’t think it was an accident at all. I think they wanted to study how my body would react to this venom and they didn’t much care how it affected me. If I died, they would have at least seen how a superior immune system reacted and

they would learn something. If I survived, they would have even more data. That was all they really cared about. But I didn't think this at first. They set up a room for me to stay right there near the lab so I could 'receive the best care possible' as they put it. They were surprised and amazed at how efficiently my system warded off their mutant strain of this deadly virus. They never even had to give me an antidote, which they were prepared to do if things got out of hand—which is another reason I eventually came to believe they had done this intentionally.

"As the months went by, I was subjected to more and more aggressive toxins so they could study how my immune system functioned. Over the full course of my participation, approximately twenty-three months, they examined every aspect and dimension of my genetic makeup. At the same time my freedom to come and go as I pleased became more and more restricted; for 'experimental control' purposes, if I was to believe what they said. And I became more and more convinced that their experiments had some ulterior purpose beyond pure scientific research. Somehow I had the feeling that I was an unwitting party in a grander scheme—and I was kept 'unwitting' because the purposes had some sinister angle they didn't want me to know about. It was then that I first discovered that the head of the facility had been observing these sessions for months from behind a one-way mirror. My every move was being monitored. To affect my escape, I exposed myself to some high level radiation, which is what led to my cancer. I knew that, as I became sicker and sicker, they would consider me less and less of a flight risk, and it would be then that I could make my break. I was getting closer and closer to terminal status when I finally had the occasion to meet the big man himself, Dr. Bridger."

"Bridger!" interjected Wes. "Cornell Bridger?"

"Yes, that is his name. Do you know him," asked Cain.

"Only by name," said Wes. "What is this facility you were at?"

"It is called the Genetic Discovery Corporation, why? Is that

important?”

“More than any of us knows, I think!” Wes shouted toward the front door, “Aryana, come in here!”

A moment later the Persian strongman rejoined the group. “It’s all clear out there, Wes. What’s up?”

Wes hurriedly pointed to a seat and again addressed Cain. “How familiar are you with the layout of this building?” he asked.

“After two years of daily visits, I know it pretty well.”

“Do you think you could draw out a floor plan of the place?”

“Certainly,” said Cain, “I have a great memory, Wes. One of the areas they studied was my caudate nucleus, whatever that is, and they were amazed at its size and activity level. I never forget a detail, which I could have told them if they’d asked. What do you want to know about the place?”

“Well, for starters, we’ll need to know everything you can tell us about their security system. Also, where they keep their files on you, the most direct route to get in and out quickly, and their shifts and manpower routines. Can you do that for us?”

“No problem,” said Cain.

“And one other thing,” said Wes. “This may be a long shot, but would you know anything about a research project these people might have been working on called THE METHUSELAH MAN?”

Cain laughed softly to himself, again displaying a distant melancholy that had been evident earlier. “Yes, I do know of it. Ironically, it’s what they called the file on me.”

“Ironically?” questioned Wes. “How so?”

Cain seemed to sink back into his head for a moment before shaking off whatever thoughts he was having. “Nothing. Not important now. Another time. If you’ll do the drawing, I can give you the layout.”

Rosenfeld produced a pad of paper and pencil, and Aryana drew out the floor plan to Cain’s specifications. Within about thirty minutes they produced a detailed map of the route in and out, the

location of monitors and sensors, and the room in which Cain had been tested and probed and where his records were stored, both on paper and computer.

“Aryana, you and I are going to stand watch tonight,” said Wes. “In the morning, we’ll get A.J. and put together a plan of attack. Tomorrow night we’ll pay our friends at Genetic Discovery Corporation a little visit.”

Rosenfeld, who had been quietly attentive all evening, finally spoke up. “What do you want us to do, Wes?”

Wes patted Aryana on the shoulder to send him back outside. “I want you all to stay here another day or two until we have a chance to look into this more. I thought you were pulling me away from another important assignment, Joe, but now I think that job and this one may have just intersected.”

Cain said, “Wes, I have to be in Las Vegas by the weekend.”

“You have to be in Las Vegas!” exclaimed Wes. “In the middle of this you’re thinking about casinos?”

“I have to be in Las Vegas to retrieve an important package that will be waiting for me at the Venetian. You have your priorities, Wes, and I have mine. But to tell you the truth, I’m rather hoping you’ll come with me; and you Dr. Rosenfeld—and most certainly you, Liz.”

Wes thought for a moment, seeming to run some plan through his head. “One more day,” said Wes. “Let us get at those records first. We can still be in Las Vegas by Friday night.”

Cain agreed.

“Joe, can I talk to you in private for a minute?” asked Wes, and the two men stepped outside to the back patio leaving Cain and Liz to stoke their fire.

“Joe, I’m taking a major leap of faith here in accepting your account of this man Cain. Are you absolutely sure he was as sick as he claimed? I mean, I don’t care how good his immune system is; people don’t spontaneously recover from the kind of cancer he

claims he had.”

“Wes, I’m telling you, this guy was a walking dead man. Eddie Bertaccini sent him to me after running extensive tests to verify he had the cancer. Eddie was absolutely clear about the diagnosis and the prognosis. Cain should have been dead a week ago. How he lasted two weeks was astounding to me, but Wes, when he walked into my office today and looked healthier than you or me, you could have knocked me over with a feather. I don’t get it, Wes. But I promise you, I know what I saw, and I know what Eddie’s science saw. The man shouldn’t be alive—but he is. Now we have to figure out how to keep him that way, especially since he still wants to die!”

Wants to die? Wes didn’t understand what Rosenfeld meant, though the words were pretty clear. “What do you mean he wants to die?”

“From the very first session, he made it clear he wants to die. At the time it made sense; he was suffering and as good as dead anyway. But even today, after his full recovery, he still made it clear that’s what he wants. And now I have the sneaking suspicion he plans to do it in Las Vegas. What else could be so important that he just has to be there by the weekend? It’s like getting to Las Vegas is more important to him than his own life. I don’t get it, Wes.”

“What’s he told you about why he needs to go there?” asked Wes.

“This is the first I even heard of it,” said a puzzled Rosenfeld. “Until five minutes ago he never said a thing about it.”

“You think he’s really suicidal; he’ll really try to off himself there?”

“You want my honest, professional opinion?” asked Rosenfeld.

“Yes.”

“No, I don’t. I thought I was a pretty good psychiatrist, Wes, but this time I’m clueless. I believe him when he says he wants to die; though God only knows why. I’ve dealt with potential suicides over the years and I don’t see or hear any of the right cues. Even when he was sick and knocking on heaven’s door, he never really seemed like

he would take his own life. And if there was ever a good reason, that cancer would certainly have been it. He wants to die but he doesn't want to kill himself; I'd bet my career on that, which only confuses me more."

"Is he a religious man and thinks he'll go to hell if he takes his own life?"

"Religious? No. In fact he seems to be totally conflicted over whether there even is a God. On the one hand, he tells me he doesn't believe in God; on the other, he tells me God is punishing him. I wrote it off to the cancer at first; it's part of the process of coming to grips with your own death. It's a fear that there isn't a God and all you face is blackness, ego annihilation. And then you feel your sickness is punishment for everything you've ever done in your life, from spitting on the sidewalk to cheating on your high school math test. Every transgression and imagined sin crashes in on you. Finally, in the end, you reconcile with God and accept your mortality and His love; if you're lucky enough to live that long. He left me yesterday telling me that in one more night his disease would have run its course and everything would be fine. I thought he was in full-blown denial. Today the *dead* man is healthy as a horse, and I'm a stammering fool. If that isn't a miracle, then buddy, I don't know what a miracle is! And still he wants to die."

"Fascinating," said Wes. "Okay, looks like we'll have to accompany him to Las Vegas. At least if we're with him and he tries anything, we have a chance to stop him. You can't help a dead patient, so let's try to keep him alive so you can."

"Wes, I really appreciate your coming down here on such short notice," said Rosenfeld. He didn't know a lot about the kind of work Wes did, but he knew it was always important—and often dangerous. "I know it was hard to pull away from whatever it is you're working on right now."

"Joe, you know I'd come and help you anytime," said Wes, affirming a decades-long bond of friendship. "But this time it looks

like I should be thanking you. I think your man Cain is the key to the very problem I'm working on. If you hadn't called, it could have taken us a long time to crack this one. And we don't have a lot of time; we only have another ten days." Wes noticed his friend shivering from the brisk night air and patted him on the shoulder saying, "You should go back inside where it's warm. Aryana and I are going to stand watch out here tonight. We'll come in once in awhile to get warm, so keep the fire burning."

"I can spell you," offered Rosenfeld. "No need for you and Aryana to freeze your asses off all night."

"Thanks but we'll be alright. I have too much on my mind to sleep anyway. Aryana and I can sleep tomorrow before we do some late night prowling. You know his Persian cat instincts kick in late at night and he's at his best when he has a little sleep edge going. We'll be fine. You take care of Liz and Cain. We'll head out of here early in the morning."

"There's coffee in the pantry," said Rosenfeld. "You want me to have Liz put on a pot for you?"

"Actually," Wes gave an approving nod, "that sounds pretty good. Thanks."

"Okay, but remember, if either of you gets tired, just come and get me."

Wes smiled. "Okay, we will. Now go get some sleep. You've had one helluva day."

18

SYLVIA BERGSTROM SAT AT HER DESK at Langley sipping coffee and nursing a slight hangover. WICKED had been everything she and Crandall Forsyth had hoped it would be and more. They went for drinks afterward and had an exuberant discussion about the play over several drinks, probably one or two too many, and this morning she was paying for the fun. It didn't help, either, that she had stayed with the Secretary of State at his place that night and had to get up earlier for a longer commute this morning. Sylvia Bergstrom and Crandall Forsyth had been an item long before they were installed in their current positions, but it was at least a little ironic that the director of the CIA had been able to keep their relationship a secret even from the spooks whose job it was to ferret out secrets. Though they were often seen in public together, their frequent companionship was naturally understandable because of the close working relationship of the State Department and the intelligence community. It certainly helped the illusion, though, that Forsyth was ever the gentleman in public and Bergstrom the consummate professional; no PDA of any kind, each keeping their substantial libidos in check. Their behavior behind closed doors was another story, of course; they were

shameless in their enjoyment of each other. Last night would have been a prime case-in-point were they ever compelled to confess their post-WICKED activities in court, something that, thanks to the Fourth and Fifth Amendments, would never be required of them.

Sylvia Bergstrom steadied the hot cup of coffee with clenched hands, her elbows on the desk elevating the vessel as though presenting it in offering to Bacchus, the ancient god of hangovers, while her head drooped and throbbed at the temples. The thought of lying down on the couch in the office, if only for thirty minutes or so, was winning the argument against all thoughts of enemies, foreign or domestic, until the intercom on her desk ruptured the solitude.

“Ms. Bergstrom,” squawked the electronic interloper, “the Vice President has just entered the building.”

Oh shit, just what I needed! she thought. “Jamie, is this on my schedule?” she asked her administrative assistant.

“No, ma’am,” came the soft Richmond drawl.

“Okay, let me know if he’s headed this way. Maybe we’ll get lucky” and the pompous ass will confine his visit to the other side of the building, she muttered to herself after releasing the intercom button.

The DCI didn’t actually dislike George S. Austin; he was after all one of the few truly heroic heroes in a hero-obsessed America. In fact half the time she rather enjoyed him. He didn’t get where he was—or where he’d been—by being one-dimensionally brash and self-possessed. He had a winning smile and a cowboy charm that pulled people into him, and an ingratiating personality that made them want to stay once they got close. But it was invariably the case that, as soon as people got to the point in the relationship where they could move closer or farther at will, they tended to choose more often than not to keep a safe distance. Heroes are dangerous creatures; they ride a lightning bolt that eventually turns mere mortals to cinders. Besides, Sylvia Bergstrom was the Director of the

Central Intelligence Agency of arguably the most powerful nation in the history of nations and as such was riding a lightning bolt of her own. What it came down to was simply that George S. Austin was paying an unannounced visit to get something, and dealing with him this morning was a sure-fire way to turn a modest hangover into a raging migraine in no time. Not this morning, please!

George S. Austin strode confidently across the lobby over the sixteen-foot black-and-white granite seal of the agency that had been embedded in the floor since 1950 as a welcome mat of sorts: a welcome to friends and a cautionary symbol to those who would be otherwise. His gait was that of a man who understood at a visceral level that as strong a symbol of America's might as the eagle, shield, and sixteen-point compass was, without the blood, service, and sacrifice of all of American history's *George S. Austins*, it would be little more than an empty symbol at best. Austin knew this, knew fully what his contributions were to the greatness of his country. He had *been* the knight in shining armor that all young boys dream of becoming and which few men ever do. He had put it all on the line—repeatedly—and fused his personal greatness to the greatness of his nation. What most citizens owed to their country, they owed—he believed—to him. And he was not at all reticent about calling in those markers.

The Marine sentries snapped to as the Vice President crossed the lobby. Other passers-by nodded greetings and offered well wishes as their paths crossed. Some sheepishly avoided even casual contact in solemn deference to the office, as well as the man who currently occupied it. Most became a little quieter as they passed him. Even those who had known him the longest and approached with the loudest greetings did so with a modicum of humility.

Patrick Gaffney, the Middle East Section Chief, wasn't one of those. He had his own lightning bolt.

"Good morning, Mr. Vice President," boomed Gaffney in a thick Belfast brogue from fifteen feet away. "What brings you to our part

of the world on this fine November morning?”

Austin extended his hand and smiled broadly as they closed on each other, “Well, Patrick, my lad, to see you in all your fine Irish glory, of course!”

“I’d think you full o’ the Blarney if it weren’t so true,” he said, giving them both a good laugh. “And what might your second bit of business be?”

Austin placed a familiar hand on Gaffney’s shoulder as the men walked the corridor toward the Section Chief’s office. Once out of earshot of any others, the Vice President, declining an offer of coffee, tea, or ‘something a tad stronger’, got right to the point.

“I need some background info on an operation that someone seems to be briefing the White House on, from which I’m apparently being excluded” said Austin, tossing out the operation name and making it clear this was something of an *ex officio* inquiry.

Gaffney understood and assured Austin he would help in any way he could, though the file name OPERATION: STAR COVER didn’t ring a bell. He took a seat at his desk and typed in the name. No match was found in any of the several dozen clandestine operations in his sector.

“Nothing in the Middle East, Mr. Vice President, or I’d know about it. Here, have a look.” Gaffney pivoted the screen so Austin could see the list of covert operation titles and executive summaries for Gaffney’s department. There were a total of fifty-three ongoing operations from Iraq to Egypt, most of which predated the current administration, and none of which had anything close to the name Austin had provided. “Are you sure you’ve got the right title?” The Vice President said it was, as far as he knew. “Anything else you can tell me about it; general nature of the mission, personnel involved, source of the title, dates, military or civilian, possible targets? I might be able to dig up something with even a little bit of help.” This was no idle boast or ass-kissing ‘I’ll do what I can’ offer. Austin had come to his friend on other occasions with practically nothing and

within a few days had a courier present him with comprehensive reports that always impressed Austin at their thoroughness and depth of detail. The Section Chief liked providing these kinds of ‘special services’ because they enhanced his portfolio and one never knew in this line of work when a chit or two might save a life or reputation—maybe even his own. Gaffney had responsibility for the Middle East section because it was the most difficult, dirtiest, and deadliest geography on the planet and the Section Chief had proven he was more than capable of dealing with the toughest elements of a society from his early days in the Belfast underground. He had early on made a habit of doing special favors for everyone from the lowest dregs to the highest kingpins, from common convenience store thugs doing years in prison for the heist of little more than a few pennies, to corporate presidents who made charity speeches at noon while directing the wholesale slaughter of entire families at midnight, taking on jobs that made even the baddest of Ireland’s bad-asses think twice. In the process, Gaffney had accumulated a long list of IOUs at every stratum of the criminal and corporate cesspools and swamps.

“Sorry, Pat, but I don’t have anything more than a name on this one. I just happened to come across the item in the President’s notes a few weeks ago. I was never present for any of the briefings on this. Tell you the truth, buddy, I’m feeling a little out of the loop on this one. And you know how I hate being out of the loop,” smirked Austin. “The only thing I might offer for cross-reference is that President Treem has an important meeting coming up in a little over a week in Tehran. The discussions will have a ‘nuclear’ element to them, if you catch my drift, so maybe this is connected in some way to that. I’ve been put in charge of security arrangements for that conference but the President has chosen to keep me at arm’s-length on most of what’s going down at that meeting.”

“Nuclear, huh?” said Gaffney. “Okay, that could lead down some interesting streets. I know of a couple situations that might possibly

be related,” said Gaffney, a faint, cryptic smile trying to animate his ruddy cheeks, as he tapped the vast resources of his mental data vaults. “Let me put out a few feelers and see what kind of roaches get nervous from the light. How soon do you need this?”

Austin had no idea but worst case he needed it fast if it had anything at all to do with his own special plans for the upcoming summit. Better sooner than later, even if it proved unrelated to anything he cared about at all. “This week would be nice,” he said, trying to seem interested without too much urgency. Every favor generated a payback worth some future consideration. The more urgent the need, the bigger the future debt, and while he didn’t mind owing the Section Chief, so far the favors had all been running one way and he didn’t want too much debt to this dangerous ‘Mick’ hanging over his head. He might even have to engineer a few unfortunate events for the Section Chief just so he could level their playing field again by exerting a little influence of his own.

“All right,” said Gaffney, “by the end of the week then.”

“Good enough,” said Austin rising. “Now I better go give my regards to your boss before she has a conniption over my jumping protocol and going straight to her staff. You know how it is with these lady bosses—always trying to prove they have the balls for a man’s job!” he said, with a sick grunt of a laugh.

By the time the Vice President had reached the elevator, Jamie Fortmann was informing the DCI that Austin was on his way up. Sylvia Bergstrom steeled herself for the visit, curious as to what had brought the Vice President to her domain.

The most disturbing aspect of interacting with George S. Austin was that he was just so damn charming. Vice President Austin greeted Jamie Fortmann, an administrative assistant whom he barely knew, as though they had been life-long buddies, with a big Texas grin and an affected ‘Howdy, Jamie! She in?’ as he strode past Fortmann’s desk and reached for the inner office door handle without waiting for a confirmation.

Bergstrom remained seated with straight arms and both hands flat on her desk fairly holding on for the whirlwind and said, “Well hello Mr. Vice President. What brings you to Virginia on such a cold, blustery morning?” intending the description as much for him as the outside elements.

“Just making some last minute arrangements with a friend of mine, one of your section chiefs, Patrick Gaffney, and just couldn’t leave the building without looking on your sweet countenance Madame Director.”

“Can I offer you some coffee, George, or maybe some herbal tea?” at which thought Austin affected a mock cringe and shudder. “If you’d come a little later in the day, I’d have offered something a might stronger but as we have a full workday ahead of us,” her voice trailed off at a waving of Austin’s hand.

“That’s real thoughtful of you Sylvia but I’ll pass this time. But you know what you *could* help me with?” he said, as Bergstrom thought, yup, here it comes! “I’ve been hearing bits and pieces of something called OPERATION: STAR COVER and for the life of me, I can’t find anyone who knows a thing about it.”

The DCI smilingly chastised him. “Now, George, you know better. Questions like that will just get you the Jimmy Carter UFO response.”

The Vice President knew Bergstrom was referring to the time when then-President Jimmy Carter—perhaps the highest ranking American ever to openly declare having seen a UFO—asked then-DCI George H.W. Bush to tell him everything the government knew about UFOs. Carter was told by the CIA Head that anything like that would be strictly on a *need-to-know* basis and simple ‘curiosity’ didn’t constitute ‘need.’ Austin tried to use a little charm to get some kind of answer, any kind of a hint, but Bergstrom wasn’t to be had. Sylvia just shook her head and smiled and indicated she didn’t have a thing in her database on OPERATION: STAR COVER. The Secretary of State had just expressed an interest in this same operation, too.

But if by chance she did know something, even Crandall would have to be left out in the cold depending on *his* need-to-know. Lovers might not keep secrets from each other; but high-ranking government officials do, and Forsyth knew it!

Austin tried a couple different approaches to nudge her in some kind of cooperative direction, then feigned comic surrender before making his exit. He never expected her to be forthcoming anyway; he knew Gaffney would get the information if anyone could, but he had to play a little protocol game just to put her off his scent.

George S. Austin wasn't ten feet down the hall before the DCI buzzed her assistant.

"Jamie, please have the Middle East Section Chief come see me this afternoon. Tell him I'd like an informal briefing on any special operations he's conducting over the next few weeks."

19

THE MUFFLED, RHYTHMIC CLACKING of metal-on-metal created a soothing white noise as the cars swayed gently onward through the night. Taras Ostrovsky walked tentatively to the rocking, made his way through the narrow passageway, and entered the dining car near the middle of the train. Up ahead on the right, her back to him, Anzhela Starkova sat waiting, white spaghetti strings falling from her ears and leading to the ever-present pink iPod on the table in front of her. T.O. had earlier in the light of day wanted her simply as a worthwhile conquest, a mere travel trophy, but now in the soft light of the dining car, with the black of the night turning windows to mirrors, a sense of reflection and romance began to overtake him. The soft yellow light created a halo effect around this young angel that fired new feelings in him. As he approached her from behind, he put aside thoughts of Istanbul and her ultimate fate and allowed himself to pretend, if only for a while, that he was courting the love of his life. He smiled to himself thinking he would playfully startle her, but as he got to within a couple feet of her she said, without turning around, “You are very punctual Taras Ostrovsky,” and laughed.

“But how did you know it was me?” he asked.

“You radiate a distinctive sound unlike any other man on this train,” she answered, pulling the white cords from her ears.

He wanted to feel flattered, but in all honesty, he had no clue what she meant.

“No, really, how did you know? Ah, you saw my reflection in the window,” he said, as though solving her little subterfuge.

“No,” she said abruptly. “I have told you, now sit so we can order; I’m famished!”

He was both bruised at her tone and excited by her appetite. She was like a hungry hunter focused on her prey, soon to become the hunted, unaware of the danger lurking around her. He flipped open the wine list and perused it studiously for a moment. “They have a nice Cabernet Sauvignon from the Vityazevo Winery, if you like.” He paused to let her watch him authoritatively evaluate the wine list further. “Or perhaps something from the Praskoveya Winery,” he mused before tossing away this thought. “But no, we should save Praskoveya for some Dombai brandy after dinner, yes?” he said this almost as much to himself as to her. “A-ha, this is the wine for us,” he said at last, “from Moldova. There is no better place in the world for wine than Moldova; and no better wine from Moldova than Cricova! Tonight we will discover the secret of immortality,” he said with child-like glee. “You know this legend?” he asked.

“I’m sure you will tell me even if I do,” she said with a haughty laugh.

He told her enthusiastically, “It is said that in the beginning of time vines grew only in heaven. But after the Almighty threw Adam and Eve out of paradise, He took pity on them and gave them vines that they might cultivate them and in the process discover the secret of immortality. So tonight, my lovely Anzhela Starkova, you and I will become like a modern day Adam and Eve and go in search of our immortality!”

This elicited a hearty authentic laugh from her.

“Adam and Eve, eh? And just how much shall we drink to find this *immortality*, Comrade Ostrovsky?”

“As much as it takes to feel that we shall live forever!” he said, decisively waving a raised hand to the waiter.

They settled into a nice Chardonnay and by the second glass placed their order. Their conversation was like a ritual mating dance, at times easy and light, at other times heavy and profound, letting their minds prepare their bodies for the endgame, yet ever mindful that this train ride was no more than a moment in time and there would be no reality beyond this brief encounter. There would certainly be life after Istanbul—but only for one of them. Fate had dealt an unfortunate hand when they boarded this train in Kiev, a fate that would be sealed, for better or worse, with the punching of their tickets in Bucharest in the morning. But this was not a night for reality; there would be plenty of time for reality in Istanbul. Tonight would be for pretend. Tonight would be for illusion. Tonight they would live forever.

Their conversation was all-absorbing, their eyes locked on each other’s until halfway through dinner when Ostrovsky’s attention was pulled abruptly away from his lovely companion. She was in mid-sentence when his smile flattened and his eyes darted past her to the far right corner of the car. The two men with whom he’d had his earlier run-ins had just taken a table. The larger of the two saw T.O. staring in their direction and proffered a vague acknowledgment, a nod of sorts and an expression that Ostrovsky could not decipher: either an awkward smile or a malicious smirk. T.O. was inclined to believe it was the latter.

Anzhela Starkova looked over her left shoulder then quickly back at Ostrovsky with a scowl. “You men!” she said, shaking her head. “Is everything in this world just another pissing contest to you, an occasion to measure your members to see who has the biggest one? So this man offended you this afternoon. Why, because he so accurately read your mind? Because he saw that all you wanted was

to get into my pants and now you want to kill each other. I swear this is too much,” she said, slapping her napkin on the table as she began to stand.

T.O. quickly reached across the table and grabbed her hand. “No, please,” he implored. “You are right, we men are all jerks and I am our king! Please, don’t leave.” She hesitated but did not withdraw her hand from his grasp. His voice softened and he smiled. “Please, my angel, sit.”

She studied him critically for a moment then slowly lowered back into her seat.

“What is this all about, really? Is this to do with your business? You said you dealt in, how did you say it, *hard-to-come-by-goods*.” She thought for a second before asking half in jest, “You are a diamond smuggler?” Ostrovsky said nothing but wore a stern look. “That’s it, isn’t it? Your pockets are full of diamonds and you fear these men will rob you.”

They sat staring at each other for a long moment. Suddenly T.O. lit up in a broad smile then broke into a good laugh.

The girl remained serious for a moment before she too burst into laughter.

“No,” he said through tear-soaked laughing eyes, “I am not a diamond smuggler.”

Anzhela Starkova pretended to frown. “No? No diamonds? Then what good are you?” she said, looking away from him in mock disdain, slowly peeking back from the corner of her eye and breaking into a most radiant smile that nearly melted his heart. “So what is this business that is so secretive and so dangerous? You are a spy? KGB?”

Again T.O. laughed, completely disarmed.

“Not KGB?” she said. “And these Arab entrepreneurs in Istanbul, they are not spies either?”

“Please, my beautiful angel, must we speak of business? We were doing so well.”

“Yes, until those men stole your attention from me. Are they more beautiful than I? Would you rather go sit with them?” she teased.

About this time the waiter returned to see how they were doing. The wine bottle was empty, so they ordered another, and with a fresh toast on its arrival, continued through their meal without further distraction, though on a couple of occasions Ostrovsky shot furtive glances to the corner when Anzhela Starkova was not looking. He would not let the presence of these men disrupt his pleasure anymore, but he would be very happy if they left the train at Bucharest. He had intended to spend this first trip in his compartment alone. He had allowed himself to be distracted from his plan, first by this lovely encounter with an angel, and second by the chance interaction with these two men—if it truly was by chance. Angry with himself, Ostrovsky vowed that on his subsequent trips he would definitely stick to his plan. Tonight, however, he would at least take some pleasure from his learning experience.

Taras Ostrovsky and Anzhela Starkova finished their dinner and their second bottle of wine and moved on to a dessert course consisting of more alcohol. The Dombai brandy was too good to settle for just one glass, too good even to stop at two glasses. By the third, though, they had had more than enough. T.O. was amazed at how well Anzhela Starkova held her liquor, but when finally they stood to adjourn to her compartment, reality set in. On standing, the girl nearly fell back into her seat, in part from the movement of the train and in part from the spinning of her head, but she quickly steadied herself. Ostrovsky took her arm and guided her back toward her car. When she fumbled with her key, Ostrovsky took it from her and unlocked the door. As they stepped into the compartment, the worst possible thing happened: the poor, drunken girl collapsed. T.O. reached out with lightning fast reflexes to catch her and in so doing, accidentally wrapped his two large hands firmly round her breasts. She did not object. In fact, she took no notice at all, having quite passed out in his arms. He managed to get her positioned on

her bed in as comfortable a manner as he could and covered her with a blanket. She was beautiful lying there, but an inebriated lover was really no lover at all and he slowly, reluctantly backed out of her compartment and headed back toward his own car.

As the door closed and Ostrovsky's footsteps could be heard walking away, Anzhela Starkova got up from the bed, walked clumsily to the door and latched it, then found her way back to bed mumbling softly, "No immortality tonight, comrade T.O."

20

ARYANA, HIS BREATH GHOSTING FAINTLY in the chill night air, said, “What’s this guy’s story, Wes?”

“Cain? I’m not sure what to make of him,” said Wes Franklin. “Joe claims Cain came to him suffering from fourth stage lung cancer. That was less than three weeks ago and as of yesterday the man is in perfect health.”

“Is that possible, Wes? I mean people do experience remission, right?”

“Remission, yes,” answered Wes. “But remission is just a suspension of the disease, usually temporary. And remission doesn’t typically take place when the disease is as advanced as Joe described.” Wes shook his head in wonder. “If what Joe says is true, Cain has experienced more than remission; he’s had a complete recovery. And that, my friend, is not possible; not in the world of science and medicine, anyway.”

“Is he worth getting sidetracked from Secretary Forsyth’s mission?” asked Aryana.

“No,” answered Wes. “But I’m starting to think this *is* Crandall’s mission, or at least has some connection to it. There are too many

coincidences for it not to be. Vice President Austin's files contained a file named THE METHUSELAH MAN. Now a man on the opposite side of the country says that file is the name of the file created about him. Austin, one of the least scientific men in Washington, has been in constant communication with Dr. Cornell Bridger, the head of Genetic Discovery Corporation, the same group that's been running experiments and research on Cain." Wes paused in thought, feeling the chill night air on his face and arms. "When I saw the description of the man in Austin's files, I would have sworn it was a theoretical paradigm. Twenty-four hours later I'm introduced to that theoretical man and told by a close friend, a friend whom I trust implicitly, that until earlier today this man had an advanced stage of lung cancer and should be dead by now. That same should-be-dead man tells me he has miraculous healing powers and that he has been subjected to countless toxins that would kill anyone—anyone *human* that is. Austin's files were rife with information on incredibly deadly viruses and bacteria. If Cain was exposed to any one of the things I read in Austin's files, he'd have been history by now. To hear Cain tell it, he was exposed to all of them—and worse!"

Wes again became quiet, lost in thought and at a loss for any rational explanation or understanding; if any of this was actually true. His head shook almost imperceptibly as he considered and rejected various possibilities. His mind raced through eidetic images of textbooks and medical journal pages, sifting for anything that would help him fuse theory and reality but nothing fit. In the end he had nothing but anecdotal evidence: his friend believed the man was sick and now is not; and the man says he's had worse but his body knows how to heal itself! Wes needed more, a lot more, and it had to be scientific proof not simply hearsay or circumstantial evidence.

"For now I think the only thing we can do is suspend judgment until we know more," he said at last.

Aryana had been studying his friend's face and it didn't take much light to see the wheels were turning.

“What’s next, Wes?”

“What’s next?” echoed Franklin thoughtfully. “Today we stake out Genetic Discovery Corporation and tonight you, A.J., and I are going inside to get a closer look at those METHUSELAH MAN files. Joe, Liz and Cain should be safe here for a day or two, if need be. The floor plan that Cain provided is incredibly detailed. We should be able to get in and out fast.”

Wes gave Aryana a look of amazement at how detailed Cain’s floor plan was. Wes knew he possessed an extraordinary memory, but if this diagram was accurate, Cain’s memory for detail was unprecedented.

“Without that layout we could spend a month in the place and not find anything. Now we know exactly where to go, what to look for, and where their security is located.” Wes rubbed his chin, thinking hard. “We even have the timing of the security guards’ rounds.”

Aryana noted a troubled expression on Wes's face.

"What's the matter, Wes? This is a good thing, right?"

“Yeah, it’s good; almost too good.”

Aryana said, “A.J. has some kind of new gizmo she’s been working on to knock out surveillance cameras. Have you seen it?”

Wes shook his head. “No, but if she made it, I have no doubt it will probably revolutionize the security industry.”

“It’s amazing, Wes. She gave me a demonstration a few days ago. She can cause a surveillance camera to loop a thirty-second image just by pointing a laser beam at the lens. When I asked her how she did that, she told me it was easy. *Easy*, she said! She created an embedded software code that uses the laser beam as a carrier wave, which she simply aims at the camera lens. The camera sends the code back to the camera’s source just like it would transmit any picture in its field. When it reaches the receiver, the code jumps off into the software of the source device where it retrieves a digital segment of recently transmitted pictures. It can loop as much as thirty seconds of data through as many cycles as you need time for.

It even selects the image it needs by recognizing scenes with no activity. She told me, 'Well, you wouldn't want a loop of the same person walking through the corridor over and over for thirty minutes, would you?' That is one cosmically digital lady you have there, Wes! I can barely program my DVR to record a TV show so I can watch it later!"

Wes smiled thinking, Yes, the talents of Ashley Jordan cover a lot of territory, and she doesn't do anything second best!

Wes and Aryana spent a cold night at Big Sur standing at the ready for some unknown threat, walking an arced surveillance route from the front of the cabin around the side to the rear porch and back again. Up the hill in the dark there was the occasional snap of a twig or rustle of brush from, most likely, some indigenous nocturnal creature patrolling its own backyard, but nothing that caused concern. Around one-thirty a vehicle rolled into the campground. Wes and Aryana hurried around from the back of the cabin in time to see what appeared in the dark to be a white utility van with a Big Sur Lodge Maintenance sign on the side. The vehicle rolled slowly past and parked in front of Cabin 28 a few doors down, where it sat idling for a few more minutes before going quiet.

Motivated by the cold night air starting to cut through them, Wes and Aryana decided to keep moving. They walked one more time to the back of the cabin, then down to the pool and conference center.

Inside the cabin things were considerably warmer.

Liz Charles took the only bedroom, while Rosenfeld took the bed in the main room. Jared Kennan Cain had insisted the couch was more than comfortable enough for him as he didn't require much sleep and he could keep the fire stoked through the night. Rosenfeld, too tired to argue, gladly climbed under the covers and fell quickly into a deep sleep, the events of the day having drained every bit of his energy. Liz Charles had retired to her room around eleven and hadn't been heard from since. Cain dozed on and off in front of the fire, occasionally sitting up to grab the poker and stab the logs to

excite the embers. Once he threw two more logs on quietly enough that Rosenfeld never even stirred. The cabin was cozy, warm, and quiet, with only the crackle and pop of the fireplace sounding in the dark.

About three in the morning, the bedroom door creaked quietly open and Liz Charles stepped into the hall. Cain, sitting on the couch, staring pensively at the orange and yellow flames flicking up the chimney, turned toward the sound of the door. Orange light jumped and danced around the room, casting animated shadows softly over Liz, who stood motionless in a white cotton t-shirt that stopped about mid-thigh, covering pastel print panties. She was beautiful standing there almost naked, awash in the firelight, a mysterious angel of the night. She hooked a finger seductively toward Cain. Cain shot a glance over toward Rosenfeld, who was dead to the world, then silently rose and moved toward Liz. When he reached her, Liz raised her arms and draped them round his neck, then gently yet passionately pressed her lips to his. Through slightly parted lips their pheromone-laced breath wafted delicately to the nostrils, exciting their pulses and elevating their passion. They pressed hard into each other for a long moment until finally Liz broke her hold and moved back from Cain. Staring into his eyes and smiling, she took both his hands in hers and backed slowly into her room, pulling him deeper into her dark sanctuary.

“Liz, it’s been much too long for me, far too many years,” he objected softly. “I don’t think I can do this.”

She coaxed him tenderly to the bed.

“That’s okay,” she whispered. “I’m in no hurry.”

She slid her smooth, soft legs under the covers, first one, then the other, slowly.

“You’ll find your way.”

* * * * *

As the new light crept over the hill, cabins began to come to life. It was the off-season so most of the cabins were empty; of about sixty, only a handful had smoke rising from the chimney. Wes Franklin and Aryana paced up and down the road in front of the cabin as birds began their morning conversations and the sounds of daylight pushed away the silence of the night. To the west, waves rumbled rhythmically against the coastline. To the east, the sun was still twenty minutes from crowning the hills in its morning rebirth. About 7:00 A.M. the door to Cabin 22 opened and Joe, Liz and Cain stepped stretching onto the front porch.

“Good morning,” called Rosenfeld in a nasally, good-natured twang.

“Good morning,” answered their sentries.

“I trust you slept well,” added Wes.

“Like the dead,” said Rosenfeld smiling.

From the gradually stirring hills behind Wes and Aryana came a sound like a plastic ruler slapping hard against a Formica counter. In the same instant Jared Kennan Cain, standing next to the large tree in front of their cabin, was thrust violently backward, crashing into Liz Charles, who was directly behind him. Cain and Liz were thrown hard to the ground near the base of the tree. Another clap followed immediately, sending a screaming hiss by the ear of a ducking Rosenfeld. Something whizzed past and slammed into the doorsill. Wood-chips exploded into the air, some landing in Rosenfeld’s curly red hair.

Wes Franklin knew the sound of a rifle shot muzzled by a suppressor. At the first report, and almost simultaneously to the second clap, Wes spun round to scan the hillside. He drew his Micro Desert Eagle .380 pistol from his waistband and raised it toward the hills. With laser-focused eyes, he scanned the slope for clues as to the shooter’s whereabouts. He quickly picked out a small cloud of what could only be gunpowder hanging in the crisp morning air and sent two rapid-fire shots flying toward the heart of the cloud about

fifty yards away. *Take that you son-of-a-bitch.* From this range he didn't expect to hit anything but he would certainly let the shooter know that force would be met with force. The absence of a third shot from the hill seemed to indicate the message had been received. Wes gestured a left flanking maneuver to Aryana and in the same instant charged up the hill in a daring frontal assault. The hill was steep—perhaps sixty degrees—and the trees, though plentiful, were thin and tricky to negotiate, offering some obstruction but nothing for a man to hide behind. Wes climbed serpentine toward where he believed the shots originated, his heart pumping hard but his breathing smooth and steady from years of physical conditioning, his nerves cooler than the morning air from years of experience. If only to preempt a third shot from their assailant, Wes threw a third of his own in the general direction of the sniper. He heard what sounded like metal-on-metal but figured his bullet could have struck just about anything up there.

As Wes began his charge, Aryana ran flat out twenty yards to the left and then angled his way back to the right up the mountainside closing off the left flank to escape. He was armed only with three throwing knives strapped to his right forearm by a high-tech sheath of his own design, but he usually found this to be all the armaments he needed. With a subtle wrist-twist, a perfectly balanced throwing knife dropped into his palm as he forced a path up the hill.

Twenty yards into the hillside forest Wes fell to a crouch, his razor eyes scanning for a sign of the shooter's exact location. Anything, he thought, any kind of movement that would turn the predator to prey. At the same time Aryana dropped his two hundred twenty-five pound chiseled muscular body into a three-point stance like a defensive tackle, an intense focus in his dark brown eyes as he surveyed the brush thirty yards farther up the slope.

Both men remained frozen in place, listening, watching.

In an instant a figure in jungle camouflage leaped up from a clump of brush and fired at Wes, who instinctively dived to his right

and lay flat on the ground. The thunderclap of the report told Wes the sniper was no longer firing a rifle but rather something more like a Glock. A burst of dirt and stone erupted inches from Franklin's face, peppering him with a mist of soot and leaves. Three more shots came at him in rapid succession as Wes rolled hard to the right. From his prone position, Wes sent a fourth and fifth shot in the general direction of the sniper, more to dissuade him than to hit him, though Wes would have happily accepted the latter result. The shots sent the sniper scurrying down the hill away from Wes, right into the waiting arms of Aryana, crouched behind some underbrush and bushes.

As the camouflaged figure closed to within ten yards of Aryana, the Persian strongman rose and pivoted. A discus-like sweep of his arm sent a knife hurtling firmly toward his target. The blade struck with deadly accuracy right at the sniper's heart, hung upright for a split-second, then fell harmlessly to the ground, no match for the Kevlar body armor of the charging figure.

In full stride the sniper let go a round at Aryana, who threw himself hard left to the ground, affecting a classic shoulder roll. The bullet pierced his shirtsleeve and grazed his inner bicep with an inconsequential scratch, but before Aryana could get back to his feet, the sniper had rushed past him and made it to the base of the hill, where a second man was waiting in the van near Cabin 28. With a spray of loose stones and a squeal of hot rubber, the van sped toward the park's exit.

Within seconds, Wes, carrying the rifle the shooter had abandoned, linked up with Aryana and the two men raced down to their Audi R8.

Rosenfeld ran toward the men only to have Wes toss him the rifle and bark an order for Joe to get everyone inside the cabin. Wes retrieved a black medical bag from behind the driver's seat and extended it to Rosenfeld. "You'll find everything you need in here."

Wes and Aryana scrambled into the R8 and Wes twisted the key

in the ignition. The engine roared to life and Wes crammed the polished titanium gearshift into reverse. The rear wheels took a firm hold of the road and pushed off hard as Wes threw her into first and screamed out after the van.

The road out of camp was an old, single-lane, winding path, corrugated with massive tree roots that produced a seemingly endless number of natural speed bumps. A tight right turn twenty yards into the clearing was followed by a hundred yard straightaway. A wide left arc and a hard right saw the red high-performance Audi R8 blow a cloud of dust into the air as she grabbed hold of the black asphalt of Highway 1. Heading north the car thrust forward like an F-22 Raptor with full afterburners flaming.

The van had a good head start but it would be no match for the acceleration and handling of the Audi. This stretch of Highway 1 was a seemingly endless series of curves, with a 45 mph posted limit dropping frequently to 30, but the twists and turns were custom-made for the R8. The speed limits offered only a minor annoyance, easily ignored under the urgent circumstances. The machine slipped through the first four tight curves—hard right, hard left, back right, swing left—like they were mere wrinkles under a hot iron, its Bosch ESP 8.0 Electronic Stability Programme performing like an engineer's dream. The fifth turn, however, presented an obstacle that could only be handled by the R8's extraordinary C/SiC braking system. The silicon carbide brakes squeezed the wheels to a quick halt at the Riverside Campground as a sun-bleached navy blue VW bus full of a family of five and loaded with camping gear and a kayak bungied to its roof lumbered lazily onto the road in front of Wes and Aryana. And if the excruciatingly slow acceleration of the VW weren't enough, the driver, a forty-five year-old car enthusiast with long-shattered dreams of personal glory at Watkins Glen or Elkhart Lake, had his eyes glued to the driver's side mirror in open-mouthed wonder at the sight of the automobile behind him and was in no hurry to let the scarlet beauty get around and away before he

could drink her in a bit.

Compounding the problem for Wes was the oncoming traffic, which, though sparse, was spread out just enough so as to prevent him zipping around the VW. Anytime today, thought Wes, as the bus crept its way toward twenty, twenty-five, thirty, thirty-five. Wes nudged left peering around the VW for an opening only to dart back because of oncoming cars or another blind turn. Minutes ticked by in slow motion as Wes peeked and retreated a dozen more times. He had traveled this stretch of road often and was painfully aware that between Pfeifer State Park and the Bixby Creek Bridge there were some sixty such curves—many sweeping; most just a tight back and forth slalom. And he could always count on an endless stream of sightseers in no particular hurry, with only a few turnouts to allow others by. His only break could come when they reached the one long stretch running up past the Point Sur Naval Facility. Like a thoroughbred in the gate at Churchill Downs on Derby Day, Wes was chomping at the bit as they inched past the landmarks toward his one chance to break free: Juan Higuera Creek, Ripplewood Cabins, River Inn Restaurant, all the while creeping left for a peek then darting safely back behind the VW. What good is being able to go 0-to-60 in under four seconds, he thought, if you can't get out of first gear? Then he saw the sign he was waiting for: Andrew Molera State Park. He was almost there. It would be a narrow window and a short straightaway but it could make all the difference between catching their would-be killers and losing them for good in Monterey traffic. As they passed the brown Andrew Molera sign, Wes stuck his nose out left again. There it was up ahead, a stretch of road climbing north to a crest, beyond which they would encounter another series of turns and bridges and probable defeat. And far in the distance he could see the white utility van. Coming toward him was a string of a dozen vehicles, but between the second and third was a gap that could be enough. Wes slipped safely behind the VW again and waited for his opening. *Whoosh*, one: a tan Ford Taurus shot by.

Three seconds later, *whoosh*, two: a white Chevy Impala rushed by, and the gate was open! Wes whipped the R8 hard left and stood on the pedal. The Audi jumped like an excited racehorse at the bell. In a split-second he cleared the VW and jumped safely back right with room to spare. Wes slammed the gearshift into second and the machine lunged forward. The white van was still a quarter-mile from the crest on the horizon but now without a hope of getting away. The Audi could accelerate from 0-to-60 in four seconds and 60-to-124 in another eight but Wes caught up with the van in a mere ten seconds and never even got into sixth gear.

As both vehicles cleared the crest and the van swung right on the next curve, an arm reached out of the passenger window and fired at the Audi. A bullet cracked the passenger side windshield and glanced off into the hillside. Aryana didn't even flinch at the impact. The van swung back left giving Wes a brief look at the driver, a white male with dark hair, thirty-ish. Then they were back behind the vehicle again.

The van accelerated at each short straightaway, leaping forward with obviously more power than a stock vehicle. Coming up fast was the famous Bixby Creek Bridge. Built in 1932, the bridge was one of the most photographed, easily recognizable spans in the world, seen in numerous TV commercials over the years, as well as in the opening credits for the short-lived television program *Then Came Bronson* in the '60s, and the 1971 psychological thriller *Play Misty For Me* with Clint Eastwood, a movie which could have single-handedly brought an end to lover's call-in requests to radio stations. The van shot across the 714 ft expanse in seconds and leaned hard right as it made the sweeping left turn and began to climb the incline. Wes stayed close behind, zigging and zagging so as not to present a clear target for the van's shooter. At the same time, Wes pulled out his Micro Desert Eagle intent on slowing them down if he could. He had one bullet left in the chamber, but at close range that should be enough.

The van accelerated smoothly up the grade, going perhaps a bit too fast to negotiate the hard right turn at the top unless it had been fitted with a non-stock suspension along with whatever engine modifications it had undergone. To the left was the guardrail protecting southbound cars from inadvertently driving over the edge and plummeting to almost certain death on the rocks and surf hundreds of feet below. As the van reached the top of the grade, it swung hard right and leaned dangerously left from its speed. Wes hung his left arm out the window, took careful aim, and put a bullet in the drivers' side rear tire. The blow out sent the van careening sideways across the outside lane of traffic. It caught the guardrail skirt high, flipped sideways over the rail, and disappeared over the side of the cliff.

Wes hit the brakes hard and crossed the left lane to a scenic turnout twenty yards from where the van had gone over. He and Aryana jumped out of their vehicle and rushed to the edge. Peering into the gorge, they could see the Pacific slamming huge boulders three hundred feet below, and in the middle of the massive rocks lay the crushed white van.

The waves slammed and pulled at the vehicle like a huge aquamarine bear clawing at a salmon and by the third wave dragged its meal into the surf to be digested in its briny stomach.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



WILL DRESSER lives in Las Vegas, Nevada where he is currently working on his third 'Wes Franklin' novel, **TERMINAL ROCK**. To see more about the research for this and his other books and screenplays, please visit his website at www.willdresser.com.

