

Why

Harvesting the Whirlwind

Harvesting the Whirlwind – Book One

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Iraq / Syria Border

Sula Sood was daydreaming. Seated at a table in a wrecked, burnt-out building on the Iraq and Syria border, his mind was fastidiously split in two. He was still working, getting the job done, but also having the most delicious thoughts in unison with the fast-paced typing of his fingers.

Images of the toys he would purchase with the payout from his current job danced in his head. A yacht, a mansion, a new car. Not just any car, a fire engine red Ferrari. And women--- there will be plenty of those. Sula dreamed of the kind of women that wouldn't even look at a man unless he wore a Desmond Merrion and a \$300,000 dollar Rolex watch.

He had landed the job of a lifetime and it was going to make him rich beyond measure. No more competing for jobs, no more running and hiding. He would set up shop in a country that wouldn't extradite. He just had to stay alive long enough to collect.

Without a country or a home, Sula was a wanted man on several continents. His skills had afforded him a lifestyle free from the burden of the gruesome 9-to-5 job lesser men toiled through day after day. He could not imagine a desk and an office, more like a ball and chain to him.

Sula looked up from his work. In the corner a rough looking man in military garb was watching him intently. Six more thugs like him were guarding the building, all armed to the teeth. There was no doubt in Sula's mind that, as soon as his work was complete, the man would put a bullet in his head, maybe two to make sure the job was done.

Sula finished the digital masterpiece he had created on the master computer. There were 5 more Lenovo's laid out across his makeshift desk. Special encryptions he had designed were

installed on all the computers. Data just need to transferred to the additional 5 laptops. Sula stopped working, decided to go no further until he got some assurances.

Looking around anxiously for his contact, Sula examined the death trap he had been working in. Hot tepid air poured through gaping holes where walls should have been. The building reeked of burnt wood and death. It was the perfect place for a terrorist and a wanted black hat hacker to do business, but a bad place to be trapped if things went south. Best to conclude the business at hand as soon as possible.

A car was waiting for him outside to take him wherever he wanted to go. In spite of the circumstances, he closed his eyes. Images of his future life played deliciously in his head again.

“We’re not paying you to sleep.” An irritated voice jarred him from his thoughts.

His contact was still wearing the same cheap suit he had worn when they met but now there was a clear spreading of sweat under the armpits. A 357 was clutched in his left hand, his right hand folded over the weapon. His finger was always on the trigger.

“I was waiting for you,” Sula said, shrugging off the last tantalizing thoughts of fast cars and loose women.

The contact turned the master computer towards himself, looked it over, glanced at the other 5 computers. “We done here?” He asked brusquely.

Sula leaned back in his chair, eyeing the contact. The man was a first-rate thug with the IQ of a rock. Obviously not the one in charge. However, Sula could not underestimate the man’s willingness to kill him with the gun he’d kept nestled near his crotch. Having done his research, Suka knew the man before him had a bloody history filled with men and women who had been a means to an end. Sula had no intention of being part of that body count.

“The master computer is ready. All the data has been transferred and the computer is completely encrypted. The other computers are ready to go, I just need to do the data transfers from the master.” Sula said.

The contact was not amused. “How much more time?”

“Thirty minutes max.” Sula answered as the man reached into his pocket for his phone.

Sula knew instinctively what was coming. The order would be given to end his life as soon as he finished the transfers. Phone to his ear with the right hand, gun still enclosed in his left, the contact spoke a command and the phone began to dial.

“Before you make that call, we need to come to an agreement.” Sula added quickly. Even in a rush, he had to choose his words carefully.

Intelligence, Investigation and Security Agency, Denver Co

A ringing phone interrupted Robert Anderson Duchovny’s fried egg and coffee. As head of the Intelligence, Investigation and Security Agency, known by the acronym IISA, a call straight to his desk was always a matter of national security.

“Robert here.” He kept it short, pushing his food aside.

The sun was just peeking over the skyscrapers that laced the Denver skyline. The old saying that evil never slept was truer than most people ever dreamed.

In the average American household, busy Moms and Dads were getting reluctant children out of bed, others might be hitting the pavement for a morning run. Crying alarms summoned people out of their homes for work or play. Not so for him. He had been up since 4:00 am and faced more danger before his morning coffee than most people faced in a lifetime.

“We have a situation. We need you and the team on it right now.” The caller demanded.

Robert ended the call without a goodbye and headed to the command center with his breakfast untouched. It wouldn't be the first time he had missed eating to handle a situation that couldn't wait. It was part of what he did. He stopped the bad guys from getting through the front door of the United States.

Foregoing the elevator for 6 flights of stairs, he reached the entrance. He endured a retinal scan which gave him access to the secure facility. The door, a foot thick and solid steal, hissed silently behind him as it closed and locked.

Girded in steal, the command center was fashioned like an underground military bunker. An enemy could bring the entire building down around them, but the command center would stay intact. It could even withstand a nuclear blast.

Already at their seats, his team was geared up and ready to do battle. It was a war that wouldn't be fought on a battlefield, rather in cyberspace. The caller from his office was connected and placed on speaker phone.

Panic laced the caller's voice as he spoke. "The CIA is being hacked. It started ten minutes ago. Their in-house cybersecurity team tried to stop it, but the hacker blew right through them. It's complete chaos. They're in the middle of an operation in the middle east. They've lost contact and operational control."

"Team, I need data asap." Robert said, taking his seat overlooking a large open space.

Each team member had an impressive set up of their own with all of the fastest and latest technology. Massive monitors allowed everyone to see what was happening in real time.

Jaxson Golightly, a fresh-faced young man with a mess of black hair and Robert's right-hand man, patched in data from the CIA. The team worked frantically, in unison. Within minutes Robert could see the location of the hacker and the IP address.

“Insidious?” He questioned.

“This guy does low level hacks, hits independent banks---small businesses.” His lead guy said silently to Robert. “Why is he targeting the CIA?”

Iraq / Syria Border

Sula straightened the new tie he had purchased 4 days before. Why he had chosen to wear a business suit and tie seemed utterly ridiculous now. This wasn't Wall Street. He was in the middle of a hot, hostile desert, surrounded by booted thugs.

He was uncomfortable, terrified and the double cross he was about to pull made him even more so. The tie would also be a good noose to hang him with. He loosened the tie, snatched it off, looked the contact straight in the eye. Sula knew he could not show fear with these people. They would pounce like a lion on a wounded animal if he did.

“The encryption I put on the computers is unbreakable. The computers can only be accessed with the passwords I give you and I'm not giving you anything until my money has been transferred.”

Sula pulled his phone out of his pocket as he continued. “I also put a password reset on the computers. All 6 computers will automatically reset every 3 months. They won't open unless you have the passwords and you can only get them from me.”

Glaring at Sula, the man relayed what was being said to his boss on the other end of the phone. Sula knew who it was and he shuddered inwardly.

There was no turning back now. Sula continued. “If he thinks he has a backup, he's mistaken. I sent a virus to his personal computer an hour ago. As soon as he boots it up and tries to log in, the virus will kill the computer.”

Sula's heart pounding at the pace of a running rabbit, the words rushed out of him. There would be only one chance to change his date with death.

"I know your boss has a team of hackers on his payroll. Tell them to try to get in. No one can break my encryption, no one." Sula added confidently.

The contact turned the master computer towards Sula. An unseen hand, obviously one of the chief hoodlum's paid hackers, booted up the computer. The log in page popped into view and Sula stiffened at the sight. Someone had gotten past the initial protections he had put in place.

There were only a few hackers in the world that could have pulled that off. And since the thugs didn't have Robert Duchovny or the elite Gang of Seven on their payroll, he knew the rest was un-hackable.

On speaker, a man spoke in a harsh, guttural language. Sula watched the computer, satisfied, as someone tried over and over again to gain access without success. The screen shivered and flickered, booted and re-booted, all while Sula sat sweating, looking down the barrel of the 357.

Intelligence, Investigation and Security Agency, Denver Co

"This is way out of character for him and way out of his league." Robert agreed. He rattled off the address that popped up on the screen for the hacker. "Deploy agents."

The caller repeated the address. The IISA had partners in countries all over the world. The hacker's house would be targeted and raided within minutes.

"I need eyes on that location."

As commanded, Robert's team immediately gained access to all cameras within a 20-mile radius of the hacker's house. The images were brought onscreen. As they watched, the door

was battered down. Moments later a man was dragged out of a one-story bungalow cursing and in his pajamas.

Working faster than any hacker in the world, Robert sent a kill virus, his own personal design, to the hacker's location. With the computer destroyed, this should have immediately stopped the hack. However, as soon as he killed the computer, another hacker simultaneously took the hacker's place.

"It's CompKill66. Same M.O., small banks, small businesses, never anything this big." Jax called out, alerting the team to the new hack.

"Location?" Robert asked. His team had it for him within seconds and he relayed it to the caller.

The hacker frantically tried to counter Robert's attack but lacked the skill to stop him from breaching the computer. Once inside, Robert copied all of the data from the computer's hard drive before he killed it.

"Jax, start analysis." He said, transferring the data he had retrieved to his lead.

"Analyzing now, Boss."

The words were barely out of his mouth when the system lit up again. Another hacker had just joined the game.

"CrkJack" Jax said.

"What the hell is happening, Robert." The caller on the line yelled, apoplectic.

Robert seemed outwardly calm and collected, but inside he was raging. Every hacker in the world knew who he was. The United States was his house and hostile thieves were trying to break in. He took this as a personal offense.

“This is being bounced.” Robert said, realizing whoever was coordinating the attack was bouncing the data off several devices.

It could be cell phones or computers that had been compromised. This was an elaborate scheme that had taken time and planning.

The hack could be for monetary gain or it could simply be for fun. Most black hat hackers despised the CIA and government run security agencies. Getting a righteous hack against the CIA would give them respect and lend credibility when they went after bigger jobs. As the old saying went, this was now a game of cat and mouse.

“Deploy agents. Tell them to proceed with caution. They might be walking into an empty warehouse, but there could also be a legitimate threat. Confiscate computers and peripherals.” Robert ordered.

“Do it.” The caller said to the agents in the field, his voice no less panicked.

The screens in the room were now lit up with images of homes, warehouses and businesses being raided in multiple locations.

“The hacker we nabbed is being questioned now. The next two locations were empty warehouses. Computer, modem and phone set up.” The caller informed them.

“Get it here, asap.” Robert replied, still working.

“It’s in route.”

“Jax, I need something.” Robert called out, fending off one attack after another.

“The CIA is still locked out. These people are going to get our agents killed.” The caller barked at them over the loudspeaker.

“Jax?” Robert asked with a sense of urgency.

“Analysis almost complete.” Jax informed the room.

Iraq / Syria Border

A crackling sound broke the stiff silence in the building, followed by the sound of approaching vehicles and whirling helicopter blades.

“What is that?” Sula asked, knowing it was stupid question.

Gunfire and explosions suddenly rocked the decrepit building. Unwelcomed guests had crashed their private party. The contact snatched up the master computer, stuffed it under his arm. Without another word he pocketed the phone and headed for the stairwell. Sula had to trust his instincts. He followed the man he knew was his enemy. It was his only chance for survival and escape.

Sula huffed as he ran to keep up with the contact. He assumed that, after what he had just told them about his safeguards, there was a place for him on the escape vehicle which was clearly a helicopter.

The old building shook with rapid gun fire and boots on the ground. A full-fledged gun fight had broken out below. The contact’s pace quickened. It took everything Sula had to push forward and keep up the pace. They were almost to the roof when the man turned and shoved Sula down the stairs.

Intelligence, Investigation and Security Agency, Denver Co

“Everything is being fed through a system at this location.” Jax said as he passed Robert the hacker’s IP and physical address.

Robert shouted out the address to the caller, then dropped his attacks on the other locations and focused on the main target.

“User Name?” Robert questioned as he worked.

“Dragonfyre.” Jax answered with a scowl.

“Never heard of him.”

“Me either, Boss.”

Robert went to work as the hacker efficiently tried to counter his attacks. He was good, but obviously new, inexperienced. Robert could tell by the flaws in the hacker’s program. However, it was brilliantly written which troubled him.

For someone who was obviously young to have the hutzpah to level an attack on the CIA, this was someone Robert was going to need to watch. He hoped they could apprehend him.

“You got that last address? Send everyone you have there now.” Robert commanded and the orders were followed.

“You’re going to have to drop the attack and flee for your life or risk getting caught. Which is it going to be?” Robert said, challenging his invisible foe.

Iraq / Syria Border

Sula hit the concrete, stunned and temporarily blinded. Luckily, he had only dropped 5 stairs down or the fall would have killed him. Pain shot through his arm and shoulder as he moved to sit up. He could hear the helicopter above making a hasty escape.

His options were limited and he had to think quick. The door in front of him provided a potential hiding place, but even this was a gamble. With the building in bad shape, he could only hope the floor behind the door still existed. It wouldn’t help his situation if he stepped into nothing and fell 6 stories to his death.

If it was the Americans or the Brits, he might be able to cut a deal. He had a wealth of information that was worth more than gold. If it was someone else, his luck had run out. There were countries that had a price on his head and zealous individuals more than willing to carry out

the death sentence. Weighing the options, he opted to take his chance on what was behind door number one.

Dark enveloped him as he moved cautiously into the room. The air was stale and muggy, the ground beneath him stable as he took his first steps. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, small slivers of sunlight revealed heaps of ruined concrete and twisted metal. The building had been under construction when the bombs dropped. It created a perfect place to hide.

Moving cautiously behind a cement block Sula sank down, careful not to injure himself further on the protruding metal that jettied out of the ruins. *Steady your breath*, he thought. He had been abandoned, but not killed. This was a good sign. He knew the terrorists would not be able to break his encryption no matter who or what they threw at it.

They now had a dead computer, the virus had not been a bluff, and a master computer they could never access. The 5 Lenovo's they had deserted were now in enemy hands. He would give them a couple of days to sweat, then would reach out to them. After this incident, he wanted double the money.

People rushed by his hiding place more than once. Muffled voices spoke in the distance. Sula hoped they would assume he had escaped in the helicopter and wouldn't do a floor-by-floor search. If he could get out of this predicament alive, he would be a very rich man. If not, he had secrets to trade with whatever government was conducting the raid.

Intelligence, Investigation and Security Agency, Denver Co

"All exploits have stopped, Boss." Jax said, leaning back and running his hand through his hair.

The clock in the command center read 6:05 am. Robert logged the time, then immediately began transferring the data they'd received to the secure computer at his desk.

“CIA is back online. But the mission had massive casualties. We’ll brief you later. We need to know what the happened, Robert.” The caller was furious and ended the call without a further word.

Robert was frustrated, but couldn’t let it show.

“Great job as always, Team. Each of you take 2 or 3 hackers and analyze the heck out of them. I want to know where they’ve been, who they’ve been in contact with and anything and everything about their lives for the last 6 months.”

The team immediately got to work. Robert knew they would work out the details and get the job done.

“He sounded upset. None of this would have happened if they’d left cybersecurity in our hands.” Jax whispered to Robert in an irritated tone.

“I know. But what’s done is done.”

Robert stood, speaking to the entire team again. “You know the drill. I want all data forwarded to me by the end of the day. Jax, I want a full scan of the CIA’s system. Utilize any team members you need.”

Back in his office Robert powered up his computer. His assistant brought in a steaming cup of coffee and a brown bag that smelled like heaven.

“Rachel, what would I do without you?”

“That egg didn’t look good so I tossed it. I don’t know what you’re gonna do when I’m not around” She winked and left.

His government issued secure cell phone rang.

“Robert, what happened? We’ve been able to stop these attacks before. How did this one get through?”

“Don’t know yet. It’s a hacker I’ve never heard of before. I know the method, I just have to figure out the means.”

“You’re actually confessing you don’t know something?”

“I warned everyone this could happen. The CIA, the Pentagon, the FBI, everyone. I told all of you what would happen if cybersecurity was moved from IISA’s control back to the individual agencies, but no one listened. I can’t monitor a system I don’t have access to.”

“We lost people on this one. Six agents. The CIA had no contact during the most critical time. The intel was bad. It was a mess.”

Robert hated to hear about the loss of agents from any agency, but he felt the need to defend his team.

“My Team and I will dedicate all of our time to figuring out what happened.”

“Can you do it in six months? This shows how much we need you. With this type of breach, you’re needed now more than ever.”

“And so they said five years ago, then three years go and just last year. I’m retiring. Six months, that’s it. I’ll get to the bottom of this and I’ll leave the results and a solution in my replacements capable hands.”

His superior didn’t like the answer and said as much before he ended the call. Robert would not be moved. It was time for him to give up the reigns and get a part of his life back he had only seen his friends enjoy.

Reaching into his brown bag he pulled out a napkin and a note. The handwritten note simply read---*Don’t believe what they tell you. Your life depends on it.*

Robert wrapped the note in the napkin, calling his assistant back into his office.

“Do you know who delivered?”

“Larry did, as always. He knows the security situation.”

“Was it in any else’s possession?”

“Of course not. I took it directly from Larry like I always do and brought it straight up to you.” She said, a hurt tone in her voice.

Robert held up the note. “With a little something extra.”

Her eyes widened. “Was that in the bag?”

“Look, Rachel, I’m not upset with you. I just need to know where this came from and how it got in my breakfast. Can you take it downstairs and ask Dave to analyze it?”

“Sure.” She carefully took the napkin with the note protected inside. “You want me to call Larry?”

“No, I’ll call him.”

Larry was the owner of Larry’s Bagel’s and a good friend. He and Robert went way back to when Larry had first opened his business 20 years ago. The bagel shop was down the street from the agency and a local haunt for IISA agents and personal alike.

“I’m so sorry, Robert.”

“Not your fault, Rachel. Just let me know when you get a call from Dave.” Robert said gently. She was clearly very upset.

He stared at his breakfast. Was it poisoned? He was starving and now he couldn’t eat the second meal he’d had before him that morning.

It wouldn't be the first time he had been threatened. You didn't overhaul an entire country's infrastructure and cybersecurity systems and not face a backlash and attempted retaliation from bad actors. He pushed the food aside and reached for a granola bar in his desk.

Not exactly the breakfast of champions, but it would have to do. He opened the files he had transferred from the command center, dialing Larry's number at the same time.

The protocol was always the same. Larry personally prepared and hand delivered everything. How had someone gotten close enough to his food to slip in a note? The note seemed to be a cryptic warning, but from who?

Iraq / Syria Border

Several hours had passed. Holding his breath, Sula peaked around the corner as the shadow of boots moved under his hideaway door.

He heard trucks driving away outside, then there was silence. Still not out of the woods, but that much closer to safety. It would be a long walk back to civilization if he couldn't reach his driver. But at least he was alive.

An array of emotions flooded through him. Relief, then anger that he had been abandoned, then concern about which bones he might have broken in the fall. His shoulder was going numb which wasn't a good sign. Double the money, he thought. Just get through this moment.

Sula stiffened at the sound of someone stopping outside his hideaway door, then the sound of a door opening and footsteps.

"My name is Sula Sood. I need to speak to your superiors. I have information---valuable information."

Sula turned just as a bullet hit him between the eyes.

Ramstein Air Base, Germany

Louka Stojanović was cleaning his weapon in silence. The men and women on his elite team were doing the same. They had lost 6 special agents, friends to many of them. There was nothing that needed to be said. People like them kept their emotions in check.

There were no emotional scenes. Just the business of cleaning, writing reports, anything to focus on besides the dead bodies of their comrades.

They were in a hangar at Ramstein Air Base waiting for the Air Force C-5 that would fly them back to the United States. The caskets of the deceased agents would be beside them in the cargo bay. Another reminder of how dangerous their job was.

The CIA mission had been a failure. Louka's personal mission had been a partial success. The secret meeting was a business transaction between black hat hacker Sula Sood and a wanted terrorist named Achojah Okonkwo.

The plan had always been to kill Sula, there could be no loose ends. However, at the end of the transaction, Achojah's people should have walked away with a fully operational master computer and 5 companion computers.

The CIA agents and Louka, who had been planted with the mission as a precaution, received the go command and had gone in as expected. Louka had known the intel was bad, that there was a lot more armed terrorist than expected. They would all be walking into a trap, except him. The terrorist knew who he was, knew he was working with their associates. Bullets would fly, but not in his direction. None of the agents should have walked out alive and Louka should have been on the helicopter headed to freedom.

Unfortunately, the plan had been thwarted by Sula's last-minute act of deception and Robert Duchovny's ability to shut down the hack of the CIA quicker than expected. The CIA had

re-established contact just in time to send in reinforcements. Achojah's man had barely escaped with the master computer and his life.

"I'm gonna grab something for the road. Anyone taking?" One of the agents asked.

People called out different requests. Louka asked for a sandwich and bottled water. He preferred not to put junk in his body, but the trip back home would be a long one.

As the agent made his way towards the cafeteria, Louka's ear piece beeped silently. They were forbidden to make calls until they returned to the US to be debriefed but this was a call he needed to take.

Louka stood and stretched, walking away from the other agents and onto the tarmac. The roar of airplanes taking off and landing muffled the sound. He discreetly pushed the earpiece further into his ear.

"My son." The voice on the other line said.

Louka stood up straighter. It took everything in his will not to bow down on the tarmac at the voice of the Prophet.

"Father."

"Our friends have made us aware of the situation."

"Does this mean I'm not coming home?"

"We need you to stay where you are. Your position is too valuable."

Louka's heart sank. "You know what this means? I must go back to an unclean situation."

"It is a sacrifice you must make."

Louka knew better than to protest. The Prophet's words were to be obeyed without question.

“I will do all that you ask of me.”

“Has the hacker been terminated?”

“Yes. He’s not talking to anyone. Did our friend get what he needed?”

“The computer is locked. No one has been able to undo what Sula has done.”

“Dragonfyre?”

“Tried and failed.”

Louka was shocked at this news.

“The companion computers?”

“No important data was transferred. The computers are useless. However, the situation is still serious. If our associate can’t access the computer, it will compromise our joint operations in the US and abroad.”

“What’s next?”

“Go home. There is another plan in motion. We will need you there.”

This time Louka fell to his knees, braving the scorching hot asphalt and the burn of airplane fuel in his nostrils. He knew the others would think he was overcome with grief.

“With my life, I will serve you.” Louka said, his voice quivering.

Louka made his way back to the hanger just as the agent returned with their lunch. Shortly thereafter the airplane arrived. The living and the dead were loaded in for the trip home.

Separating himself from the other agents, Louka ate. Satisfied for the moment, he spent the long ride back to the states slouched down in his seat with his hat covering his face. He would be interrogated as soon as he touched ground. He needed to be ready, focused. His façade had to continue for just a little while longer.

Louka awoke as the plane was taxiing into Langley Air Force Base. Cars were waiting. No time to relax or change clothes, they were being shuttled immediately to CIA headquarters to be debriefed.

This would be the moment of truth. After each mission there was always a chance his true purpose had been compromised. He was a triple agent, living the life of the average American citizen, then as an asset for the CIA, then as an enforcer for the Mal'akh.

Louka was relieved when he got a pat on the back and condolences for the agents that had been lost. He was told to go home, but to stay close. Another important mission was on the horizon. It was the same thing he had heard from the Prophet.

Checking out a CIA vehicle, Louka made his way to the place he lived at in Newport News, Virginia. He refused to call it home.

At the door, his key turned in the lock. The clanging of pots and pans told him the woman was home. The racket stopped as she cautiously emerged from the kitchen with a gun in her hand. It was a precaution of their trade. She tucked the weapon back into its hiding place when she saw him at the door.

“You hungry?” She asked, knowing not to question him about where he had been.

He was starving, with only a sandwich to full his stomach over the span of several hours, but he didn't want to take anything from her hand. He shouldn't even be here, he thought bitterly, back in this same place with her.

“I just want to get a bath and rest.”

She went to him. He could not avoid the arms that wrapped around him, the kiss on his lips. He recoiled and she felt it.

Her eyes searched his face, examining him. He hated the scrutiny. She was good at reading people, analyzing them. It was what she did. She was suspicious. It was only a matter of time before she put two and two together and his true intentions were exposed.

But for now, he needed her. He knew she loved him, even though she tried to hide it. It gave him the advantage.

“You doing ok?” She questioned with prying eyes.

“It’s you---us. It’s changing me. I never thought about these missions before, about what I do. Now all I can think about is coming back to you.”

He drew her into his arms and kissed her, this time with the appropriate amount of passion. He lied, she ate it up. He had broken protocol even mentioning the mission. But he knew she would appreciate him confiding in her. Love was truly blind.

There was nothing unappealing about her. She was a dark-haired beauty that caught the attention of more than one man when they were out together. She was smart and loved to do the things men liked to do. She could hike, fish, hunt and shoot with the best of them and was better than most men he knew. But his heart, mind and soul were elsewhere. He could never return the love she felt for him.

“Why don’t you get settled in.” She said, turning back to the kitchen to finish dinner. It looked elaborate, a welcome home meal.

“I think I’ll take that meal too.” He answered with a feigned smile.

He would continue to play the part of the wounded, tormented man, torn between what he did for a living and his love for her. It had worked in the past and it worked now.

“I’m going to check my email and soak.” Louka commented.

“Dinner will be ready when you get out.”

“Sounds great.”

He dropped his small duffle bag at the door of the bedroom and stored his weapon in the gun safe. Peeking around the corner to make sure she was preoccupied, he powered up her computer. To make sure she wouldn't come in to check on him he started a bath, letting the water trickle slowly enough for him to do what he needed.

Logging into her computer, he quickly bypassed the security protocols as he had been taught and accessed the secret files he had stored right under her nose. He opened his secure email and shot off a quick message to the Mal'akh that simply read---*Back in the States. All Clear.*

Another peak around the corner revealed her sticking something in the oven. When the meal was done, she would come looking for him. He quickly closed out the files and his secure email, shutting the computer down and carefully putting it back where she had left it. A moment later he was soaking in a hot bath, his aching bones relaxing under the caress of steaming water.

Fresh from the hot bath, he ate with her and shared small talk. She did most of the talking, he listened.

Later that night, he closed off his emotions to be with her physically. He could not call it making love because there was no love in him for her. She quickly went to sleep afterwards, but his mind was too preoccupied to join her in rest.

He listened to her steady breathing, saw the rise and fall of her chest. It would be so easy to kill her in her sleep. Maybe when his mission was done, he would do just that. But for now, she was an important and integral part of the plan. The Mal'akh needed her and the resources she unknowingly provided.

He placed his hand on her neck. Just a small twist he thought and her breathing would cease. Maybe he would take her life with mercy when the time came, in her sleep. She would never know what happened. Or, maybe he would face her while he did it and watch the fear, confusion and pain in her eyes.

It made him feel potent, having the power of life and death over another human being. This power gave him focus, it always had. He had never appreciated his special talents until he had met the Prophet and his betrothed. He was a monster in a world that didn't want to know people like him existed. But that was all going to change soon.

He desired for his hands to be drenched in blood. He glanced to his side at the sleeping woman. He would start with her.

“What’s all this?” Robert asked of the breakfast display before him.

“It’s from Larry. He feels really bad about what happened. There’s coffee too. You need anything else?” Rachel asked.

“That will be all. Thank you, Rachel.”

Robert helped himself to a coffee and bagel as his team entered.

“Wow, you’re really go all out now that you’re leaving us.” Mavis, one of his longest standing team members, said as he eyed the goods.

“It’s not from me. Larry decided to treat us today.” Robert said, taking his seat at the head of the table and powering up his computer.

He waited for the entire team to enter and help themselves to breakfast before he locked down the secure conference room. A man ran up waving just as Robert finished the security protocols. He had to open the room up again.

“Sorry, Mr. Duchovny.” The man rushed into the room, his computer and file folders dangerously close to falling out of his arms.

He plopped everything down on the conference table in front of an empty chair.

“Are those bagels?” He questioned.

Robert secured the room again while Dave, the IISA’s lead data analyst, helped himself.

“Sorry again, I got caught upstairs.” He said with his mouth full. “You mind if I take over?” He asked, motioning to a large TV screen on the wall. Robert nodded.

He brought up an image of Larry’s Bagel Shop. In the image, Larry could be seen at the front counter, a leggy blond was standing next to him. Dave hit play on the video.

“Check this out. He’s getting ready to leave with your order, she comes up from behind. Larry told me she asked for directions. As he turns toward the street---you see that? It’s a quick slight-of- hand, she slips the note in your bag.”

“We get any camera feed from outside?” Robert questioned.

Dave had just taken another bite and he chewed quickly as the room waited. He chased his bagel and lox down with a sip of coffee.

“Sorry, I didn’t have breakfast. I’m starving---.”

“Outside?” Robert questioned again.

“Yeah.” He brought up the feed. “Nothing, just fuzzy ants. She obviously has a jammer. She must have turned it off when she got inside. If she hadn’t, the jammer would have messed with everyone’s electronics, drawn a lot unwanted attention. You know what the jammer does, right? It interferes---.”

“I know what it does, I invented it.” Robert said, interrupting the explanation. He just wanted the facts.

“Sorry, Mr. Duchovny. Going back to the feed here, you can see fuzz, then she walks in, no fuzz. She heads straight for Larry. She’s obviously there for one purpose and knows where that bag is headed.”

“Anyone know who she is?” Robert asked.

“I wish I did. I mean wow, look at the legs on her. I wouldn’t mind a hot blonde stalker slipping me notes.” Dave said.

He was silenced by Roberts disapproving look.

“I run the security checks on all new hires for the IISA and the FBI. I don’t recognize her.” Mavis replied.

“Any prints off the note?” Robert asked, trying to catch Dave in between bites.

Dave zoomed in on the women’s hands. “Gloves, no prints. And, as she’s leaving the building, look what she does. She reaches into her purse and turns the jammer back on as soon as she steps outside. All we get is fuzzy ants again. We don’t have a car or the direction she headed. All we got is this shot of her inside.”

“Thank you, Dave.” Robert said, dismissing him from the meeting.

Stopping at the table, Dave stuffed a pastry in his mouth and grabbed another bagel with his free hand as he slid out the door.

“Thanks.” Dave said through clenched teeth as he disappeared from sight.

“Thoughts?” Robert addressed the team.

“She’s got to be agency. With skills like that she could be NOC.” Jax offered. Everyone at the table nodded in agreement.

Jax was a white hat hacker that held several cybersecurity degrees. He went by the handle DrkMattr. Robert had met Jaxson Golightly at a lecture Robert had done at a prominent university.

They had spoken at length after the lecture and Robert had been extremely impressed. They'd kept in touch and he'd hired Jax right out of college. The man was brilliant. He just couldn't control the unruly mop of dark hair that always seemed to be lacking a comb.

"Only agency would have access to a jammer and know how to use it. And that little trick with the note, she totally knew how to play Larry."

This came from Patricia Kate Casey who went by the handle PatiKake. Patti had been a vicious black hat hacker with a penchant for hacking government agencies.

A successful hack of Norad at the age of 18 would have landed her in prison had Robert not intervened. He had called in several favors to get the charges dropped. As she served probation, he had flipped her and taken her under his wings.

"Agreed. The way she handled herself, I'm thinking CIA." Mavis chimed in.

Mavis McMillen was a family man with a wife and two boys. He went by the handle PhatFngr5. Mavis had been with Robert the longest. He had followed him to the IISA when Robert had left the FBI to accept the job as Managing Director of Cybersecurity.

"I can run facial recognition. I'll check agency, non-agency, wanted and in-custody databases and see if I come up with anything." Jax said.

"I'll run analysis on all of the cameras in the area. If she had the jammer on the entire time, we're going to see camera and electronic device blackout wherever she went. We can establish a pattern of where she was headed based on what was blacked out and when." Mavis added confidently.

“I’ll check everyone who’s had a jammer issued to them in the past 10 years. It’s got to be a very short list. We can match this list with what Jax and Mav come up with to whittle the suspects down even more.” Patti offered.

“I like it.” Robert said, always in admiration of his team.

He would have his hands full analyzing all the data recovered by his team along with the hardware he had received from the CIA breach. This would keep him preoccupied for several weeks.

They spent the next two hours poring over the details from the breach, the schedule for the next week and helping themselves to seconds from Larry’s spread of goodies. After the meeting, each team member was fully up to date and had an assignment to work on. Patti turned to Robert with a smile.

“Any fun plans for the weekend, Boss?”

“I’ve been invited to a barbeque after work tomorrow.”

“You should go.”

“How about you?” He asked, wanting to change the subject.

“No plans.” Patti replied, speaking loudly and glancing at Jax who was completely oblivious to the crush she had on him.

“This week has been a bear. Go and blow off some steam. Trust me, the work will be here when you get back.”

Once the room was empty Mavis approached Robert.

“Sounds like great advice. You should remember that yourself.” He said genuinely.

“I know. There’s just so much to do and I’m running out of time to do it.”

“Like you said, it’ll be here when you get back. Have fun, get some sun, play some volleyball or something. You might as well start getting accustomed to it. You’re going to be a civilian in 6 months.”

“You’re right.” Robert agreed. “Speaking of me leaving---.”

Mavis patted him on the shoulder. “When your business is up and running, you just have to make the call and we’ll be there. The IISA won’t be happy, but I know Jax and Patti feel the same.”

The next day Robert was up at 4 am and in the IISA lab by five. He hadn’t slept, his thoughts preoccupied with analyzing the hardware and software that was now in the IISA’s possession.

Enjoying a bagel and coffee from Larry’s, he looked through stacks of hardware until he found a laptop marked Dragonfyre. Robert kicked off his shoes, booted up his laptop and cranked up the volume on the radio.

Plugging in the confiscated laptop, he let his mind drift as files were being transferred to his computer for analysis.

Robert glanced at the only two pictures on his lab workstation. The first was a photo of him and his adoptive mother and grandmother. His white complexion was in stark contrast to their dark skin. The second picture was Robert with his best friend John, his wife Celia and their daughter Lacy. This was his family and he cherished them more than words could express. They had filled the life of a child from a broken home with love and with meaning.

His eyes swept nostalgically around the lab he’d worked in for years. Civilian life would be a huge change. But one he was willing and eager to make.

Robert had been involved in the military, then intelligence agencies, his entire career and it had left no room for a personal life. He hoped his new life would involve meeting an amazing woman. He had been successful in everything thus far, except in that department.

His computer beeped notifying him the file transfer was complete. This was followed by the ringing of his personal cell phone. He didn't answer, but the phone continued to ring urgently, the caller refusing to be ignored. With the phone cradled in one ear and both hands typing, he answered.

"Don't try to ignore me. I don't want to hear about how you can't make it tonight." His old friend John started in on him immediately.

"I'll be at the barbeque, I promise. I'm bringing potato salad, right?"

"No computers." John insisted.

"I didn't catch that." Robert said, joking with his old friend as Rachel entered the lab.

"Assistant Director Wiseman is here." She mouthed the words.

"Hey, I got company. I'll call you right before I head out." Robert said.

"I'm telling Celia you're coming. It's six sharp. Not seven, not eight, six.

"I got it. Six o'clock, with potato salad."

"No computer." John shouted into the phone as Robert ended the call.

A well-dressed man stepped into the lab. After courtesies were extended and drinks offered, Rachel left, closing the door behind her.

"Shaun." Robert greeted him. The man had a brief case in his hand and a computer bag thrown over his shoulder.

Shaunessy was the Assistant Director of the IISA and its sister agency the FBI. The man rubbed people at both agencies the wrong way, but he and Robert had clicked. There was mutual respect and they had been friends for over 20 years.

Shaunessy was dressed to impress. He wore an Armani suit that Robert guessed cost more than the Mercedes he had parked outside. The car was well kept, polished, without a scratch, as was its owner. The Assistant Director title suited him well and Robert knew he had his eye on the next step up, the Directors position.

“What brings you all the way out here from Pennsylvania Avenue?” Robert asked.

“Can’t a guy come visit an old friend?” Shaunessy answered, looking at the assortment of hardware spread across Robert’s work desk. “This stuff from the raids? He asked.

“The computer from the hacker that initiated the entire incident is of special interest. I’m getting ready to analyze the data if you want to stick around.”

“I’ll leave that up to you. I’m on vacation. I do, however, have a couple of things for you. I might as well get as much work out of you as I can before you decide to leave me high and dry.”

“I have done my time.” Robert said decidedly.

“Civilian life is boring. You’re going to miss all this. I suspect you’ll be calling within months begging for your old job back.” Shaunessy grabbed his brief case, removing a file and sliding it across Robert’s desk.

“This is all the data we have on Dragonfyre.”

“This from the FBI or the CIA?”

“FBI.”

“When are we going to get data from the CIA? They came to us for help and now they won’t give us the information we need to do a full analysis. They were apparently in the middle of some sort of operation. You know anything about that?”

“The release of information has to be cleared from the very top. I’m working on it.”

“At least the FBI and the IISA are still playing nice.”

“The FBI’s been gutted. Only executive leadership and a few hundred agents. I think the President is going to shut it all down eventually and we’ll all be wearing IISA badges.”

“May be a chance for you to move up.” Robert commented.

“Director Stanley isn’t going anywhere. He’s the director for the IISA and the FBI. You don’t just step down from that kind of power.”

Shaunessy examined the hardware spread across Robert’s desk. Robert noticed the scrutiny.

“This is all top-of-the-line stuff. Whoever Dragonfyre is he’s very well-funded and very clever.” Robert said.

“Not clever enough to beat you.”

Robert took the compliment with a smile. “I’m analyzing the data on all the hard drives. I also want to see if we can get some serial numbers off the hardware. If the numbers aren’t scratched off, it’ll give us some idea of where he got the equipment.”

“You sound giddy. This stuff never gets old for you, does it?” Shaunessy asked.

In spite of his upcoming retirement, the new hacker piqued Robert’s curiosity. He hoped that, even after he left the IISA, he would be able to continue to work on this case through his private firm.

“The whole hack was a shell game. They basically get you to look at one hand, while the other hand is up to no good. I’m curious if the CIA lost any data or if there was any malware installed in their system. Jax did an initial scan before we got locked out and it looks like the CIA got phished. Any word from Aakash Singh?” Robert inquired.

Aakash was his counterpart at the CIA and not very good at his job in Robert’s opinion.

“He’s staying mum on the whole incident until he sees your report.”

“We do train people to stop, look and think before they open an email. Aakash needs to train his people better or take me up on my offer to train them before I leave.”

“I don’t think the CIA wants you snooping around their data files again. That’s why they locked Jax out. And they definitely don’t want you to know what they were up to when the hack occurred.”

“They’d better take advantage of what I know before I leave. After that, it’s going to cost them.”

“Speaking of getting the most out of you before you leave---”

Shaunessy grabbed the computer bag. Removing a laptop from the bag, he slid it in Robert’s direction. It was a beautiful black Lenovo with all the bells and whistles.

“This is nice.” Robert said, opening it gently. “This yours? You want me to add some software or upgrades---like it needs it.”

Shaunessy steepled his hands in his lap and leaned back.

“No, it’s yours---if you can bypass the encryption. The Pentagon is tightening their cybersecurity, wants to see how good their new security protocols are. If you can’t break it, I take it back to them and tell them their network is sound. I know you’ve got your hands full, but this is a priority request directly from the Chairman.”

Robert cracked a smile. “They took a beating last time and they’re coming back for more? How long did it take me to crack through their last firewall, if you could call it that.”

“Fifteen minutes and twenty seconds. The Chairman is still miffed about that. His son works in the Pentagon’s Cybersecurity Department. That new firewall was his baby.”

“Mind if I power her up?”

“Go ahead” Shaunessy replied, “You’re my last stop before I meet the family in Aspen. My last little bird is flying the coup.”

“I can’t believe Rebecca is off to college. Did she decide where she wants to go?”

Robert powered up the Lenovo. He had the rare ability to mentally multi-task that made many of his colleagues jealous. As Shaunessy elaborated on the university choices for his youngest daughter, Robert’s fingers moved glibly across the keys.

“She finally decided on Harvard. The wife’s been crying for weeks. You’d think she would be fine the second time around. After Aspen, I’m thinking France. Nothing a trip to Paris won’t fix.”

“Paris---nice.” Robert replied, still focused on the computer.

“How’s the team taking your retirement?”

“One day at a time.” Robert answered.

“I’ve heard they’re not happy.”

“The team just doesn’t like change. They’ll warm up to the new guy in time. I’ll make sure he has all of the training he needs before I leave. It will be a very smooth transition.

However, there is something else you need to be concerned about.”

“What?” Shaunessy questioned with an alarmed look.

“Tell the Pentagon thank you for the new computer.” Robert turned the Lenovo around to face Shaunessy. He had not only gotten past the laptop’s security protocols, he had opened the lone encrypted file that was on the hard drive as well.

Shaunessy whistled through his teeth, looked at his watch. “16 minutes and 33 seconds. A little harder than last time. Seems like they still have some work to do.”

“Tell the Chairman I like his son, but the kid should really consider another line of work.”

“I’ll do that. She’s all yours.” Shaunessy nodded towards the computer. “Copy me in on the report of your findings.” He added as he retrieved his brief case and the empty computer bag.

As he was walking out the door he turned back to Robert. “I’m going to miss working with you.”

It was a genuine sentiment and Robert felt the same.

Robert had been working diligently for hours when he was interrupted by his beeping phone. John’s text simply read: *Barbeque. If you’re not here by six I’m coming to get you.*

Robert checked his watch. It was already 15 minutes past five. He still had to go home for a shower and shave, then swing by the store for potato salad. He snatched his jacket off the back of his chair, slipped on his shoes and exited the lab.

He dropped by his office to grab his brief case and noticed Rachel was still at her desk. He always worked late, so she stayed for him. He felt a pang of guilt. It was bad enough he had made his entire life about work.

As he was rushing out the door he gave her the rest of the night off. It was the first time he'd left work before six in his career. Things were changing in his life and he was looking forward to what the future had in store.

The parking lot was full. Robert was lucky to find a spot. He angled his mustang into the tight space like a pro, then took the time to engage the security protocols on the vehicle.

On the outside the car looked like a classic 1966 Ford Mustang, complete with racing strips and custom rims. Inside, the car was a secure, bullet proof cybersecurity office on wheels that Robert could use to access the IISA's network at any time.

The task at hand completed, he grabbed the grocery bag and exited the car. He noticed a large group of people in an area cordoned off with blue ropes and balloons. Tables and chairs were set up and a competitive game of volleyball was already afoot.

Robert wasn't big on crowds, but he was big on Celia's homemade sweet potato pie. The pie was always on the menu when John's wife knew Robert was coming. He was a bachelor and not one that could cook. The chance for sweet potato pie and home cooked food was high on his list of things that brought him joy.

John noticed he'd arrived and waved him over. Robert swung his computer bag around to his back hoping John wouldn't see it, but it was the first thing the man commented on.

"You are not doing that today." John said, giving him a stern look and holding out his hand.

Robert put the potato salad on the table and let John take the computer bag. He had brought his personal computer and the new Lenovo, wanting to spend some time with his sweet new toy.

“Normally I would be upset, but I forgot to bring my phone and I’m in charge of music.”

John opened the bag, his brow furrowed as he looked inside. “You got two computers in here. One’s not enough?” He said, screwing up his face at Robert as he pulled out Roberts personal computer.

“I just got the other one today, wanted to check it out.”

As John was booting up the computer his wife Celia approached and gave Robert a hug and a sisterly kiss on the cheek.

“Where do you want this stuff.” Robert asked of the store brought potato salad.

“You can put it on the food table, right next to that sweet potato pie.” Celia teased.

“Celia, I love you. You never let me down.” Robert picked up the bag, glancing in the direction her finger was pointing.

He saw the table loaded with food and Celia’s famous pie, but that wasn’t what caught his attention. His eyes were drawn and fixed on a stunning woman sitting next to the table.

Dressed all in white, the sun reflected against her long, dark hair and lit it up with highlights of gold. Her skin was the color of coffee mixed with honey and cream, her soft features and expression filled eyes complemented the delicate curves of her face perfectly. Robert was instantly mesmerized.

Someone snapped behind him and he realized he had missed his name being called.

“Robert---password?” John had gotten the computer booted up, but couldn’t log in. Robert changed his passwords often.

“What?” He stammered, extremely distracted.

John repeated the question.

“Same as before, just change the 1 to a 2 and the exclamation point to a percent.”

John hadn't noticed, but Celia had. She leaned in so that only Robert could hear.

"Her name is Sarah. I could introduce you."

"No." Robert said, glancing back in that direction, but not at the food.

"I have to go that way anyway."

He held up his grocery bag, giving Celia a smile as he headed in the direction of the food table and the captivating woman.

With a plate full of homemade food and a generous slice of pie, Robert made his way to the place Sarah was sitting.

"Do you mind if I sit here?" He asked cordially.

"Of course not." One of the women at the table said with a huge smile.

She glanced at Sarah. Robert wasn't as smooth as he thought.

"I'm Robert."

"I'm Maggie, this is Angeline and that is Sarah." Maggie said, nodding towards Sarah with a large grin.

"Nice to meet you, ladies." Robert said as he took the seat across from Sarah.

"You don't look familiar." Angeline commented, her eyes squinting at Robert.

"I'm friends with John and Celia."

"Oh, you're that Robert." Maggie said, raising an eyebrow. His reputation obviously preceded him.

"What do you all do?" He asked, changing the subject and taking the time to dig into his food.

“We’re teachers at Palmer Elementary.” Maggie offered, obviously the outspoken one of the bunch.

“That’s got to be exciting. What grades do you teach?” Robert asked.

Nothing got people talking more than asking them about something important in their life. Over the years, he had learned to deflect and avoid questions and conversations that centered around him.

When it was her turn to talk, he learned Sarah taught 4th grade. It gave him an excuse to gaze at her.

“Sarah tutors college kids too, math and science. Maggie said, the huge ear to ear smile still on her face.

“Maggie.” Sarah said, obviously embarrassed by the attention, but Robert was intrigued. Beauty and brains? It was a lethal combination to him that attracted him even more.

“Math and science. Those are hard subjects to teach. What got you interested in tutoring?” He asked.

Sarah effortlessly switched from talking about teaching 4th graders to what intrigued her about math and science. Robert was enthralled.

Angeline stood and stretched. “Looks like they’re taking a break. I think I’ll jump in on the last volley ball game.”

“I’m going to join you.” Maggie said. Robert could tell she had ulterior motives leaving him alone with Sarah.

“You need a server? Sarah asked.

“No, you stay here. I think Robert would like to hear more about tutoring. Nice to meet you.” Maggie shook Robert’s hand and the two women disappeared.

“Sorry. She’s normally not that odd.” Sarah said, looking after her friends as they headed towards the game.

“I think she wanted to leave us alone.”

“Why?” Sarah asked.

“A guy might be embarrassed asking a lady out with her friends sitting nearby.”

“Are you going to ask me out?”

“I was hoping to. Unless there’s someone else?”

“No---just me.” She said, making his day.

He reached into his pocket and fished out a business card. Under normal circumstances, he would not have used his business card as scratch paper. But something inside him told him he could not let Sarah get away and the card was the only form of paper he had.

He jotted down his name, phone number and email on the back of a card and passed it to her. He gave her the backside of another card to do the same. He hoped she wouldn’t look, but she immediately turned the card around.

“Robert A. Duchovny, Managing Director of Systems and Cybersecurity, Intelligence, Investigation and Security Agency. There’s a phone number and email, but no address. You must work in that super-secret building with no markings in downtown Denver they don’t want anyone to know about.”

“I plead the fifth.”

“A vague answer. Can I trust him?”

“You’ll just have to let me take you out to dinner and find out.” Robert said pouring on the charm.

He loved her wit and found himself incredibly attracted to her. He waited eagerly, the blank card and pen poised in her hand.

She glanced towards the volleyball nets as if she was trying to decide. He wanted to say something, like he would be a perfect gentleman or that he would take her wherever she wanted to go, but something told him to hold his tongue.

He sensed this was a big deal for her, giving a man her number. With what he did for a living he had learned to analyze people in a very short period of time. Something had happened to her, something that made her not trust men. He hoped she would give him the opportunity to prove she could trust him.

There was an inward sigh of relief when she wrote out her name, phone number and email on the card and slid it back towards him.

‘Sarah Levy.’ He said. The name felt like velvet on his lips.

‘It’s getting late, I’m going to head out.’ She commented, looking around.

The lights had come on in the park and the last set of volleyball was starting to wrap up. He had been lost in time talking to her.

‘Can I walk you to your car?’

‘A gentleman. I like that.’ She said, grabbing her purse and wrapping herself in a light shawl.

At the car, Robert opened the door for her.

‘It was really wonderful to meet you tonight, Sarah. I’m going to call you for dinner. You free tomorrow?’

‘I can’t. I have plans with family this weekend.’

‘Next Saturday then?’ He didn’t care if he sounded desperate. He had to see her again.

“Next Saturday it is. Nice to meet you too, Robert A. Duchovny.”

Back at the table where the night had started, Robert helped John and Celia clean up.

As Celia headed off to wish some friends goodnight, John leaned in and whispered. “You get her number?”

“I did. I’m going to call her for dinner next Saturday.”

“Alright now. I was hoping you got something after sitting over there the entire time. I guess I won’t be angry at you for ignoring us all night.” John teased with a large grin.

“I’ll see you tomorrow.” Robert replied, amused at his friend’s enthusiasm.

Robert headed back to his car with Sarah on his mind. As he approached, he noticed a white piece of paper folded and stuck under the windshield wiper.

He grabbed the note and spread it out on the top of his car. The note had a simple message.

Don’t involve the girl.

Louka used his key card to enter the back door at CIA headquarters. The secret entrance was created for people the CIA did not want to be seen.

When he stepped into the conference room the meeting was already in progress. He knew his late arrival had been timed on purpose. Brendon Stout, the CIA Director of Operations, needed time to brief the new team that Louka was going to be embedded in the mission. He removed his sunglasses as he entered, taking the open seat at the end of the table

“What’s he doing here?” The Team Leader asked.

“Mr. Stojanović has a special skill set we feel will be valuable on this mission.” Brendan answered.

“We don’t need an assassin. And his skill set didn’t do the other team any good.”

Louka remained calm as the Team Lead and Brendon argued back and forth. The Team Leader’s arguments were futile. Louka was going whether anyone liked it or not.

He sensed that he had a special task none of the other team members knew about. This was confirmed after the meeting when the room was cleared but he was asked to stay.

Brendon sat down on the edge of the table.

“I talked to your handler. The handler’s concerned you’re not mission ready. Is there anything I need to know about?”

“Nothing, Sir. We lost agents on my watch. I’m a little anxious for some retribution.”

“You’ll get that.” Brendan said, standing and pacing the room. “After the computer has been copied and the team is clear, you have the go ahead to take out Achojah Okonkwo and anyone else in his compound. He likes to use women and kids as human shields because that’s the kind of scumbag he is. We’re not concerned about that. You get the shot, you take it, and don’t stop until there’s no one left breathing. His associates will think it was a hit from one of his rivals. You get in, you get out. Understand?”

“Understood.”

“I’m signing off on the authorization for you to be imbedded with the team, against your handlers wishes. You’re the best we have and we can’t have any mistakes on this one. You never leave a trace. That’s why we’re sending you.”

“When do I leave?”

“I’ll be in touch. Keep your bag packed.”

Louka replaced his sunglasses and headed out the way he came.

Back at the house he shared with the woman, he was relieved to find it dark and empty. He changed clothes and grabbed a quick snack before he headed out again.

Starting out on foot he jogged for a mile, always keeping an eye on his surroundings. Satisfied that he wasn't being followed, he got on a bus headed for Norfolk, changing buses twice until he arrived at his destination.

A few blocks walk led him to an old red brick building with a neatly manicured lawn and a sign out front that read New Covenant Church.

Going to the heavily treed back of the building, he used his key to unlock the door and slip inside. After taking a quick peek through one of the windows to make sure he had not been seen, he made his way down the stairwell. At the end of the stairs, he opened another locked door and stepped inside.

The room opened to an enormous ornately decorated sanctuary room. At the end of the sanctuary was an altar on which sat the days offering of bread and burning incense. Several basins and candelabras, all made of solid gold, adorned the elaborate set up. In the center of the altar was a massive statue of a serpent made of bronze.

Louka recovered one of the beaded mats leaning against the wall and laid it gently on the floor. He removed a gold, ruby studded dagger from a sheath he kept wrapped around his waist at all times. Running the blade down his arm, he drew blood. Breathing heavy, placing the dagger at the head of the mat, he bent over until his face touched the floor.

He repeated the gesture, rocking and chanting and bleeding in front of the bronze serpent for over an hour. His worship session was interrupted by the opening of a door behind him.

“They will see you know.” A cleric in a flowing white robe informed him.

Louka stood, rolled up his mat, placed it in a pile with other used mats covered in blood. The man before him handed him a crimson cloth which he used to wrap the wound on his arm.

A door led to another chamber with a large conference room table, 15 chairs and a massive screen on the farthest wall. As Louka entered, he saw the Prophet onscreen, sitting in his place of honor at the head of the table.

Next to him were the Quorum of Eight, all billionaires and all influential in their own right. Among them was a top-ranking official from the United Nations, The World Economic Forum and Interpol. Alexander Treager, the President of the World Bank sat next to the Prophet, beside him was Andreatta Pierce, a media mogul who owned a large portion of the news networks and papers in the United States. An oil magnate, a prominent religious leader and a top-ranking member of the United States government rounded out the group.

Louka got on his knees, bowing low before the Prophet.

“Rise and come forward my son.” The Prophet said, his voice husky like a slithering snake.

Louka chose the chair closest to the screen. The man that had opened the door for him, a cleric in their order, sat across from him. Louka was beyond belief at being the in presence of the Prophet and the Quorum of Eight. They were the hierarchy of the Mal’akh. Being able to speak to them directly meant his prominence and importance in the order had risen to the highest levels.

“Speak.” The Prophet said, giving him the permission he needed to address them.

“The CIA has fallen for the bait.”

“Good. When will they act?”

“They’ve already assembled another team. I’ll be embedded with the team like before. I’m on standby, just waiting for orders.”

“Our man on the inside will continue to feed them mis-information.” Andreatta said.

Louka didn’t want to push, but he had to know. He loathed the false life he was leading and was anxious to return to the place he now called home.

“How soon will everything be in place?” He asked respectfully.

One of the Quorum members leaned in and whispered something in the Prophet’s ear. Louka didn’t like the secrecy, but he held his tongue.

“Patience my son. We made mistakes last time. Everything is happening just as we’ve planned. There is only a last piece that needs to be in place for the puzzle to be complete. You are an intricate part of the larger plan. Do you understand this?”

The words of the Prophet encouraged him.

“I understand.”

Again, he hated to break protocol, but there was one last thing he had to know.

“How is she?”

He felt a moment of dread when his question was met with silence. Had he gone too far? Maybe he should have waited until he could talk to the Prophet alone. However, as long as he was on this mission, the phone calls and video meetings were far and few in between. He had to know. It couldn’t wait.

“She is waiting for you with open arms, as we all are. Finish this task and you will return to us like a king returning from battle. And you shall be rewarded as such.”

Louka moved from the chair, sliding down to his knees again.

“With my life, I serve you.” He said sincerely and eagerly.

However, when he looked up, he saw that the video feed had been cut and the screen was black.

“Be careful. I think someone might be following you.” The cleric said as they walked out together.

“I’m always careful.” Louka rebuffed him, giving the man a sharp look.

“I know you are, brother. But I saw a car earlier on the video feed shortly after you arrived. It circled the block twice, then it parked across the street where it sat for 20 minutes. I would have continued to monitor the situation, but the Prophet called me into the meeting.”

“What did it look like?”

“Dark blue Ford escort. Early 2000 model.”

Louka moved passed the cleric, upstairs to the main sanctuary that faced the street. He peeked discretely through one of the windows. Whether he was being followed or it was just a coincidence he would never know. The car was gone.

6 months later...

“I have a margarita, a beer and a Shirly temple with lots of cherries.”

“Big spender.” John said as Robert passed out the drinks. “I’ll get the next round.” He added.

Robert rejoined the group and was getting ready to take a sip of his ginger ale when the phone rang. It was the office. He had to take the call.

“I’ll be back.” He informed everyone at the table as he headed outside.

Once in the car, with his security systems in place, he returned the call.

“Is that music?” Jax asked.

“I’m at dance club with Sarah, John and Celia.”

“I didn’t know you could dance, Boss.”

“Well, I dance like a drunk chicken, but Sarah has some really nice moves.”

And she sure is wonderful to look at. Robert thought to himself.

“I’m glad you’re having a good time, Boss.”

“What do you got?”

“Another penetration attempt.”

“CIA again?”

“No, this time the Pentagon.”

Robert had his computer up and running within minutes, with all the necessary peripherals attached.

“Dragonfyre.” He said as he looked at the trace that was already running. “He’s not even trying to hide it.”

“It’s as if he wants us to see him.” Jax agreed.

“Stop the trace. I’m going to try something else.”

“Trace stopped.”

Robert decided to launch a sneaky, back door attack. He zeroed in on Dragonfyre’s location just as the hack stopped.

“He’s detected me. Have them deploy agents to this location immediately.” Robert quickly forwarded the address to Jax. “And get eyes on the location now. Who’s there with you?”

“Patti and Simon.”

“Send the data to them as well. I want eyes, ears, anything we can get on this.”

He heard Jax make the call. In a moment Jax was back on the line.

“Shaunessy says a team is in route. They’ve contacted the local government and police are on their way to the location as well. We’ve got access to the local surveillance system via satellite. We can see everything.”

“Call me if they nab him or anything major comes up. I want any hardware they get from the raid in my lab asap. In the meantime, do a thorough sweep of the Pentagon’s system and email me your findings.”

“You got it, Boss. Enjoy the rest of your evening.”

Robert returned to the table. One of John and Celia’s favorite songs had come on and they’d left their drinks to dance.

“Everything ok?” Sarah asked, sipping her Shirley temple. All of the cherries were gone.

“Yeah. Same stuff, different day.” He said, purposefully being vague.

He didn’t like the fact that he couldn’t talk about his day with her. But she knew what he did was classified and thankfully she never pressed him.

“I like this song.” Sarah hinted as the music changed.

Robert stood, holding out his hand. She placed her hand in his and he led her to the dance floor next to John and Celia. Trying his best not to embarrass her or himself, he moved as best as he could. The best part was watching the amazing beauty before him.

Robert had never had such a good time, just hanging out with friends. He was trying things that were out of character for him and letting his guard down. The past six months with Sarah had been filled with new experiences and he enjoyed every moment he spent with her.

He had dated other women for considerably longer and none of them had stolen his heart the way Sarah had. He was sincerely disappointed when the DJ played the last song, a slow

dance and thanked them all for coming. It had been a wonderful night that he did not want to end. Driving Sarah home, he took the long way to her house.

“There’s two very wonderful ladies I want you to meet.” He commented casually.

However, it was anything but casual. He wanted her to meet his adoptive mother and grandmother. The last step to taking things to a more serious level. He waited for her to respond.

“Who and where?” She questioned.

“My mom and grandma. They’ve been dying to meet you. Ma said she’s going all out with the creole food.” Robert said, trying to entice her.

“Creole food? Homemade? I don’t think I can turn that down.” She said with a smile, but Robert could hear some hesitation in her voice.

“You ok with that?” He asked.

Meeting Mem and Addie was the equivalent of meeting his family. He hoped he wasn’t rushing things. But there was just no denying how he felt.

“I think that would be wonderful. I’ve heard so much about them. I feel like I know them already.” She finally said but there was still a hint of uncertainty in her voice.

“You don’t sound completely ok with it.”

Sarah bit her lip, looking out the window. “I’m just a little nervous. We’ve spent so much time together the past six months. I don’t know what to think about all of this.”

“I know how you feel. It’s been a whirlwind for me too, but I’ve enjoyed every moment of it. Have you?”

“Very much.”

“Then don’t think about it. Just come.”

Robert wanted to tell her how special she was to him, wanted to ask her if she felt the same way. But he sensed something weighing on her, something heavy. Whenever they got anywhere near talking about anything serious, he felt the wall come up. He had done it in past relationships. Now he knew how it felt to be on the other side of the wall.

“Sarah, talk to me.”

“I guess you’ll want to meet my family too.”

“I would love that. Is that what’s bothering you?”

“There’s a long history with my family, and it’s not all good. There are also some things I need to tell you---about me---my past.”

“Did you commit murder?”

“No.”

“Rob a bank?”

“No.”

He could see the tears welling up in her eyes as he pulled up in front of her house and parked.

“Then I don’t care.” He took her hand and kissed it. “I really don’t. We can’t dwell in the past. We have to let it go,”

She nodded, finally meeting his gaze.

“Are you going to come, have some great food and hang out with me and my folks or not?” Robert asked again.

“I’ll be there. And I guess it’s time for you to meet my family too. But---.”

“No buts. Let’s do it. You make the time, I’ll be there.”

“My brother Aaron is a police officer. He’s a detective with the Colorado Springs Police Department.”

“I work with law enforcement all the time and I have several friends who are law enforcement, I’m excited to meet him.”

“You ever heard of Ezra Levy?”

Ezra Levy. Robert turned the name around in his mind, then it suddenly clicked.

“Federal Judge, Ezra Levy? Yes, I know who he is. The man’s a hawk.”

“The man’s my dad. And if you think he’s a hawk on the bench, wait until you meet him in person”

“Is that the reason you haven’t introduced me to your family?”

She nodded. “One of many.”

“And I was thinking you just didn’t like me all that much.” Robert joked.

She laughed and he was glad the joke lightened her mood.

“It’s not you, it’s definitely them.” She confessed.

“What about Aaron?”

He now understood why he hadn’t met her parents, but couldn’t understand her hesitation with him meeting her older brother. She had told him several times they were very close.

Again, she hesitated. He knew it was something she didn’t want to talk about in detail, but felt like he was finally breaking through the guard rails she had erected to protect herself. Sitting in the dark, he would wait patiently for her to answer, even if it took all night.

“After ever thing that happened, Aaron can be a little overprotective. He’s 100 % a big brother.”

“You don’t think he’ll approve of me?”

“It’s not that. I just need to make sure that what I’m feeling is real. It’s been a while since I’ve been this close to someone.”

“So, it’s not just me imaging something between us?” Robert asked.

“No, it’s not just you. I’ve never felt like this before.”

It wasn’t exactly a confession of love, but it was something more than---*I just want to be friends*. He leaned in and kissed her. As always, he felt her soften and relax in his arms. It made him feel like a million bucks.

The were interrupted by a light shining into the car. Sarah’s neighbor had opened her front door and turned on a flashlight. She was looking intently in their direction, trying to see who was inside.

“You ok in there?” She called out in the direction of the car.

Sarah rolled down the window. “I’m fine.

“I’d better go in before she comes over.” Sarah said, rolling up the window.

Robert exited the car to open the door for her as the neighbor stood on the lawn, flashlight in hand. He walked her to the door as he always did. They said their goodnights with a kiss and then he was back on the road headed home.

As he drove, thoughts of Sarah and Dragonfyre, collided in his mind. His impending retirement and a possible future with Sarah were at the forefront of his thoughts. But the hacker’s boldness attacking US security and law enforcement systems plagued him.

As soon as he was home, he checked his email. Jax, dependable as always, had sent him pictures they’d retrieved from the raid on Dragonfyre’s alleged location.

WE ALMOST GOT HIM! Jax wrote in all capital letters. Then added, *more to come!*

Robert could not wait until morning to see the complete set of data and pictures.

Two hours went by as he examined everything Jax had sent. Robert blew up the picture of a man and woman, mid -30's, dark haired, ebony complexions, making their getaway in a white jeep.

Robert typed an email to his team and cc'd Shaunessy. There was always someone on staff at the IISA. He knew his request would be seen and acted on immediately

Enhance the picture, try to get a license plate and run the plate through our data base. Set up facial recognition, stateside and abroad with all participating countries and request immediate notification if they get a hit. Also, run the pics through criminal databases, all agencies. I'll handle research on the IP address. Great Job Team!

He sent the email, then Robert carefully scrutinized the grainy faces on the picture.

Who are you? He asked himself as he examined the first glimpse he had received of his adversary. He stared at the picture for a long moment before he shut down his computer for the night.

It was almost 3:00 am when Robert finally went to bed. His body was tired, but his mind was racing. He was thrilled at the thought that they had come so close to catching Dragonfyre, the man who had been trying to exploit every government and military systems since the initial, brazen attack on the CIA.

This wasn't some pimply faced kid living in his mother's basement harassing government agencies because he was too young to date or drive. The attacks were too calculated to be the random acts of a pest. The hacker was testing all of the US's systems, trying to exploit vulnerabilities and gage response times.

The fact that he was doing this to multiple agencies simultaneously was even more disturbing. If someone wanted to destabilize an institution, business or government and test their defenses, the hacker was doing exactly what Robert would do. And he was doing it at a very high level of competency and skill.

This was an elite, dangerous, previously unknown individual that seemed to have come out of nowhere. No history, no previous exploits that Robert could use to form a profile. How could a hacker this prolific stay hidden for so long?

There was also the fact that the hacker had decided to attack the US. This was Robert's territory. The hacker knew what he was up against, but seemed unphased. Robert wasn't egotistical, but he knew his skills surpassed most of the hackers in the world. This hacker had gotten under his skin in a bad way. He was itching to take his nemesis down.

The clock was ticking. As he prepared to leave the IISA, he only one thing on his mind. He had to get Dragonfyre.

Louka looked at the woman through the barrel of his long-range rifle, his finger on the trigger. He wanted to end it all, right then and there. He thought of different excuses he could use. It had been a mistake. He had dropped the gun---his finger slipped---he had missed his target accidentally. He dismissed these thoughts immediately. With his skill level, they would know he was lying.

It was not uncommon for men and women in his position to snap. It had happened before. If he killed her now, in this fashion, they would think he had gone off the deep end. That meant arrest and then a mental institution or a casket, whatever they had to do to keep his mouth shut about what he did for them.

He also reminded himself that they needed her. That is what the Prophet had said. His desire to finish his mission, his real mission, was the only thing that stopped him from squeezing the trigger and ending her miserable life at that very moment.

His phone rang, pulling his thoughts away from death.

“The mission is a go. There’s only one missing piece.” Brendon Stout said conspiratorially.

“How soon,” Louka asked, trying not to sound too eager.

“Two weeks from now. You’ll be briefed when we get closer to the go time.”

“I’m your man. I’ll get the job done.”

“We’re counting on it.”

Louka watched the woman walking back towards him. The mission had probably just saved her life. *Two more weeks* he thought to himself, and he would never have to see her again.

They spent a few hours trading shots. He had trained her well and she’d reached a marksman level. It was something that might come back to haunt him, he mused. But he loved to shoot and it was something he could do with her. This was the one place he could be himself, do something he enjoyed, without causing too much suspicion.

Back at the place they shared he prepared his meal. A salad, steamed vegetables and a sliver of chicken.

“You on a diet?” She asked.

She had made comments about his change in diet and habits since his conversion.

“Just trying to stay healthy. I’m not getting any younger.” He quipped, trying to keep the mood light.

But he could not hide his meditations from her. The times when he rolled out his mat and kneeled, facing away from Jerusalem as he chanted, cut himself and prayed.

She questioned him about it constantly and he had to lie, which sullied him further. He had converted to Islam, he told her, hoping she would not take the time to research the religion. If she did, she would know the things he was doing had nothing to do with that faith.

“I got the call.” He informed her.

“When’s the go time?”

“Two weeks.”

“That’s short notice.”

“It is. But its mission critical this time and I’ve got to be ready. I’m going to sleep in the other room. You’re too much of a distraction.” He said, covering her hand with his.

Normally she would react to his show of affection, but she didn’t this time. She was on to him, or very close.

Sarah removed glasses and wiped down the table as Maggie loaded the dishwasher. She was pulled away from cleaning by her ringing phone.

“I would like to come get you a little early. We have dinner at 6:00 pm with Ma and grandma. Can I pick you up about 4:30? There’s something I want to show you.” Robert asked jovially.

“You want me to meet you somewhere?”

“I’d like to pick you up if that’s ok.”

Sarah agreed, her curiosity peeked. She tried to prod him a little further, but he was not divulging any more information.

As soon as the call ended Maggie peaked out of the kitchen “Well?”

“He wants to take me somewhere before dinner.”

“Jewelry store?” Maggie quipped.

“Maggie.” Sarah exclaimed. She knew Robert had won her friends stamp of approval.

“Dear, I see the way he is around you. The man is so head over heels he can hardly see straight. And men don’t just introduce anyone to their family.”

“I know. I just want to take things slow.”

“As you should. I’ve said it before, you need to guard your heart, mind, body and soul. If he’s a real man and he really loves you, he’ll respect that.”

Maggie must have noticed Sarah’s reaction because she moved closer and took Sarah by the hands.

“Yes, I said love. I hope you give yourself that chance, to have a man love you the way you should be loved. Robert seems like he really wants to.”

Maggie dabbed her tear-filled eyes with her apron. Sarah had to wipe her eyes with the back of her hand.

“Don’t get me started.” Sarah said.

“Can’t help it. Now, go get ready. It’s 3:00 o’clock. You only have an hour and a half.”

“What about all this stuff?” Sarah said of the leftover clutter in Maggie’s dining room.

“Don’t worry about this. You go. Have a great time.”

Sarah gave Maggie a big hug and kiss on the cheek.

“Thanks

Sarah checked her watch as she hurried out the door. She wanted to shower and get dolled up. She knew how big of a deal this was to Robert and wanted to make a good impression.

She was sliding the key into the ignition when she noticed a car pull away from the curb. The car sped by her and quickly turned the corner.

She had seen the car before. Was it at the grocery store, they gym, perhaps both? Was someone following her?

She grabbed her phone, bringing up Aaron's number. She was ready to dial, but quickly put the phone down. This was a special night for her and Robert. She didn't want her fears from the past to ruin it. She tossed the phone back in her purse.

Grabbing a piece of paper, she jotted down---*Dark blue ford, possibly an escort or something similar, early 2000's, one person in the car. Man – Woman?* Satisfied, she pulled away from Maggie's house.

Robert maneuvered the mustang up a 300-foot driveway to a house that was nestled between towering aspens and pines. Debbie, his real estate agent, was waiting for him at the door.

“Door's already open.” The agent said, stepping aside for Robert and Sarah to enter.

“What do you think?” Robert asked, carefully watching her reaction.

“It gorgeous.”

“Now that I won't have to be in Denver, I thought some elbow room would be nice.”

“It's a big change.” Sarah commented, looking around.

“I'm ready to make a lot of big changes in my life.”

“It's peaceful here. I love the open space. Have you decided to pull the trigger?”

“I definitely want to pull the trigger.”

Sarah walked around the house, peeking in the rooms then strolled downstairs. Robert had already seen the entire house and the property, but wanted Sarah's approval. Coming back upstairs she glanced one more time at the open space and the vaulted ceiling.

"I think it's beautiful. If this is what you want, you should do it."

"This is exactly what I want." Robert said. He went to her, taking her by the hand.

The urgent ring of his phone interrupted the moment. It was the office.

"I have to answer this. Take a look in back if you want. The view from the patio is amazing."

At the front door, he watched as the real estate agent led Sarah through the rear patio and into the sprawling back yard.

She was wearing the same white summer dress she had worn the first day they met. The one that had knocked him off of his feet and still did now. He was floored at how beautiful she was. The ringing phone pulled him back to reality.

When he answered the call Jax informed him that the IISA had averted another attempt from Dragonfyre. This time he'd tried to penetrate the Department of Defense. Robert got all the details and Jax promised a full report by the end of the day.

Robert was disturbed, but determined not to let the news ruin what he thought was going to be a wonderful evening.

Back in the house, Robert found Sarah lounging in a chair on the back patio talking to Debbie.

"Sorry about that." Robert apologized. "You ready to head out?"

"It's fine. I know this is part of what you do." Sarah said.

She stood, shaking hands with Debbie. "It was nice to meet you."

“You too.” The agent said with an ear-to-ear smile.

When Sarah turned her back Debbie mouth the words, “*she’s gorgeous,*” and gave Robert the thumbs up.

He led Sarah back to the car. Once she slipped inside, he turned to the agent.

“Put in the offer.”

It was past 9 pm. Mem and Addie waved at Robert and Sarah from the front porch as they made their way to the car after a marvelous dinner.

“They’re so sweet. It must have been interesting growing up, explaining the situation to other kids at school.” Sarah commented, waving as they drove away.

“What do you mean? I’ve been told I look just like Mem.”

“Well, maybe a little.” She said with a chuckle.

“Those two wonderful women adopted me when I was a very troubled 11-year-old kid. They didn’t care about the color of my skin. They just saw a little boy that desperately needed a home. They saved my life.”

As they slipped into a comfortable silence, Sarah noticed that Robert was taking the long way to her house. They’d reached a crossroads where they could be together and not feel uncomfortable if every moment wasn’t filled with words.

He glanced in her direction as he made the turn into her neighborhood. She could tell he didn’t want the night to end.

“The night’s still young. Why don’t we drop by your house, grab your stuff, then you can stay at my place tonight?”

There was a hint of something more in his voice. Sarah had fallen hard for Robert and was beyond the point of just flirting with the idea of love. It didn't take her by surprise that he was suggesting they spend the night together.

As close as they had become, being physically intimate would be the next big step for a relationship. She didn't sense that he wanted to take advantage of her, she just wasn't mentally and emotionally ready for a physical relationship with him.

Maggie's words kept reverberating in her mind. It was very old fashioned, especially in the world they lived in. But she wanted to wait for love and marriage before she shared her body with a man again.

This was going to be a telling moment. She hated the fact that, even at her age, she felt like a school girl afraid of rejection. She placed her hand gently over his.

"I think I should go home. It's been a wonderful evening and I loved meeting Mem and Addie. I'm just not ready for anything else."

Anticipation gripped her as she waited for his response. She was more emotionally committed than she should be after only 6 months. A part of her would be deeply broken hearted if she lost him now. But better now than to have her heart broken later.

Robert took her hand in his, kissed it. "All wonderful things are worth waiting for."

Sarah inwardly sighed in relief.

"Why don't we still meet at nine, but let's grab breakfast first. There's this new place that opened up down the street from my house. I've been wanting to try it and it'll give us some fuel before we take on the mountain." He asked, giving her a quick sideways glance.

Sarah relaxed in her seat. She could not quantify her sense of renewed calm and love for him. He hadn't gotten angry or tried to push or guilt her into sleeping with him. They agreed on breakfast as he pulled up into her driveway and stopped the car.

"Can I come in for a moment?" Robert asked.

"Of course." Sarah answered.

Robert jumped out of the car to get her door. Once inside the house and seated he looked into her eyes.

"I'm sorry about earlier. I can't deny how attracted I am to you and how much I want to make love to you. But I feel like there is something really special here. I don't want to ruin it by rushing things. I meant what I said. This is worth waiting for."

"Thank you." Sarah answered sincerely, her heart touched beyond measure.

They leaned into each other and kissed. Not just the casual kisses they had flirted with the past few months, but an uninhibited, passionate kiss.

Robert caressed her face. "I'm in love with you, Sarah Levy. What do you think about that?"

Sarah was floored. She felt the same way, but the feelings frightened her for reasons that were tangled up in her past. She feared what she also desperately wanted.

"It's a little scary." Sarah confessed.

"Scary in a good way or a bad way?" Robert questioned.

"In a very, very good way. It's just---I've been hurt before."

"I promise I will never hurt you."

They kissed again, but now there was something new between them. Unspoken words and feelings that had finally come to light.

Robert wrapped her in his arms and she felt her resolve not to spend the night with him beginning to melt. The way he kissed and touched her, she didn't want him to stop. Robert saved them both when he gently pulled away.

"Wow, that was nice. I had better go before I break my promise." He voiced what she felt. At the door he took her in his arms.

"Breakfast and hiking tomorrow. But this time I'm going to beat you to the top."

"No, you won't." Sarah said with a onery smile.

Robert was great at a lot of things, but hiking wasn't one of them. The man hadn't hiked a day in his life before they started dating and his first 14er had pushed him to his limits.

"You might be surprised. I've been training." Robert teased.

He kissed her again before he slipped out the front door.

"Lock up!" He said from outside and she laughed.

She took a quick, cautious peek out the window. No car outside except Robert's mustang pulling away from the driveway. Maybe she had imagined seeing the mysterious blue car before. But she didn't want to dwell on old thoughts or fears.

Knowing Robert was in love with her, she was on top of the world.

Robert was in a fantastic mood. He'd had a wonderful weekend with Sarah. She still beat him to the top of the mountain during the hike. He swore the woman was half mountain goat, but loved spending time with her and doing something she enjoyed.

Debbie called him on his way to work to inform him his offer had been accepted on the Larkspur house. As if the stars were aligning for him, there was also an offer on his Denver

condo and the buyers wanted to move in as soon as possible. This would leave Robert homeless for a few months until the new house was ready, but he had already made plans for this.

There was also an appointment with a jeweler at lunch. He had held Sarah's hands enough to guess her ring size. He wanted to design something special just for her.

The icing on the cake was that he would be a free man soon. No more being on call 24 hours a day. He was ready for retirement and glad he was leaving his department in good hands. Preparations had been made, procedures put in place. He was completely comfortable making his move to civilian life.

Rachel swept into his office shortly after he arrived, spreading several papers out on his desk. "Shaunessy says he needs to meet with you at 3:00pm. It's a priority, can't be missed."

"We doing a video conference?" Robert asked.

"No, he's in town."

"Can you set up the secure conference room for the meeting?"

"Already done. And here's your messages and your very last case." She placed a folder in front of him. "You're going to miss all of this." Rachel said, eyeing Robert with her hands on her hips.

It was the same thing Shaunessy had said to him.

"I will." Robert said with a smile. "But it will be replaced by other things."

"How are things going with the new business?" She questioned

"John and I are finishing up paperwork, laying some foundations, making contacts." He leaned back in his chair. "It should be up and running within the next couple of months. I'll need an office manager and assistant if you're interested?"

"Oh my gosh, I would love that." She pined.

“We can talk about it more once I get everything set up.” He promised and she nodded with a smile.

“Thank you, Rachel.” Robert said sincerely as she filed out the door.

Three o’clock rolled around quicker than expected. He locked his last case file in a secure drawer and headed towards the conference room. He knew his team had been planning a surprise retirement party for him and assumed this is what the priority meeting was about.

It was hard to keep secrets from a man whose business it was to look into and know everything. He would pretend he didn’t know about the party and put on the best act of feigning surprise he could muster.

As he rounded the corner, Shaunessy was in the hallway. The look on his boss’s face showed the man was not amused.

The Quiet Room was an ultra-secure conference room used only for high level, extremely classified meetings. It was bug proof, spy proof, bullet and bomb proof. Definitely not a room that would be used for a retirement party.

Robert was further perplexed when he stepped inside and saw Benjamin Stanley, the Director of the IISA and the FBI, Shane Kaggen, the CIA Director and Pinder Haise, the Assistant CIA Director already seated in the room.

A CIA Special Agent collected everyone’s personal cell phones. A second sweep of the room was done by another agent after Robert and Shaunessy entered to ensure the room was still secure. Both agents stepped out, closing and locking the door behind them.

“Robert, it’s nice to see you again.” Shane Kaggen said pensively.

Robert nodded in Shane’s direction, his curiosity peeked.

“I’ll get right to the point. That computer you hacked several months ago wasn’t from the Pentagon, it was from us.” Shane said in a serious tone.

Robert shot a glance at Shaunessy who looked both wounded and irritated.

“Shaun didn’t know, Robert. He was just briefed today.” Director Stanley said.

“I don’t like dishonesty, Director Kaggen. If you know anything about me, you should know that.”

“It was necessary.”

Shane slid a folder across the desk to Robert. Everyone else in the room already had a similar folder in front of them marked TOP SECRET in large red letters. Robert opened the folder to view the files and pictures.

“You remember this guy?” Shane asked.

“Achojah Okonkwo.” Robert read out loud.

How could he forget? The prior year the CIA had approached him with actionable intel that Achojah was plotting an attack on several US military bases. Robert’s Team had been recruited to infiltrate Achojah’s organization. The data they’d retrieved had devastated Achojah’s criminal empire. There had also been several arrests when Achojah’s South African compound had been raided.

Achojah had barely gotten away with the clothes on his back. Unfortunately, he had also escaped with a laptop that contained all of his personal files.

It was a loss because they had not been able to apprehend the man himself. But it had also been a huge success because a potential terror threat had been neutralized.

“Several months ago, we got actionable intel that Achojah was looking for someone to create an un-hackable firewall and to encrypt and password protect several computers. After

what you and your Team did to him previously, it sounds like he's not taking any chances with the assets he has left. These computers were going to be used to network valuable information for Achojah's terror cells all over the world. Bank accounts, names, safe houses, businesses they're using to launder money, you name it. But he wanted to do it off the grid so to speak."

"There's no such thing as a computer or system that can't be exploited. Some just take more time than others." Robert said.

"Apparently Achojah seemed to think he had found a solution. The master computer and the accompanying computers would all have this super firewall, or whatever you want to call it, that no one could hack or compromise. Even the IP address couldn't be traced."

"Is that even possible? An un-hackable, untraceable computer?" Shaunessy asked.

"In today's world, with the technology we have, it can be done. But there is a certain level of difficulty. It's the same technology we use on our secure, company phones and the network at the IISA. However, we still have to make upgrades and constantly deploy countermeasures to keep the bad guys out. If there is any opening, a good hacker will find a way in." Robert replied.

Shane continued. "From what we've gathered, Achojah moved all his money to cryptocurrency and banks in countries that don't ask questions. He's also moved all of his transactions to the dark web, which is a little harder for us to monitor and penetrate."

"Makes sense. That's what I would do if I was a terrorist trying to keep my affairs private. But you said there were several computers?" Robert asked.

"Yes, five additional computers were encrypted. With these computers Achojah's cohorts could operate each of their individual terror cells, in whatever country they chose, without fear of compromising the main operation." Shane replied.

“Who did he contract to do the job?” Robert questioned.

“Sula Sood. Do you know him?”

“One of the Gang of Seven, an elite group of black hat hackers.” Robert said as he continued to scan the file.

“We were able to locate the meeting place between Achojah’s guys and Sula.” Pinder chimed in proudly.

Shane picked again up from there. “We had a team in place. Everything was a go. The mission was to get Sula and extradite him back to the US. We would have had Sula and Achojah’s computer, but something went south at the last moment. We lost operational control. A scumbag named Henreth Brubaker, Achojah’s point man, escaped with the master computer. Our Team was able to secure the scene. However, Sula ended up dead and we were left with a bunch of laptops we couldn’t access. Our cybersecurity team tried, but they couldn’t get past the firewall. No one could gain access until you penetrated the computer Shaunessy gave you.”

“I’d like to see those other computers.” Robert said curtly, not hiding his irritation. “The computers should have been given to me and my team months ago.”

“They’ll give you all the access you need, Robert. But there’s something more urgent. We think the CIA interrupted the transfer of data from the master computer to the companion computers. Our new intel suggests Achojah only has the master computer and he’s completely locked out.” Director Stanley said.

Apparently, they don’t have a Robert Duchovny on their payroll.” Shane added smugly, trying to stroke Robert’s ego.

Robert wasn’t biting. The CIA had the computers in their possession for months as Robert’s team was leading the investigation. They had withheld crucial information.

Robert was mentally unpacking the situation as he read through the file. He knew Sula Sood was exceptional at what he did. The only hackers in the world with the skill level to do what Achojah needed would be Robert or one of the Gang of Seven. Achojah was going to have to find another hacker at Sula's level fast before his entire enterprise was compromised.

If he had operations in motion, the kind of people he dealt with were not going to wait to be paid. Some of his associates had their data compromised when Achojah's compound was raided. The terrorist was skating on thin ice. One more screw up and his own people would turn on him. They wouldn't just kill him, they would make sure he suffered in unimaginable ways.

There was nothing worse than a man like Achojah being backed in a corner. It was like locking a starving lion in a cage for ten days then sticking your hand in to pet the kitty. The man would be more dangerous now than ever. But they had the upper hand as long as his data and his money were tied up on an inaccessible computer.

"Any information on how Dragonfyre is involved?" Robert asked.

"We don't know. I read your report. It seems like just another guy out to get a quick pay day. We think the hack was a distraction to foul up our operation and to keep us chasing ghosts while Sula and Achojah conducted their business." Shane answered.

The other men on the room were silent as Robert mulled over their predicament. The picture was starting to become crystal clear in Robert's mind and he didn't like what he was hearing. He closed the file, pushed it aside and looked the CIA Director in the eye.

"What does this have to do with me?" He asked, but deep inside he already knew the answer.

"Robert, we gave those computers to every hacker and CIA resource in this country. We even pulled some guys out of jail to take a crack at it. No one, I repeat, not one person could

crack it. No one except you. And you did it in 16 minutes and 33 seconds.” Shane answered pointedly.

Robert couldn’t lie to himself, the case excited the heck out of him. Cracking codes and catching bad guys was in his DNA. It was what he had spent most of his career doing. But he didn’t want to get wrapped up in another case. He was retiring.

Also, in spite of the close relationship between the organizations, he had an underlying mistrust for the CIA. What the FBI and the IISA did in the light, the CIA did in the dark. And they weren’t always on the level about how they conducted themselves. Warning alarms were going off in his head telling him to walk away.

Robert stood to leave. “Gentlemen, I’m leaving the IISA. I have a new business, among other things, waiting for me. I appreciate the situation here, but you have other people that can do this. You’re the CIA. You must have a team that can handle this case. I can supervise for the next few weeks, help get your team started.”

“Robert, please.” Shane motioned for him to sit down. Robert remained standing. The CIA Director got to the point.

“Afghanistan, 3 weeks from now. We get the master computer, copy it there, put the computer back before anyone even knows it’s gone. Achojah will think his information is secure, but we’ll have it. We’ll know every plan he has and intimate details about all of his associates and his operations.”

“Copy it there? This is a field mission and a dangerous one.” Robert said.

“Shane.” Robert began, holding up a hand as Shane started to interrupt him. “This sounds like a job for NOC or at least someone that’s been in the field. I’m not that guy.”

The two directors exchanged glances. Shaunessy remained silent. Robert was not amused with the entire situation. He would have preferred the office surprise party.

“We got one more shot at this thing before Achojah goes underground. Once he disappears, we’ll have no idea what’s coming. We can’t take any chances, Robert. We know you can do the hack. We need you there.” Shane said, laying it all out on the line.

Robert glanced at Shaunessy, the only person he trusted in the room. The man finally spoke.

“The FBI has the same intel, Robert. I personally checked it out and it’s a legitimate threat, possibly nuclear. I initially recommended Mavis because of his field experience. But we gave him one of the computers earlier today and he couldn’t do the hack.”

The words hit Robert like a sledgehammer. Nuclear threat? A multitude of thoughts were swirling in his head, but he could not make a decision this large on a dime.

“I have to think about this.”

“We need an answer as soon as possible to set it up.” Shane insisted.

“I don’t like dishonesty. Going forward, me and my team need full access.” Robert demanded, keeping his eyes leveled at Shane.

“You got it. Shaun can be your point guy. We really need you on this one.” Shane said, trying to reassure him.

“You’ll have an answer by the end of the week.” Robert left the room, not waiting for any further response. His good mood was gone.

When John arrived Robert was pacing the floor. He had already scanned the entire condo. The scanner device was a gadget he had designed and patented himself and it was the only thing that allowed him to do top secret work at home.

He had essentially turned his condo into a secure, safe room, similar to what he had at the IISA and in his mustang. He powered up his Lenovo and plugged in his secure work phone. Using a similar device, he ran the same security checks on both devices.

“That smells great.” Robert said as he worked.

The smell was coming from the Chinese take-out John had picked up on his way there. He placed the bags on the counter then made himself comfortable at the table across from Robert.

“I got your call and here I am. Celia had a movie and a dinner date with Lacy and I wasn’t in the mood for frozen chicken fingers.”

This elicited a laugh from Robert. He was a bachelor’s bachelor, complete with frozen dinners in the fridge.

Robert was John’s brother from another mother, as John liked to call it. Everyone wondered how the computer expert and the former military pilot had become such close friends. But they went way back---back to a time when Robert had first been adopted by Mem and Addie and both men were still in school.

John owned a security firm which employed over 100 men and women which Robert would soon be a part of. They were merging John’s security company, James Security Services, with Robert’s business, KZMS Cyber Security LLC, making them the go to place for complete business and personal cybersecurity, technology, infrastructure and personal protection.

The buzz was already out about the new company, Fortress Security Systems. Private and government entities were lining up to work with them.

John sat at the table as Robert finished the last of the security protocols. He could tell his friends curiosity was peaked. Robert had been extremely vague over the phone. With the scan complete, Robert passed his computer to John as he acquired the plates and the utensils they would need for dinner.

“Everything you see there is classified. No discussing it outside this room. Not even with the family.” Robert warned.

John shot him a concerned look as he began to scan what was in front of him.

“Do I have authorization to even look at this?” John asked, noting the huge letters that read TOP SECRET in the subject line of the email.

Robert slid him a letter signed by the Secretary of Defense giving John security clearance.

“Robert, what is this?”

“Just read.”

As John reviewed the data, Robert dished out noodles, curry chicken and rice, then grabbed himself a ginger ale. He held up a can for John.

“Can’t a man get a beer in this joint?” John asked.

“It’s all I got. Other options are water and OJ.”

“I’ll take the ginger ale with a little ice if you got it.”

“Hey, I’m not that bad.” Robert said.

Grabbing a glass and filling it with ice, he poured his friend a cold one.

John took a bite of Chinese and followed it with a sip of ginger ale. He grimaced, but it wasn't the food or the drink.

"I don't like this." John said, shaking his head. "Afghanistan just formed a new government after years of being under Taliban rule. You don't have any field experience and you're a high value target in countries that are hostile to the United States. The US government doesn't have a relationship with the new Afghan government. They're not going to authorize an unsanctioned operation in their country." John added.

"That's not even the worst of it. The last team they sent in, only five agents made it back alive. The rest were killed when a hacker shut down the CIA's command center in the middle of the operation."

"And they want to send in less people now?"

"Last time they went in guns blazing. This time they want to do something more discreet. Two agents at the hotel with me, two will grab the computer from the compound. One guy is a sharp shooter or something like that. He'll be in a lookout position to keep me and the recovery team safe. I've run analysis and exploited systems in Afghanistan from my command center at the IISA. I'll be doing the same, just on location."

"If you can do the hack from the IISA, why do you have to go to Afghanistan?"

"Keep reading." Robert said as he finished his first plate and filled up on seconds.

After he finished reading all the mission parameters, John sat back in his chair, pushing his plate aside. Robert sensed his friend's appetite was ruined.

"They don't have a field agent with your skills that could do this?"

“We have to do everything on sight. Achojah and his associates can’t know the computer has been compromised. And if I’m going to put someone’s life in danger, it’s going to be mine, not someone on my team”

“We’re talking about the same terrorist we’ve seen on videos cutting people’s heads off with a machete?”

“Yes. That’s him.” Robert confirmed.

“Oh man, brother. I would send this back to the CIA and tell them to shove it up their---”

“The CIA and FBI have actionable intel that there is a potential terrorist threat on US soil. Five times the scale of 9/11 and possibly nuclear.”

John’s face twisted up like he had been punched in the gut.

Robert continued. “What would you do if you knew you could stop something like this from happening?”

John stared at the computer screen. He let out a deep sigh and started to read through the email again.

“You want more?” Robert asked of the food, John declined.

John pulled out a secure tablet he used for work and made some notes. Robert could see in his friend’s eyes that he was emotional about this job. But Robert needed him to take his feelings out of the situation and approach the job the way he would for any client.

“I don’t trust the CIA.” John finally said, giving Robert a look of serious concern.

“Feeling is mutual.”

“If we do this, we need to do it without their knowledge. Can you make that happen?”

“I believe I can.”

“That’s the only way this thing works. What are you going to tell Sarah?”

This caught Robert off guard. He hadn't considered how the mission might affect Sarah. It was something new for him, being in a relationship, being in love.

"Business trip, I guess. I can't tell her anything more. What about Celia? What do you say to her when you have one of these security jobs?"

"Normally I just tell her I have a job. She understands the need for discretion. But, with this being classified, I'll have to put this job under your CIA alias they've provided here. I don't like this, being dishonest."

"Neither do I. This is the last thing I do for them, then I'm done."

Sitting at Robert's kitchen table, they started working out potential scenarios. John had a team in Pakistan he used for security jobs in the middle east. They were ex-military and skilled, elite fighters who also knew the language, customs and the terrain of the region.

A second team. Robert liked the idea, but agreed they needed to assemble the team outside the CIA's jurisdiction.

"I can talk to Shaun, see if we can get this sanctioned through other channels." Robert commented.

"How is he going to get this past the CIA?" John countered with a frown.

"Do you know Edgar Page?" Robert questioned.

"Secretary of Defense Edgar Page? Of course. I'm former military."

"Do you know his daughter, Bethany Page?"

"West Point Cadet, was on her way to a prestigious military career until she retired, got married or something like that. Your point?"

"She did get married and has two beautiful daughters and a successful husband. She kept the last name Page, but it's now hyphenated Page-Wiseman."

John gave Robert his *you can't be serious look*. "How did a phony, smooth-talking geek like Shaunessy Wiseman reel her in?"

"Us geeks can be very charming when we want to be." Robert said with a chuckle.

John wrote out the plan on his tablet as Robert cleaned up.

"You want to take this home?" Robert asked.

John shook his head absently. "You need it more than I do."

He finished up some notes then fixed Robert with a pointed stare.

"What we're planning, we're going to need high-level clearance."

John recapped the plan for him out loud. When he was done, Robert sighed deeply. He didn't want to say anything to alarm his friend further, but everything about the mission made him uncomfortable.

"You know the worst part of this---," John said, anger creeping into his voice, "They messed this up the first time. Now they're sending in someone with no field experience to do the job. Make no mistake Robert, this is dangerous. Don't let that jerk Shane try to make this sound like a cake walk."

Robert wasn't the type of guy that liked living on the edge. That is why he had opted for a desk job instead of going into the field. But he was an extreme patriot. He had devoted his life to protecting the country he loved. One last time, he would answer the call.

"I'll call Shaun and let him know it's a go. We have 4 weeks, John. Let's put this plan into action."

Weeks passed like the blink of an eye. Robert had been avoiding Sarah and he felt terrible. He just couldn't look her in the eye and lie to her face about the upcoming mission.

Never being good with communication in his personal relationships, he'd told her he had an important business trip to prepare for then he had cancelled all their dates.

He could hear the hurt in her voice over the phone. Just a few weeks ago he had held her in his arms, told her he loved her and that he would never hurt her. Now he was cancelling dates and avoiding her. He couldn't leave things like this between them, not with what he was about to do.

It was a problem that had plagued him his entire life. He had never been good with expressing his feelings. His lack of emotional empathy had destroyed his past relationships. He didn't want this to happen with Sarah. How was he going to fix the damage he had already done to their deep, but very new relationship?

There was no easy way he could apologize without telling her about the mission. Instead, he dug himself into his work with Sarah at the forefront of his thoughts.

Approval for the second team had been authorized directly by the Secretary of Defense. John still had some concerns about Shaunnesy and his loyalty to the agency over Robert's safety. However, they could not get access to the SOD without him.

Besides, Robert knew the man was still miffed that he had been kept in the dark and used as a pawn to get the confiscated computer to Robert. This was his chance for some payback.

Go time was within 24 hours and everything had fallen into place except Sarah. There was no pride to swallow. He loved her and he hadn't shown it the past few weeks. He decided all he could do was beg for forgiveness and hope he hadn't lost one of the best things that had happened to him.

Sarah answered the phone as soon as she saw Robert's number. Most women would have let the call go to voicemail or avoided his calls all together after the way he had treated her the past few weeks.

But she was past the point of playing games. She was already mentally and emotionally invested in him. And worse yet, she sensed something was going on. He was deeply troubled by something and it was making him push her away.

They both had baggage. She understood this and wanted to give him the chance to open up and explain. There was something amazing growing between them. But like any relationship, there would be tares that grew up amongst the wheat. The question was, would they both have the strength to walk through the tough times together?

Robert showed up 20 minutes past 9 pm with a dozen red roses and chocolates. He took her desperately into his arms and kissed her. She felt the usual passion there, but also a sense of longing and urgency she hadn't felt before.

"I'm so sorry about the past few weeks. I don't have any excuses." He said, apologizing as soon as he was inside the door.

"Robert, what's going on?" She asked earnestly.

They'd been inseparable the past few months and he had made her feel like no other man had in her life. Then he'd disappeared. Had it been because she had rebuffed his advances? Something deep in her soul told her this wasn't the case. But she had to know and he was the only one who could answer her questions.

"You know the work I do is classified. I can't tell you everything. All I can say is that this business trip, it's part of my work."

"Aren't you retired now?"

“This is something I have to do.”

“Is it dangerous?” Sarah questioned.

She knew the answer when he wouldn't meet her gaze.

“Can't you say no?”

“It's----I can't say anything else about it and you can't say anything to anyone, Sarah. If anyone asks you, I'm on a business trip.”

Sarah was alarmed. She knew he worked for the IISA, but never thought his work might put him in harm's way. An army of emotions swirled within her. She needed to know more, wanted to demand answers. But she didn't want to betray the trust he had already bestowed on her.

“How long will you be gone?” Sarah asked.

“Three days. I won't be able to call you. But I'll get in touch with you as soon as I return. I'm heading out tomorrow.”

Her heart sank. The entire situation gave her an uneasy feeling in the pit of her stomach. He was being very aloof. It wasn't the first time. She noticed he never gave her direct, complete answers when she asked about his job. But this time was different.

“Are you sure this isn't about us?” She asked.

A part of her wished the past few weeks had been a scheme to break things off with her rather than him doing something potentially dangerous.

“It's not about us or about you. Let's plan something together when I get back. I want to get away, just the two of us.”

“That sounds really nice.” Sarah said honestly.

“I should go. Big day tomorrow. There's still a lot I need to do.”

At the door Robert took Sarah into his arms and held her as if he didn't want to let her go.

"I promise I'll make this right when I get back. I love you, Sarah."

They kissed and he moved to leave. He was almost through the door when she pulled him back in and threw her arms around him.

"I love you too."

Robert woke up slightly before 7 am with Sarah in his arms. They were wedged together on her oversized leather sofa, covered by a thick comforter she had pulled off her bed.

He was in his street clothes and hadn't showered, brushed or shaved. But he'd slept better than he had in weeks. They'd spent the night on the couch in each other arms, talking about anything and everything. They'd talked until their eyes were heavy and they had drifted off to sleep.

He gazed at his sleeping beauty. She fit so perfectly in his arms.

"I'm going to marry you, Sarah Levy. What do you think about that?"

She stirred slightly, but was still fast asleep. Robert didn't want to leave. In the back of his mind, he almost had the radical idea to cancel the mission, to stay with her. He brushed his lips lightly against her forehead in a delicate kiss. She shifted, eyelids fluttering, then their eyes met.

"I could stay here forever." Robert said, caressing her face.

"Me too. I don't want you to go." She wrapped her arms tightly around him.

"Three days. Then I'm back."

"You had better be."

He held her, kissed her and told her that he loved her. Then did one of the hardest things he had ever done, he left her.

On his way back to Denver Robert's cell phone rang. He had expected John, but it was the jeweler informing him that Sarah's ring was ready. He checked his watch. The store would be open at 8 which gave him time to pick up the ring. He took a detour to the jewelry store for the ring, then back to the nearly empty condo.

Per the instructions in the email, he dyed his hair and eyebrows jet black. He had been told the dye was temporary and he really hoped this was the case. He hadn't had enough time to grow a full beard and mustache as requested, so the 5 o'clock shadow would have to do. Dark brown contact lenses were popped in to complete the disguise. Robert examined his reflection in the mirror, hoping the disguise would be enough to hide his true identity.

His computer bag was stuffed with his Lenovo and peripherals. The secure smartphone was coming with him, his personal cell phone would be left behind.

Going to his work station, he logged into the IISA's secure system and called Jax.

"We ready?" Robert asked.

"Patti and Mav are here and all systems are online." Jax replied.

"Let's run a check on everything one last time."

Robert and Jax parlayed back and forth as Robert read off a system and Jax confirmed they had the green light on their end. Everything was good until they started the mission parameters check.

"What do you mean we don't have everything?" Robert asked.

“The CIA is giving us limited access, Boss. I’ve requested full network access repeatedly and this is all we’ve got so far.”

Robert was furious. This was not the time for the CIA to withhold information. He dialed Pinder Haise’s number on a second line.

“I thought we were cooperating?”

“We are. We can see the system checks and everything looks good on our end.”

‘Jax told me we don’t have full access. We need that now.’ Robert ordered, past the point of being civil.

“You have access to this specific mission’s data, that’s all you need.”

“We were promised full access. What if there’s another attempt to exploit the system while we’re in the field? The CIA’s cybersecurity team has already shown they don’t have the skill to handle a massive attack.”

“If something happens, we’ll turn the situation over to your IISA team. Until that time, we’re giving you access to everything you and your team need. This isn’t the only covert mission we have in operation, Robert. We can’t jeopardize our other missions when they’re in a crucial phase.”

“You know I can infiltrate the network and take the information I want.” Robert said defiantly, his normal professional manner gone. There was nothing veiled about his threat.

“We’re all aware of your skills at penetration, Robert. But this is the CIA and any unauthorized hack on our system would be considered illegal, even by you. You’re not above the law.”

Robert ended the call without further discussion.

“What a tool.” Jax said, having heard the entire conversation on the conferenced call.

“Continue the check. But let’s keep mission protocols in place.” Robert said.

Mission protocols was a secret code to his team that he would hack into the CIA, with or without authorization, if he felt his or the agents’ lives were in jeopardy.

“Checks complete. IISA is a go.” Jax confirmed.

“Synchronizing time.” Robert said, making sure that the time he had on his watch and the time his team had at the command center matched.

“I’m patching you into the CIA command center. Waiting for green light confirmation.” Jax said.

“Green light. Mission is a go. Your car is waiting outside.” Another voice on the line confirmed.

“Falcon one, leaving residence.” Robert said, ending the call. He knew every step he took going forward would be monitored.

Robert picked up his personal cell phone and sent Sarah a quick, simple text.

I love you, Sweetheart. I’ll see you soon.

She responded. *I love you to. Be careful!*

He looked longingly at the message for a moment before he placed his personal cell phone on the desk and grabbed his luggage.

As promised, a CIA agent posing as a ride share driver was waiting outside. Robert had been checked into a 5-star hotel in Denver under an alias.

As far as the hotel was concerned, he was a business man from Wisconsin meeting potential partners for a startup business. He had been staying at the hotel for 6 days and had even ordered room service. This would be his same cover in Afghanistan. As soon as Robert stepped into the car, the covert mission began.

The driver handed him the key to his hotel and a packet that contained fake identification, a passport, credit cards and cash. Robert tucked these items neatly away in his briefcase. He was dropped off at the hotel and he causally made his way to the lobby and up to his room. A woman was waiting for him inside.

“Falcon One has arrived.” She said in a small earpiece that was tucked discreetly in her ear.

“Give me your watch.” She commanded.

Robert removed his watch and handed it to her. She replaced it with a watch, same make and style.

“There’s a tracking device in the watch. It will let us know your whereabouts at all time. Don’t take it off.”

She looked him over and frowned.

“What?” Robert asked.

“Is this the best you could do?”

“I didn’t have much time to change my appearance.”

She scowled at him, but moved on to the next topic.

“As you were briefed, two agents will meet you at the airport, traveling with you as your business associates. The other three are already in place at the Kabul Serena. They’ll make contact when you arrive.”

Robert had seen pictures of all the agents involved, memorized their cover stories and knew all of the details of the mission. He assumed the chatter from the female agent was just to reassure him that the CIA had everything organized and under control.

“You ready for this?” She finally asked, looking Robert over one last time.

“As ready as I’ll ever be, I guess.”

The phone on the desk rang and Robert answered. His ride to the airport had arrived.

“Stick to the mission parameters, don’t deviate from the plan, don’t blow your cover and you’ll be fine.”

“Thanks.” Robert said, not quite sure what else to say.

“Falcon one in transit.” She said into the earpiece as Robert answered the knock at the door.

It was John, dressed in a business suit and tie. He addressed Robert by his alias and grabbed his bag.

“Is this all you have, Sir?” John asked of the one bag.

“It is, I can carry the computer bag and my briefcase.”

“Right this way, Sir.”

John’s bullet proof, heavily outfitted hummer was parked in front of the hotel. He secured Robert’s bag neatly in the back.

As Robert was reaching for the passenger side door, John quickly stepped beside him and opened the rear door instead, motioning for him to get inside.

Once his passenger was secure, John returned to the driver’s seat. He did his final security check on the vehicle, rolling up the windows and putting on the air for his passenger’s comfort.

John turned to Robert. “Are you comfortable. Anything you need?”

“I feel great. You want to shine my shoes and get me a cheeseburger?” Robert said with a laugh.

John gave him a serious look. “Robert, you need to get on point. You are no longer Robert Duchovny. You are the CEO of an important company on your way to Afghanistan for important business. I am your driver, not your friend, and should be treated as such. When we get to the airport, it’s all business.”

“You’re the boss.” Robert answered.

“No, you’re the boss.” John retorted as he pulled away from the curb and prying eyes.

“Well, if I am the boss, can I show you something? No one can see us in this thing, right?”

“State of the art, tinted windows. You are rolling in a completely secure tank my friend.”

“Good.”

Robert reached into his pocket, pulled out a box. The glint of the diamond engagement ring reflected off the rear-view mirror.

John let out a whoop. “Oh man brother, is that what I think it is?”

“It is.” Robert turned the ring towards himself. He hoped it would fit Sarah’s delicate hand.

“Oh wow. When are you going to ask her?” John exclaimed from the front seat with delight.

“I’m going to invite her to the new house when it’s ready, bring in a chef, have them prepare a meal for two.”

“That’s classy. I like it. But you have to get down on one knee when you do it. I’m telling you man, it might seem a little old fashioned, but she’ll never forget it.”

“One knee, huh?”

Robert glanced down at the ring he would give his future wife. It was dainty and beautiful, just like her. He felt a warm glow within himself at the thought of a life with Sarah. He just had to get past the mission.

He leaned forward, holding the boxed ring out to John.

“Will you hold on to this for me?”

“It will be my pleasure.”

John took the box, placed it safely in his jacket pocket.

As John was pulling into DIA he glanced at Robert in the rear-view mirror. He tried to hide it, but Robert could see the concern in his old friend’s eyes.

“If you suspect anything is wrong, give the abort and get to extraction team. Clear?”

“Clear.” Robert acknowledged calmly, though he was anything but calm inside.

“It’s game time.” John said simply, jumping out of the car.

Robert was careful to wait until John opened the door for him. He retrieved Robert’s luggage and brought it to the check-in counter for the airlines.

Robert gave him a large tip and John departed without saying another word. He watched as his friend pulled away from the curb and disappeared into airport traffic.

Two agents and Louka were packed inside of an ornately decorated luxury suite at the Kabul Serena hotel. The CIA had booked the entire floor to make sure it was clear, but the suite would serve as the rendezvous point for the entire team. They’d just received word that Falcon 1, who Louka knew to be Robert Duchovny, was on the move.

“I need to do recon.” Louka told the two agents, grabbing his back pack and binoculars.

“That’s not part of the plan. We’re supposed to wait here until we make contact with Falcon 1 and the rest of the team.” One of the agents said.

“My mission parameters are different than yours.”

The two agents glanced at each other. There was obvious mistrust for Louka. They’re code names were Falcon 2 and Falcon 3. The man doing the talking was Falcon 2, the Team Leader and the same person who had spoken against having Louka on the mission in their briefing at the CIA.

“I’m going to need to call this in.” Falcon 2 warned him.

“You do that.” Louka said, leaving the room.

Louka knew Brendon Stout would get the Team Leader off his back. The other agents had been kept in the dark about the authorization he had received from the highest levels of the government to kill Achojah Okonkwo. What the CIA Director of Operations didn’t know was that Louka had an agenda of his own.

Safely away from prying eyes and ears, he removed his watch and phone and left them in the glove compartment of his rental car. He then took off on foot, making his way to a secure, predetermined meeting place.

Inside he knelt at a makeshift altar. It was much smaller than the one he worshipped at back home, but it would suffice under the circumstances. Slipping his knife out of its sheath, he cut himself and left a little blood before he stepped inside to the inner chamber. A man was waiting for him.

“Brother.” The man embraced him and he returned the gesture.

“He’s on the way.” Louka informed him.

“I can’t believe they’re stupid enough to send Robert Duchovny.”

“They’re desperate and they’re arrogant. They think they’ve got this under control and no one can touch them. It’s the perfect opportunity for us, killing two birds with one stone.” Louka replied.

Louka walked into a room within the underground sanctuary that had a bed, a coffee table and no windows. There were several bottles of water, a package of beef jerky and a book sitting on the coffee table. The walls were made of cement and sound proof, the door deadbolted from the outside. The room was ready for its prisoner.

“After they get the computer, they’ll take it to Duchovny at the hotel. That will put him and all the agents in the same room, at the same time. As soon as I hear he’s accessed the computer, I’ll drop the agents. He’ll panic and think the mission’s been compromised. I’ll collect him from the hotel and bring him here.”

“We have a team waiting to smuggle him out of the country. If the situation is too hot to move him, we can keep him here, guarded, until it’s safe.” Louka’s accomplice said, nodding towards the cell.

“Make sure you take everything from him. Strip him naked if you have to. If there’s any type of electronic device in this room, he’ll figure out a way to call for help. He’s IISA’s golden boy, so I doubt they’re sending him in empty handed. We can’t take any chances.” Louka warned the cleric.

“You think he can get into the computer? Everyone else has tried and failed.”

“The CIA seems to think he’s their man. We’ll all find out just how good he is very soon.” Louka answered.

Louka looked at the cell one last time, examined the door. If Robert failed, it meant he would have to go back to the US, to the house and the woman, his own personal prison. The

thought made his stomach churn. He prayed to the hosts of heaven that Robert Duchovny would be successful.

“I won’t be able to contact you once the action starts. So be ready.” Louka added.

The two men embraced again and then Louka departed.

Back in Kabul, Louka went to a hotel adjacent to the Kabul Serena. He had already checked in under an alias, so he slipped discretely into his room on the top floor.

It was a newer 5-star hotel that had been built since the liberation of Afghanistan from the Taliban. The multi-story, high rise afforded Louka a clear view of the Kabul Serena across the way and the suite where Robert and the team would be working.

The distance between the hotels was 3,985 yards. If he made the kill, he would beat the current record for the deadliest sniper kill in history. But there would be no time to celebrate. He would have to get to Robert before the man had time to think or make any calls.

Louka positioned himself, looked through the scope of his sniper rifle to make sure everything was perfectly aligned.

For privacy, the agents would close the windows while Robert worked. He switched the special lens perched atop his sniper rifle to x-ray infrared, a setting that would allow him to read heat signatures through the closed curtains. Satisfied, he closed up shop. All he needed was for his mark to arrive.

Robert’s day started early as a distinguished guest at the Kabul Serena Hotel. At 8:00 am it was surprisingly mild at 72 degrees.

After a rough night's sleep, he had gotten up at the crack of dawn, had breakfast and set up his work space. He had run several checks on the system before going to bed and two more that morning. He was ready to go.

The all clear and go ahead had come through from his contact, Falcon 2, and the delicate mission of extracting the computer from Achojah's heavily guarded compound was in progress. The CIA's situation desk was monitoring the entire mission as were Jax and his IISA team.

As he waited Robert tried to read a book without success. He was too nervous and keyed up to focus. He checked his set up one more time, check his watch, then got up to pace the room.

Lunch time arrived, still nothing. He glanced at his watch as he had done five times in the last hour. Having tired himself of his attempt at reading and watching Afghan TV, he turned back to his computer to re-checked the settings and all of his programs and penetration tools.

He picked up his book again with sigh. All his thoughts were focused on doing what he needed to do and getting the mission done. He was eager to get home.

It was late afternoon when he heard footsteps in the hallway. His heart leapt in his chest when he heard a commotion outside and a key at the door. He rushed to his desk. His Lenovo was booted up and ready.

Having all of his best tools and programs at his disposal, no one would ever know the computer had been touched. Achojah's laptop was about to be professionally violated by one of the best in the industry.

Falcon 2 and 3 slipped into the room still wearing their camouflage field uniforms. They were covered from head to toe with dirt, but they had the computer. A moment later, Falcon 4 and 5 entered. They'd done a sweep of the entire hotel and gave everyone the all clear.

"All clear from here." Louka confirmed in their earpieces.

Robert plugged his laptop and peripherals into Achojah's computer. There were some differences in the program on the master computer, but not enough to stop him from blowing through the computer's security and into its program files.

"I'm in." Robert said.

As soon as he had full access there were appreciative whistles, claps and high fives.

"Piece of cake." Falcon 2 said confidently to everyone assembled and the people listening in at the IISA and the CIA.

"Copying and transmitting data now."

Robert started the process of copying and quarantining data from the laptop to his Lenovo as he simultaneously transmitted data to Langley and his IISA team.

"Right on schedule." Someone from the CIA Situation Desk informed everyone.

Robert felt a sense of relief flood through him. As soon as the data was copied and transmitted, he would be on an airplane that night headed back to the US. The hardest part of the mission would be the second 15-hour flight he'd have to endure back to the states.

A crackling sound in his earpiece drew him out of his thoughts.

"We just got hit. It's another cyberattack. Multiple attacks." Came a panicked voice from the CIA situation desk.

"This is Falcon 1. Give my team access now." Robert demanded.

"Transferring data and granting ---." The line suddenly went dead.

"Command Center 1, did you hear my last request?" Robert questioned, hearing only the crackling on the dead line.

“Falcon 1, this is Command Center 2. We have lost communication with Command Center 1.” Jax responded, letting him know that the IISA had lost contact with the CIA and was the only center up and running.

“Are you still receiving?” Robert questioned frantically.

“We are not receiving and have lost all mission data and communications, including satellite.”

“Switch to Fallback Protocol?” One of the agents in the room questioned, looking at Falcon 2.

“Negative. Continue with current mission parameters until otherwise specif---.” His words were cut short.

“Shooter, Shooter, Shooter.” Louka screamed into their earpieces.

Before Robert could react, he heard the windows in the room fracture. The four agents next to him were suddenly down.

Shattered glass and blood littered the room along with the lifeless bodies. Robert’s mind couldn’t register what had just happened and what he was seeing.

“Falcons, report in.” Jax said frantically in Robert’s earpiece.

“This is Falcon 6. Switching to Fallback Protocol. On my way to Falcon location to access situation and retrieve package.” Louka answered quickly.

“Falcons, check in.” Jax asked again, anything but calm. “Boss?” He yelled, breaking protocol when Robert didn’t respond.

Robert was wet. As he looked around the room and at himself, it wasn’t water, it was red. The walls, the computers, everything was splattered with crimson. One agent’s eyes were frozen

in a death stare, another had a bullet wound that had taken out the entire right side of her forehead. The others lay where they'd fallen, stains of dark crimson spreading beneath them.

“Falcon 1, this is Command Center 2. If you're still there, I can't imagine what you're seeing right now, but you need to acknowledge.” Mavis's soothing voice pulled him out his trance.

“This is Falcon 1. All agents are down.”

Robert looked at the computers, the transmission of data had come to a standstill.

“Falcon 1, Falcon 6 is on the way to you. We are in Fallback Protocol. I repeat, Fallback Protocol. Repeat what I just said.”

“Fallback protocol.” Robert replied, looking around the room again at the fallen agents.

He realized he was going into shock. He'd heard about it, but never experienced it. It took every ounce of willpower he possessed to pull himself back to reality. “Fallback protocol.” Robert repeated. He had to move fast.

Going into the restroom, he pulled off his clothes and jumped into the shower. He rinsed off, washed his hair, then quickly slipped on a change of clothes, everything taking less than a few minutes. Back at his set up, he slipped in his earpiece.

“Transmission has failed. Packing up.” Robert informed the team.

“We see the failure on our end. Secure package and proceed with caution.” Mavis said coolly, his field experience obviously coming into play.

Robert wiped down and stuffed both laptops, his peripherals, his fake ID's, credit cards and cash into his computer bag. His hands shook as he retrieved and opened a black case that held a tube of viscous liquid.

“Cleansing the scene.” He said in hushed tones, looking around one last time at the agents.

They had families. What would the CIA tell their mothers, fathers, their children? What lies would the CIA offer to explain why their loved ones weren’t coming home?

Sirens could be heard in the background.

“Falcon 1, you need to cleanse the scene and move. Falcon 6 is waiting at the rendezvous point.” Mavis said urgently.

Robert snapped the tube like a glow stick, mixing the liquids inside. Tossing the tube to the floor, he hoisted the computer bag on his shoulder and rushed out, closing the door on the room filled with death.

Racked with guilt, he made his way down the back stairwell. He would not be seen, he had already taken out the cameras. Taking the steps two at a time, he flew out the back door and ran into Louka.

Robert was shoved into the back of a rental car. Louka hit the gas hard, screeching the car away from the curb just as a massive explosion rocked the hotel.

“You have the package?” Louka asked.

“Yes.” Robert answered, fighting the waves of shock and nausea that was trying to consume him.

“Falcon 1 and package are secure. Heading to fallback location.” Louka informed the Command Center as he veered out of the parking lot.

The sounds of heavy-duty military trucks could be heard rumbling in the distance, mixed with the sound of approaching sirens.

“Afghan forces.” Louka said with a glance out the window. “Get down.”

Robert laid down in the back seat, but he still felt exposed.

“Hand me your watch.” Louka demanded and Robert complied.

Something fizzled from the front seat and a putrid smell filled his nostrils. He saw a small whisp of smoke rising up from his back seat hiding place.

“Falcon 1 we just lost your signal.” Mavis said in his earpiece.

Robert stiffened. Falcon 6 had obviously done something to his watch, the only way for his team to track him.

“Hand me your earpiece and phone.” Louka demanded.

Robert ignored him, quietly giving his team his exact location and where they were heading.

“Hand me your earpiece and phone.” Louka insisted again.

“Why?” Robert questioned, panic gripping him.

“Don’t you get it? This mission has been compromised, just like the first one. This isn’t coincidence. It has to be someone from the inside. We need to get to a safe place until I figure out what to do and I can make contact with someone I trust. Until then, I don’t trust anyone.”

Robert sat up, glancing through the rear window. The marketplace was already bustling with shoppers bartering for the best deals. He chanced a glance at the man he knew only as Falcon 6. His earpiece was gone. No one had heard his last comments.

“Stay down.” Louka yelled.

“Where are we headed?” Robert asked in an equally demanding voice.

The fallback safe house was in the opposite direction.

Falcon 6 seemed just as concerned and cautious about their surroundings as he was. It took him a moment to answer as he cautiously eyed the crowds and the street.

“We’re falling back to a second safe house to wait for further instructions from my contact. Achojah isn’t due back at the compound until tomorrow morning. If you can get access to that computer again and transmit the data, we can still do this.”

As the car moved at a snail’s pace, trying to navigate the people and other cars in the market, Robert began to put two and two together. He was horrified at the conclusion. Falcon 6, a sharp shooter---all 4 agents taken out with precise, direct hits to the head. The man had also just destroyed Robert’s watch and was now demanding that he give him his earpiece and secure phone.

Stick to the plan. He had been told repeatedly. Robert looked around slyly at the packed market. This would be his only chance to escape. If Falcon 6 got him out of town, he could take him anywhere.

With his heart racing and the car still rolling, Robert opened the door and jumped out. He landed on his side, trying to protect the precious cargo he had in his bag.

There was a jolt of pain as he hit the hard dirt road and his earpiece popped out of his ear. Falcon 6 slammed on the breaks as Robert recovered from his fall and ran through the streets, hoping to lose himself in the human melee.

Moving with purpose and trying to distance himself from Falcon 6, he didn’t dare look back. He kept moving forward, scanning the shopping district, looking for the street that would lead him to the Ka Farushi bazaar and safety.

He hoped the sea of humanity and the zoo like atmosphere of the bazaar would provide enough cover as he searched for the spice shop that was his emergency extraction point.

Seeing he was not being pursued, he ducked into a side market where he liberated a shawl from a nearby vendor. The shawl was large enough for him to throw over his shoulder to

partially hide the computer bag. He quickly bargained with another vendor for a head wrap and a pair of sunglasses. Disguised, he continued steadfastly to his destination.

The noise and smell of the bazaar assaulted him so heavily he almost missed the street he'd been looking for. He moved past vendors, screaming, caged birds and masses of people. His eyes darted left and right as he moved frantically, looking over his shoulder every few seconds.

He finally stopped, breathing rapidly. Had he missed it? He was ready to turn around when he saw the non-descript building painted red and gold. A crooked sign simply read *Spices*. The shop matched the description John had given him. He could only hope he had found the right one as he rushed inside.

"I need curry." Robert said, double checking his surroundings.

"I have green or yellow." The shopkeeper answered, an older man that looked like he had spent too many days in the sun.

"My preference is red."

"Follow me."

The shopkeeper led him into the back of the shop, pulling a curtain over the doorway. The old man opened a closet door, motioned for him to go inside.

Robert followed the man's gaze to the floor, a trap door. Reluctantly, he opened the door, started heading down the steps. Once his head had cleared, he could hear the man placing something over the trap door. Hiding the door or trapping him inside?

The stairway was narrow, a slow descent into a dark abyss. It had been hot upstairs but the basement was humid to the point of suffocation. If he died here, no one would ever find him. He wished he had a weapon. But all he had was his bare hands and his will to live.

After what seemed like an eternity he reached the last step. As his eyes adjusted to the dim light, he was met by two middle eastern men in Afghan dress, both weapons aimed at him.

His mind raced as he considered his options. Two guys, two guns, not much of a chance for him to escape. He held up his hands in surrender.

“Falcon 1?” One of the men addressed him by his code name and both lowered their guns. “I’m Eagle 1 and this is Eagle 2.”

Robert sighed in relief, they were John’s men. Eagle 1 threw some clothes at him.

“Change clothes.” He said in a thick Afghan accent.

He passed an ear piece to Robert which he shoved into his ear.

“Status?” A voice demanded to know.

It was the man himself, Secretary Edgar Page.

“The mission is blown.” Robert answered as he undressed in front of the two men with no sense of modesty or embarrassment. He was too terrified. “I have the package.”

“Wait.” Eagle 1 said, walking over to Robert in his underwear.

He pulled a Kevlar vest over Robert’s head, securing the vest on each side. “Now you’re ok.” The man said, motioning for him to continue dressing.

“Are you injured?” The Secretary would not be ignored.

“Scraped and bruised from jumping out of a moving vehicle. But otherwise, intact.”

“Assessment?”

“I think it was Falcon 6.” Robert answered, now fully dressed in Afghan wear. “He was trying to take me to another location, which we discussed previously as a no go. If he’s responsible, he killed those agents in cold blood. Use caution if he tries to make contact.”

“Switching mission parameters to Eagle Extraction. New call sign Eagle 3. Acknowledge.”

The sound of John’s voice almost brought him to tears. The vision of lifeless bodies roared back into his mind. His friends voice reminded him of the promise of home, away from the mission that had gone terribly wrong.

“Acknowledged.” Robert said, taking in a deep breath.

This was not the time or place to lose control.

“Eagle 1 and Eagle 2, can you hear me?”

“Yes.” They both had earpieces and had heard the entire conversation.

John gave his men a street name and license plate number.

“There’s a late model ford, white, parked next to a dark green van. Keys are secured under the car bumper. Drive to the rendezvous point. A taxi will be waiting.”

John informed them that once they got Robert the taxi, the driver would take Robert to a gas station. Robert was to wait in the last stall of the bathroom until a man entered and said the code word. After he was retrieved, Robert would be smuggled to Al-Udeid Air Base in Qatar where a military escort was waiting to fly him home.

“Why can’t I just go straight to Bagram?” Robert asked, eager to get out of Afghanistan.

“Afghan forces have raided the hotel. Main roads have been blocked and there are security forces scouring the area looking for you in town and at the airport. And if Falcon 6 is involved, he has intimate details about the mission and our operations.” This came from Secretary Page.

“Do they know who I am?” Panic coursed through Roberts body. If his cover had been blown, he was in serious trouble.”

“Not yet. At this time Afghan forces are reporting what happened as a terrorist attack. They’re looking for any guests at the hotel that have not been accounted for. You’re a person of interest as a possible suspect, but your alias is untraceable.” Secretary Page explained.

“They think I killed them?”

“Listen to me, you can’t think about that now. We need to get you out of there. You on point?” John asked forcefully.

“Yes.” Robert lied.

He was far from being on point, but knew he had to stuff the pain, grief and fear he was feeling.

“This is your go code.” John said giving him a code word and making him repeat it several times. “The man that retrieves you from the bathroom will give you this code. Don’t move unless you hear that code.”

Robert repeated it again, his normally clear, photographic mind failing him as the vision and smell of death tortured his mind.

“Give him the weapon and the watch.” Secretary Page demanded.

Eagle 1 handed Robert a loaded 357 which he took and stuffed into the deep pocket of his perahan tunban. Then he slipped the watch onto his wrist.

“My IISA team?” Robert asked.

“They’ve been notified you’re alive, but we’re maintaining radio silence with them. They were able to thwart the cyber-attack on the CIA and get them back up and running, we just don’t know who’s listening.” Secretary Page said.

Eagle 1 threw a large shawl around Robert's shoulders and wrapped his head until it was covered by a neat turban. He didn't know if he still looked American, but hoped he was inconspicuous enough to make it to the waiting car.

"Stay sharp." The Secretary commanded. "If you're right about Falcon 6, he might still be out there and he is lethal with a long-range rifle."

A woman's voice cut into the conversation. "Satellite image has been restored. We have eyes on your location. Everything looks clear. You are a go."

Eagle 1 and Eagle 2 moved towards the door, their weapons concealed in their perahan tunbans. Robert pulled his bag onto his shoulder. With Robert in tow, they looked like three Afghan men going for a stroll as they merged into the crowd. Eagle 1 and Eagle 2 skillfully kept an eye on the multitude around them as they carefully maneuvered through the marketplace.

The men were methodical as they headed towards their destination, but Robert was anything but calm. His heartbeat was erratic, he had broken out into a sweat and his hands were shaking uncontrollably. He was furious at the reactions in his body he could not control.

It took everything within him to keep moving. At the forefront of his mind was the thought that Falcon 6 could be anywhere. He chanced a glance up at the rooftops. Could he be hiding there, waiting to strike?

"Car at 3 o'clock." Eagle 1 informed them and the trio walked with purpose towards the waiting vehicle.

Robert could see the car in the clearing and knew this was his ride to safety. The three men moved with determination while keeping an eye on the bustling crowd and their busy surroundings.

He heard the sound first before he felt something move past his face. Eagle 2 hit the ground behind him with a clean shot to the head that had barely missed Robert. People screamed and scattered as a slow-moving pool of crimson spread out beneath the dead man's turban.

Robert was grabbed by the arm and shoved towards the car. Human chaos was now all around them as people ran for cover. They were almost to the car's location when a minivan pulled in front of them, blocking their view and blocking the car. Another bullet whizzed past Robert's head, blowing out the getaway car's front tire.

Eagle 1 had Robert clutched firmly by the arm as they ran in the opposite direction. They were bobbing and weaving with urgency through the crowd, no way to go back to the protection of the spice shop.

The shooter was taking advantage of the bedlam in the marketplace. Both men could hear bullet fire around them, hitting cars, ricocheting off buildings. Robert watched in horror as innocent people were struck and fell around them.

Robert was pulled by Eagle 1 into a concealed alley way. The shooting stopped but they didn't. He guided them through the back streets and alleys like he owned them. It was obvious his protector and guide knew these streets, knew his way around. The man retrieved his phone with his free hand.

Robert reached into his perahan tunban for the gun as he ran and it slipped out of his hand, skidding across the alley. Panicked, he moved to retrieve the weapon, but was stopped by Eagle 1's steady hand on his arm.

"Leave it!" The man commanded as he spoke quickly to someone on the phone in Dari. They stopped suddenly.

"You see the taxi?" Falcon 1 motioned to the road from their hiding place.

There was a taxi along with several other cars. Sirens could be heard wailing in the background, approaching their location.

“We run for the taxi, don’t stop. Back doors unlocked. Understand?” Falcon 1 asked.

Out of breath, Robert answered yes. The man held up three fingers and started to count down. When no fingers were left, he gave the command to move.

The two men broke cover and ran for the taxi. It must have taken the shooter a moment to re-orient himself because they heard no shots as they ran. Eagle 1 opened the door and tossed Robert in the backseat as several shots rang out. The first one hit the man dead center in the chest from behind, penetrating his Kevlar vest.

“Go!” He managed to gurgle as blood spilled from his mouth.

Another bullet tore through his shoulder, then a final kill shot hit him in the head. The taxi was already in motion before Eagle 1 hit the ground.

Louka had found a place to perch on the roof of a building, waiting for Robert to resurface. It hadn’t taken long to see the targets moving through the crowd, trying to hide. Was he going for the car? A quick call was placed and that means of escape was blocked. Louka had blown out the tire just in case. After that, Louka didn’t care who he hit.

He noticed the two men with Robert, one in the front and the other flanking him. There was no time to wonder where the men had come from. He deemed them a threat to his retrieval of Robert and the package and took immediate action. The first kill had been successful, then they’d disappeared.

By the time the assassin got them back in sight, they were at the taxi and Robert was already inside. He fired several kill shots to take out the second protector and missed the taxi driver's head by an inch as the man sped away.

Aiming through his scope, he fired carefully at the disappearing taxi, not wanting to damage the package or hit Robert. But his efforts were in vain, the taxi melted into a freeway of fleeing people and cars.

Louka packed up his weapon, quickly escaped from the roof and tried to get back to his vehicle. A quick peek revealed that the entire area was now swarming with Afghan police and was already cordoned off. His window of opportunity to escape was brief. He decided to abandon the car.

They would find other weapons, but nothing they could trace to him. The cache of weapons in a rental car would also solidify the false news being fed to everyone that the incident at the Kabul Serena had been a terrorist attack.

Louka considered his options. He could have pursued the taxi if he had the car, now he had to rearrange his plans. He needed to get back to the safehouse, needed another car and had to get back on the trail of the target before his valuable bounty was taken out of the country. A master at deception and avoidance, he moved past the police and got back to the mission at hand.

For hours the men drove in silence. Robert looked down at his hands, shaking, covered with specs of blood. Looking up, he caught his reflection in the rearview mirror. What he saw looked like hades raked over. His entire outfit, including his face, was spattered with blood. His unsteady hands lifted the shawl to wipe his face, but the blood had already dried.

The Afghan landscaped rushed by his window. On the lonely stretch of road, only a few cars passed them going the opposite direction.

Robert looked up to see the driver watching him.

“You, ok?” the man asked, his accent thick.

Robert nodded, but he was numb. His mind was still trying to process what had transpired. He had started the day off in a hotel suite, surrounded by luxury. Now, he was in the back of a taxi, a fugitive covered in blood. He reached in his pocket for the phone. A message on the screen told him he had no service.

“We are out of range of everything.” The driver commented from the front seat.

Robert’s stomach turned as nausea swept over him. Quickly opening a window, he leaned out. The last bit of nourishment he had in his system was left on the highway. After a moment he rolled the window up against the hot, dry air.

The man watched him in the rear-view mirror, his eyes darting back and forth between the mirror and the road. He seemed to be trying to gauge if Robert was well enough for conversation.

“I’m Eagle 4. I’m taking you to the meeting spot. Hide in the bathroom, the last stall, someone will come for you. He will say a code. You have the code, yes? You understand this?”

“I understand.” Robert said.

The driver looked at him through the rearview mirror.

“Those men that died, they were my brothers. You take what you have. And---how do you say in American---take them down, take them out. You understand?”

Robert put his hand on the bag. With all that had happened, he had almost forgotten the computer was there. The faces of the people that had died that day flashed before his eyes.

“I will” He assured Eagle 4, not knowing what was on the computer, not even knowing if he could keep his promise.

Off the deserted road, a lone gas station came into view surrounded by a sparse town in the distance. Glancing around cautiously to make sure he wasn't being followed, the taxi pulled into the back of the gas station.

“Go now.” The man exclaimed and Robert quickly exited the taxi and slipped into the men's bathroom.

Two hours passed waiting in a filthy toilet stall. Normally not one for being impatient, Robert had reached his limit. He hadn't been told how long he needed to wait and the phone he had been given still showed no reception. He tried it anyway, to no avail.

Robert covered his face to try to mask the stench permeating the entire facility. The smell, lingering with the heat, brought him close to losing consciousness. His bowels ached and growled. There was discontent and hunger, but also nausea.

The door to the bathroom opened as it had done several times the past two hours. But this time a man spoke. The accent was Afghan.

“Robert?”

He jumped at the sound of his name. That wasn't the code. But how did the man know who he was?

“I am being followed. We must go now.” The man urged.

Robert's entire body was racked by the beating of his heart. The man hadn't given the code, but he knew Robert's name. The bathroom door opened again and Robert flinched from his

perch on the toilet seat. Was this someone else coming in for him? Was he losing his only opportunity to go home?

He needed to make a decision and fast. If this was his point man, the longer he delayed meant he was putting them both in danger. His mind tried to work a mile a minute, but the burden of all that had happened and the desperate desire to go home fogged his normally precise judgment. A toilet flushed and he heard the creaking of the bathroom door opening and closing.

“Robert, we have to go now. I’m sorry I don’t have the code word. I had to leave in hurry. I’m being followed.” The man pleaded in a whisper.

Robert calculated in an instant that he would trust the man. No one else had come for him. The man knew his name and he knew about the code word, even if he could not recite it.

As soon as he exited the stall he was taken by the arm and rushed into the passenger seat of a white Cadillac sedan. Without waiting for Robert to buckle up, the man put the pedal to the metal and screamed out of the gas station. Behind them, a black hearse was closing in on them fast. The man handed Robert a gun.

“That’s him.” The man said as he turned urgently, looking behind his shoulder at the fast-approaching car. “You know how to use that?”

The gun felt heavy in Robert’s hand, like the dead weight of an unwanted task. Robert turned to look as well. The hearse was coming in hard and fast, flashing its lights. The Cadillac increased speed, barreling along the highway and kicking up dust.

“He’s coming around.” The man shrieked at Robert.

Robert cocked the gun. His hands were shaking, his heart throbbing. The very air he breathed seemed to stick in his throat, constricting it and making it hard for him to catch his breath.

He had never taken a life. His head began to pound at the thought, matching the beating of his heart. The hearse had caught up and was angling to come up parallel to them.

“Shoot him.” The driver yelled.

He jerked the Cadillac to the right, trying to throw the hearse off the pursuit, but the determined man behind the wheel kept coming.

“Shoot him! We are dead if you don’t.” The driver said, cursing in Dari.

Robert’s palms were sweating, the gun shaking in his hand as he brought it up. The thought of shooting someone at point blank range horrified him. But the thought of anyone else losing their life because of him gave him a new sense of purpose.

He placed his other hand around his wrist to steady the gun as the hearse pulled up alongside them, both cars swerving and careening down the highway.

As the hearse leveled up with Robert, he could see a man behind the wheel, his eyes large and wide, but determined. He swerved into the Cadillac, forcing the driver to correct hard to the left. Robert’s driver swore at him, a stream of heated Dari he could not understand.

Robert finally pointed the gun at the hearse driver’s head, his finger on the trigger as the driver rolled down his window. The screams to shoot were still ringing in his ears from the driver of his car.

“Echo Kosmos 1.” The hearse’s driver shouted as Robert squared off at his head with the 9 mm.

The man repeated the phrase again and again. The words hit Robert like a ton of lead. The man was giving him the go code. Robert felt a blow to the side of his head as he realized he was in the wrong car.

The punch brought pain, but it was awkwardly placed and not lethal as the driver of the Cadillac tried to maintain control. Something bubbled up and uncoiled inside of Robert, a rage he had never known he possessed.

He came around hard with the gun striking the driving man dead center in the face. Blood billowed out of the wound that opened up. The driver reached for Robert, but could not deflect another blow as the car spun out of control.

Robert saw his life flash before his eyes as the car whirled like a spinning wheel. They would both be killed if it flipped. The Cadillac moaned and screeched under the abuse, but finally came to a stop, upright.

The passenger door was yanked open. The hearse driver retrieved and threw Robert into the back of the hearse. Before the dust had settled and Robert could assess if the driver of the Cadillac was still alive, they were back on the road.

The back of the hearse was hot, empty and smelled of stale clothes and formaldehyde. Robert knocked on the wall separating him from the driver.

“The other man, was he alive?” He asked.

No response. Robert pounded on the wall again.

“I don’t know.” The man answered with an Afghan accent, but perfect English.

“Do not worry about this. You’re going home.”

Louka stared into the empty cage Robert Duchovny should have been in. There had been no word from his people. He knew failure was not an option, not acceptable. He wanted to call in, but needed to know what had happened before he did. He snatched up his cell phone on the first ring.

“You failed.” Achojah’s words seethed through the phone.

Louka took a moment to compose himself before he answered.

“I didn’t fail, your intel was bad. There was another team. I would have Duchovny if it hadn’t been for your mistakes.”

“That’s not possible.”

“It is possible. He had someone helping him. And Henreth is an idiot. I told him not to use the real computer. Dragonfyre could have created a decoy.”

Louka thought of everything that had gone wrong. This is why he always worked alone. Too many people, too many unknown variables.

“They have my computer. Not a decoy, my computer.” The Nigerian said in an accusatory tone.

“Your guy brought the real computer to the grab site because he thought the mighty Kosmos would be able to tell the difference.” Louka retorted, no longer trying to conceal his anger and contempt

“You think he did this on purpose?”

Louka guffawed, the man could not be that ignorant.

“Every hacker on this planet’s been having wet dreams about Duchovny cracking Sula’s code in 16 minutes. Henreth is into all of that garbage. I think he left the master computer for the agents to take because he actually wanted to see Duchovny do it. And he did---he got in. You understand me?”

“Where is he now?”

“Headed back to the states.”

“Why don’t we have him?” Achojah yelled into the phone.

“One of our guys grabbed him at a gas station, but he was intercepted.”

Achojah cursed vehemently in his native tongue. Louka didn't care if the man was offended. His people could kill Achojah one hundred different ways before he even knew what hit him. He waited for the other man to respond. Whether the man lived or died would depend on his next words.

“A second team.” The man said quietly to himself as if absorbing the news. It was more of a comment than a question. “You must go, as soon as possible. I need that computer and Duchovny---alive.”

“Can't Dragonfyre send a virus to the computer, just shut it down.? Louka asked.

“I need that computer intact. And no one can crack Sula's encryption. No one except the man you let slip away. If I don't get that computer, everything will fall apart. I need my money. This falls apart, nothing for me and nothing for your bosses. This needs to be handled quickly.” Achojah said vehemently.

“My identity in the US is blown. I'll need a new one. And I'll need cash, weapons, something untraceable. I won't be able to fly into the United States, not on a commercial flight. I'll need a private charter via air or sea. Also, my fee is now 40 million. Same as before, unmarked bonds.

“Done. I will have Henreth make contact with you. He will supply you with what you need and then you both can---.”

Louka cut him off. “I work alone. You want this done, I do it alone.”

“I don't trust you or the people you work for.” Achojah retorted. “My guy goes, or I will send someone else. I'm sure there is another organization that could benefit from what I have to

offer. And I am sure there are any number of hired thugs that would love to be 40 million dollars richer.”

Louka calculated the risks in his mind. They needed Achojah for the time being. He was a necessary evil, a temporary irritation, like gum on the bottom of your shoe. It was an annoyance you tolerated until you could find something to scrape it off with without dirtying your hands.

Louka agreed to the terms, but added, “Your guy gets in my way again, I will kill him.”

“Agreed.” Achojah said, sealing the deal. “Meet him at the compound, 6:00 pm sharp. He will have everything you need and give you further instructions.”

Louka ended the call and immediately dialed another number. A man answered the phone. His calm, deep voice immediately soothed Louka’s rage from the previous call. He explained in detail all that had occurred.

“A second team. Outside of the CIA and the IISA? This is something we had not calculated into the plan. Very clever.” The Prophet said, seemingly unphased by the colossal failure.

This reassured Louka that he was still in the Prophets favor.

“Achojah wants me to go back to the US.”

“Go.” The Prophet said without hesitation. “The transition must be seamless. Use Achojah’s resources to get the computer and Robert Duchovny, then kill Achojah. With the information we will possess, no one in his organization will know we are in control. Do this my son and you would have proved your dedication. Then you can come home. She is waiting for you.”

Louka knew the end game. The other man was trying to give him confidence and reassure him of the ultimate plan and his role in it. He was anxious to be back home, back in the fold. To see the promises that had been made to him fulfilled.

From the safety of the compound, living like a king, he could watch the world burn as the plans of the Mal'akh came to fruition.

However, for now, he was going back to the United States.

Sarah threw her purse and keys down on the table. An aged bottle of red wine had been sitting in the cupboard for years, waiting for a special occasion.

Sarah retrieved it, poured herself a healthy glass. She wasn't one for heavy drinking, but needed to drown her sorrows in something. The occasion wasn't special, far from it.

She took in a deep breath of air, blowing it out slowly. Kicking off her shoes she plopped down on the couch to nurse her glass of wine. It was one of those nights that she didn't feel like watching TV, or listening music. Robert consumed her thoughts.

With the glass almost empty, she stripped down to her birthday suit and made her way to the bathroom. A hot shower did her good as the wine successfully dulled her senses. After the shower, she heated up leftovers and followed it up with another glass of wine.

Sarah spread out on the couch, the same one she had shared with Robert, and drifted off into an alcohol induced sleep. It was past midnight when she was startled by her ringing phone.

A quick glance at the time told her she had been out for hours. The phone stopped ringing, then quickly started up again. She snatched it up this time.

“Sarah.”

“Robert.” She said simply. She would let him speak first.

“I’m back---in the US---.”

Sarah could tell he was at a loss for words, not typical for him.

He continued. “You don’t know how amazing it is to hear your voice.”

“What happened? Did something go wrong?”

“We’ll talk more when I see you.”

She could hear the emotion in his voice. It was unexpected and she didn’t know what to think.

“I was worried. Why didn’t you call?” Sarah asked.

“I’ll be back tomorrow. I haven’t slept for hours and I want to be at my best when I see you. Can we get together Friday night? I have a lot to say. I just can’t do it over the phone.”

The sound of his voice brought up emotions in her as well. She tried to hold back tears, but they fell from her eyes unimpeded. She didn’t want him to know how vulnerable she was when it came to him. How her feelings for him had gone beyond anything she had dreamed possible for her again.

“Sarah?” He questioned when she didn’t respond.

“That sounds good.” She answered quietly.

“I love you. I love you so much and I’ll see you soon.”

What had happened to him? Hearing his voice, all of her anger dissipated and it was replaced with concern for the man she loved. He had told her he loved her again with a pleading and deep sincerity she had never experienced. Her heart hung on those words and his promise.

It had taken an extreme amount of pressure on the CIA and a call from Secretary Page to get Achojah's computer sent to Robert's lab at the IISA. After he had secured the transfer of the computer, Robert was eager to get back to Colorado.

With his condo sold, his home for the time being was a mother-in-law house owned by Paulo & Angel Santos.

Paulo was a former agent and weapons specialists with the CIA and a close friend. Robert knew the man had been involved with several black ops missions he could not talk about and Robert never asked.

They'd worked together before Paulo retired, Robert from his desk and Paulo in the field. In spite of the interesting circumstances of their relationship, they had connected once Paulo was back in the states and had become instant friends.

Paulo was half Tongan, half Samoan, six foot five and weighed over 300 pounds. Despite his height, girth and mysterious past, he was a gentle giant. Angel was Filipino, five foot three and 120 pounds soaking wet. Angel and Paulo had married late in their years and they'd managed to have one child. Jess was the center of their universe and the apple of her daddy's eye.

Angel's mother had moved from the Philippines to help out when Jess was small and both parents were working. However, with Jess grown and heading off to college, the mother-in-law had decided to go back to her home country leaving the mother-in-law house vacant. It would be Robert's home for the next few weeks until his house ready.

Robert approached the main house, rang the doorbell. Paulo greeted him at the door.

"Come in, come in." Paulo said cordially, patting Robert on the back with a large, beefy hand.

“It’s late, I don’t want to bother you and Angel.”

“You’re not bothering us. Angel made some olive cake and we were just getting ready to dig in. Come in a moment and say hi.” Paulo insisted.

Robert sat his duffel bag inside the door as he stepped in.

“Where’s Jess?” Robert asked.

“She went with Mama to the Philippines for the summer. She’ll be back before school starts.”

“Really? The last time I talked to her she said she would rather throw up in her own mouth than go to the Philippines. Her words, not mine.”

“She wanted to make sure Mama got settled in. She loved having her here.” Paulo answered with a chuckle.

The smell of olive cake assaulted Robert as he sat down at the table. Angel slipped a slice in from of him, avoiding his gaze. When she finally looked up, he noticed her eyes were red and puffy. She gave Robert a weak smile.

“You’re back. How was your trip?” She asked through tears.

“Good. You alright?” Robert asked, concerned.

Angel had a personality that could warm up any room. Her current composure troubled him.

She waved her hand. “I’m ok. I am just a silly old lady. I miss my baby already. I can’t believe she’s all grown up.”

Angel threw a glance at Paulo and something unspoken passed between them. More tears threatened and she returned to the kitchen.

“Ignore her. She’ll get over it.” Paulo said, motioning Robert outside to the patio.

Paulo plopped down in a chair and Robert did the same, cake in hand. The house had an amazing view of the Rockies. There was a cool breeze blowing, but not too chilly to enjoy the evening without a jacket.

Robert dug into the cake. It was moist and melted in his mouth. He thought about where he had been just a few days ago as he closed his eyes to relish the flavor. Little things like this were the treasures of life now. He finished the cake and turned to see Paulo watching him.

“You want more?”

Robert declined. “I’d better get those keys from you. I have an important date tomorrow.”

“You’re lady friend?” Paulo questioned.

“Yes.” Robert smiled at the warmth that spread over him at the thought of Sarah. He noticed Paulo was watching him again.

“Oh, somebody’s been bitten by the love bug.” Paulo teased.

“She’s pretty special, Paulo. She’s the one, you know. I just have to figure out a way to make things permanent.”

“I do know. I got a good one too. You don’t let them get away. You’re a clever dog. You’ll think of something.” Paulo gave Robert a friendly pat on the back that almost knocked him out of his chair.

Paulo seemed to consider something for a moment.

“Why don’t you invite her here tomorrow. We can have dinner, chicken adobo. Then you two lovebirds can go off and do whatever you want.” Paulo added with a wink.

Angel’s chicken adobo was not to be missed and Paulo’s 10-acre spread would give Robert and Sarah some privacy to talk.

Robert wondered if he should wait for the original plan, proposing at the new house. But in that moment, looking at the majestic mountain view and a dark sky full of stars, he suddenly had an urgent desire to propose to her and seal the deal immediately. It would be perfect.

“That sounds great. I’ll talk to her and see what she says.” Robert answered as he considered the possibilities.

Paulo handed him the keys.

“Sleep good my friend.” Paulo said standing up.

Robert followed Paulo inside to retrieve his bag, then made his way to the small house. It was surrounded by flowering shrubs. A chair still sat outside where Angel’s mother had enjoyed watching the sunrise and sunset from her patio.

A hot shower soothed his tired, overworked and aching muscles. He stood motionless, letting the water wash over him. He hadn’t realized just how mentally, physically and emotionally exhausted he was.

Out of the shower he eyed the bed as he toweled himself dry. The bed was as comfortable as it promised from the outside, with soft sheets and custom feather pillows. Paulo had spared no expense for the small house and Robert could tell. He sunk his weary body into the bed and hoped for sleep that never came.

Robert didn’t realize he had dozed off until his alarm rang. Part of the sleepless night had been writing notes and thoughts on his tablet. He must have eventually passed out from exhaustion he thought. The tablet was now on the floor.

Robert dressed quickly. He wanted to do a breakfast stop before he went to the IISA to examine the computer. He called Sarah, hoping it wasn't too early, and told her about the invite from Paulo and Angel. She accepted. He could tell she was reserved about seeing him.

He pulled the ring he had retrieved from John out of his travel bag, holding the tiny box in his hand. They could take a walk after dinner, there was more than enough room and privacy in Paulo's Garden.

He looked forward to being in a committed relationship and having someone special in his life. He just hoped he could regain Sarah's trust.

There were certain details about the mission he could never share, things that would haunt him the rest of his life. But he knew, if he wanted her to be his wife, she had to know everything about him, the good and the bad.

He grabbed his tablet, added *get flowers and chocolates* to his TO DO list. It was going to be a night that would change his and Sarah's life forever. He wanted it to be special. He dialed John as he was heading to his car.

"I'm going to ask her tonight. I'm getting flowers, two dozen red roses, and some chocolates. Anything else?" Robert said as soon as John answered the phone

"Alright, brother. You got this. The flowers and the chocolates are good. Just remember to get down on one knee." John said with genuine excitement in his voice.

"What?" Robert heard Celia in the background. "What's happening? What's he getting down on one knee for? Is he asking Sarah to marry him?"

John confirmed it was the case, and Robert heard Celia squeal with delight.

John continued. "I'm telling you, one knee man, she'll love it."

"What are you telling this man?" Celia's voice again.

He heard the phone exchange hands. Celia was so overjoyed she was almost breathless as she spoke.

“You just do your own thing. If you want to stand up and look her in the eyes or take her by the hand, or get down on one knee or whatever, you just do you. This is going to be a special day for her no matter what you do. I’m so excited for you.” Celia said squealing again.

“Thank you, Celia. Thank you both for everything.” Robert replied.

John retrieved the phone. “You heard the lady.”

“Yes, I did. I’m just so nervous.”

“Just do you. You two already love each other. You’re just making things official.”

“Ok. Just do me.” Robert repeated, but still could not calm his nerves.

“Let me know how everything goes.” John said. “And do the knee.” He added in a whisper.

Robert made a quick stop at Larry’s and had a breakfast sandwich in one hand and a coffee in the other as he entered the IISA building. He was met by Shaunessy at the front entrance. As they were heading towards the elevators, he ran into a woman rushing past him, almost losing the coffee.

“Oh gosh. I’m so sorry. That would have been a mess.” She exclaimed.

Her eyes brightened when she recognized who he was.

“Mr. Duchovny. Jax said you’d be back today. I didn’t anticipate running into you, literally.”

“Well, it’s a pleasure.” Robert said. “If you’ll excuse us---”

“My name’s Maria. I’m Jax’s girlfriend.” She shook Robert’s hand vigorously. “We were

just talking about lunch. I'd love it if you came. I'm working on a book about cybersecurity and would love to pick your brain. Jax wanted to take you out for a going away lunch anyway. I was hoping you wouldn't mind if I tagged along."

"No, of course not. Today won't work for me, but let's try sometime next week." Robert said in a bit of a rush.

"Wonderful. I'll talk to Jax and we'll do it. Anywhere you want to go." She handed Robert a piece of paper which he shoved into his jacket pocket. She lingered for a moment and Robert smiled, doing his best to exude patience.

"Alright, until then. Duty calls." Shaunessy said curtly as the two men moved past her.

Robert caught a glimpse of her still standing in the same place watching them as they boarded the elevator.

"I didn't know Jax had a girlfriend." Robert commented.

"I know you're his boss but he doesn't have to report everything to you." Shaunessy said with a smirk.

As they entered the IISA secure lab Jax stood and waved them over.

"Boss, it's so good to see you." Jax said to Robert with emotion in his voice. Robert could tell his young protégé had genuinely been worried about him. "Assistant Director." Jax acknowledged Shaunessy respectfully. "Let me show you what we have so far. This is like nothing I've ever seen."

Jax led them to his work station.

"I penetrated this computer in Afghanistan. We should have full access." Robert commented, sitting down next to Jax.

Patti and Mavis approached from behind.

“Good to see you, Robert.” Mavis said, giving him a pat on the back.

“It’s good to be home.” Robert answered genuinely.

They refocused their attention on Jax.

“We got your report, Boss. But I’m telling you, it’s changed. I can see traces of the original program, but this is a different beast entirely.”

As Robert examined Achojah’s computer, he realized Jax’s assessment was correct.

“I used the brute force method you gave us. I was able to gain access to the companion computers. But this one, it’s like it has a mind of its own.”

Robert pulled his Lenovo out of his computer bag and powered it up. He removed several encryption breaking devices, all his inventions, and plugged them into the terrorist’s computer.

Mavis, Patti and Shaunessy stood over his shoulder. Jax sat beside him watching his every move as he worked. Robert hated to admit it, but he was puzzled. Every time he tried accessing the computer, it countered him. He used all of the tricks and knowledge he had at his disposal, but he could not get in. It was as if the computer had learned from his previous exploit and had adjusted accordingly.

Robert could normally establish a relationship with a computer fairly quick. But this one was hostile. After several attempts he sat back and looked at his adversary of machine and metal.

He took a bite of his breakfast sandwich and chased it down with a swig of coffee as he considered his next move.

Robert noticed the bustling room had gone quiet. Everyone in the room now stood behind him. There had never been a computer Robert could not exploit. He took a large bite of his sandwich again, finishing it off, then rolled up his sleeves. The computer was going to open up to him no matter how long it took. Determined, he leaned forward and began to type.

The room was silent as they watched the master at work.

Lunch had come and gone. The time was quickly approaching five o'clock. Robert still had a small captive audience as he worked but the rest of the team had moved on to other projects.

Folding his arms across his chest, he checked his watch. He still needed to pick up roses and chocolates and wanted to shower and shave before Sarah showed up for dinner.

Saying he was frustrated was an understatement. Robert was no closer to breaking the new encryption than he had been when he arrived hours earlier. Achojah's computer was still holding on to its secrets.

He was now one hundred percent sure someone else had been involved with writing the program. Sula may have been the one manipulating the program, but there was someone far more knowledgeable and ingenious behind the work.

Robert's mind went back to the mysterious Dragonfyre. He had thought the hacker to be a new player to the game, but maybe there was more to him than he'd previously suspected.

Robert had unlocked every form of ransomware, cracked encryptions and had thwarted many attempts from hackers all over the world. He knew the calling cards of the world's top players and he had never seen anything like the program before him. This wasn't new knowledge, it couldn't be. The writer of the program knew their stuff.

He hated to leave the work undone, but he had secured exclusive access. The computer wasn't going anywhere. There was a potentially life changing dinner with Sarah that night and his thoughts began to shift to the evening ahead.

Robert flirted with the idea of coming into the IISA lab on the weekend. But that would all depend on Sarah. He needed to start making her, not work, a priority in his life. After he proposed and she hopefully said yes, he would focus his attention on their new life together.

Checking his watch again, he considered the computer one last time before he decided to call it a night. Hacking was like playing a game of chess and he had been involved in a complex game all day. His opponent was worthy, but he had a special move he hadn't tried yet.

When he sat up straight and started typing frantically, this got everyone's attention and they all rushed back to his side.

"He's using his Program Decryption Algorithm. It invades the system like a virus, shuts down its ability to protect it itself." Jax said in a whisper.

Oh's and ahhs went throughout the crowd. Robert had one hand typing on the hostile computer, the other typing frantically on his Lenovo.

"Come on Boss! She ain't got nothing on you." Jax commented as Robert worked.

There were gasps, claps and shouts of excitement when Achojah's computer flickered several times then the main screen booted up. Robert had finally broken into pandoras box.

"Never had a doubt." Jax said confidently.

"Pandora." Robert said quietly, running his hand over the laptop.

He immediately put several protections in place to stop another hacker from trying to access the device. Concerned the computer would lock up again, he also installed his own security codes and password.

There were congratulations all around as he collected his computer, briefcase and coat to depart for the evening.

“You have to show me how you did that.” Jax said as he walked out with Robert and Shaunessy.

“Maybe over lunch with your girlfriend?” Robert joked, patting Jax on the back as the younger man gave him a quizzical look.

They left Jax standing in the doorway and headed for their cars.

Robert had silenced his phone earlier so that he wouldn't be disturbed. As soon as he turned it on the phone began to beep urgently. Shaunessy did the same and both phones echoed throughout the parking garage.

“Pinder.” Robert said, holding up his phone to show Shaunessy the screen.

“Same here.” Shaunessy commented. “You go ahead. I told Director Kaggen I would keep him in the loop. I'll call and give them an update.”

“Thanks.” Robert said, heading towards his car.

“Great work today.” Shaunessy called after him.

Robert nodded towards him. He was far from done.

In his car, he thought about everything that had transpired. It was a great way to end a long day and a wonderful lead in to what Robert hoped would be an awesome, life changing evening.

Louka spread a beaded matt on the floor. He made a small cut into his forearm, just enough to draw a little blood for the offering, then placed his gold handled dagger in front of him.

He carefully removed an incense decanter from an ornate, small wooden box. Lighting the incense, he allowed the smoke to flow mystically around him, filling his nostrils with its scent, calming his mind and soothing his senses.

From the same wooden box, he removed a ruby studded gold ring which was coiled into the shape of a serpent. He placed this on his left finger where one would place a wedding band.

With his feet and back facing away from Jerusalem, he began his daily prayer ritual. He prayed to the Prophet for wisdom and to the Hosts of Heaven for the strength to complete the task ahead of him. Most of all, he prayed for enlightenment. He could only dream of attaining the level of power the Prophet wielded.

The hour-long session ended with chanting and meditation. Finished and refreshed, he popped open the bottom of the wooden box and removed a picture. He outlined the face in the picture with his fingers before he gently put the photo back in its hiding place.

“Beautiful woman. Is that your girl?”

Henreth was standing at the door.

“What do you want?” Louka barked, open hostility in his voice.

“Achojah wants an update.”

Henreth turned, left the room. Louka rolled up his matt, gently placed the wooden box on his dresser, then he met Henreth in the living area.

“Don’t ever come into my room again without knocking.” Louka warned Henreth.

“I knocked three times.”

Louka ignored him, going to the table where several files had been laid out.

“I want to know everything you know about this mam.” Louka pushed a picture of Robert Duchovny towards Henreth.

“Do you know when the first computers were invented? When we first started to write programs so that we could speak to computers and they could respond to us?”

“I don’t care about all of that. I want to know about him.” Louka tapped a finger on the photo.

“To understand him you have to understand his love of computer technology, study and language.”

Louka listened intently as the man he despised educated him on the background of his target. Robert had come from criminal parents and probably would have fallen through the cracks had he not been legally adopted by his social worker, Amemnette Arceneaux.

Once the boy was in a normal environment, it was discovered that he had a genius level understanding of math and computer science.

This led to an early graduation, two degrees at MIT, a Computer Science PhD, then to the FBI, all at a very early age. Henreth explained to him with a little more glee than necessary that Robert Anderson Duchovny had been a pioneer in computer language, science and cybersecurity.

“You see, this man can communicate with computers, the same way we’re talking now. He speaks their language and they talk to him. There’s a friendship, a bond, a love. And once you understand this, you can get a computer or a system, any system, to open up to you.”

Louka could hear the admiration in the other man’s voice and he made note of it. The worst mistake a man in his line of work could make was underestimating a worthy, dangerous adversary. Robert might not be physically dangerous, but intellect could be as treacherous as a sword. He would need to be at the top of his game.

“Weaknesses? Any vices?” Louka questioned.

“None that I know of. The guy’s squeaky clean. Like Mr. Rogers clean.” Henreth responded.

“Everyone has a price.”

“Not this guy. Trust me, it’s been tried. By every government, terrorist group, covert operation and organization on the planet. The guy is a patriot. Loves what he does, loves his country even more. Trying to buy him off isn’t going to work.”

Louka mulled this over. The direct approach, offering the man money, was off the table. He would need to come up with another plan and fast. Robert was back in the United States and he had Achojah’s computer. Louka had to get to him before Robert had a chance to do a deep dive into what he had in his possession.

Any sign that the computer had been compromised and Achojah’s contacts would go underground, assets would be moved. Achojah would be killed by his own associates and it would take years to reestablish what was already in place.

Louka could not allow this to happen. He was so close to giving the Mal’akh what they needed, the final piece to a very large and complex puzzle. They could not have their plans thwarted now.

It had taken Robert a little over 16 minutes to get into one of the companion computers. But none of the companions had the dark horse program, Dragonfyre’s masterpiece. There were layers upon layers of protection on the master computer. It would take a lifetime to crack the elite hacker’s program, if it could be hacked at all. This gave Louka the advantage.

“We need to get to him, outside of the IISA, and get the computer back.” Louka said offhandedly, deep in contemplation.

“Not sure how we do that? We don’t have the resources to get to him in a way that won’t draw attention.”

Louka smirked. Of course, the barbarians didn’t have the resources, but he did. He walked away from the table, grabbing his cell phone.

“What’s the plan?” Henreth asked from the table.

Louka didn’t respond. He had to move quick to put his plan in motion. He was headed to his bedroom when his phone rang. He felt a moment of irritation at the interruption of his thoughts.

“Yes.” He answered, an edge to his voice.

“You’re out of time. He’s in.” The person on the other end of the phone informed him.

Louka couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

“That’s impossible.”

“He did it in Afghanistan and he did it here.”

“The program was designed to stop these types of attacks.”

“I know what the program was designed to do. But somehow, he got in.”

“I’m on my way.”

“There’s been a change of plans.”

“What do you mean? I already got approval for my plan from the highest---”

“You mean the plan where you shoot up the entire block trying to get to one man like you did in Afghanistan?” The caller said, cutting him off. “I have a better plan, something a little more subtle.”

“We go with my plan. We don’t have time to make changes.” Louka argued.

“My son.” The Prophet interrupted silently.

Louka froze at the sound of the Prophet's voice.

"My apologies. I didn't know you were on the call with us." He dropped to his knees.

"Our friend is right. Your plan was bold, but we need to do this without drawing attention. We have someone on the inside, very close to him."

"Why wasn't I told?" Louka asked, hurt by the fact that he hadn't been included in the new scheme.

"The arrangements were made in haste and needed to be solidified. A lot of work went into making this plan come together. We need your full cooperation."

"You have it, as always."

"Leave for Colorado now. I'll need you there. You'll receive further instructions once you arrive."

Louka experienced the thrill he had always felt as he headed into the unknown, as he prepared for the kill. But this time, there was some trepidation as well. Normally, he was in complete control, calling the shots and executing his own plan. Now, things had been taken out of his hands.

However, he wouldn't question the Prophet. The man was older and wiser than he, and had already ascended to a higher level of being and consciousness. Louka had seen what the man was capable of. He loved him, was in awe of him and respectfully feared him. He would go anywhere the Prophet sent him without question and would do anything the man asked.

Off the phone, Louka looked for Henreth.

"Change in plans." He said from the bedroom doorway.

"What's going on?" Henreth asked.

Louka ignored the question.

“Get packed. You’re driving.” Louka said as he tossed Henreth the car keys.

The other man gave him a look of extreme dissatisfaction. He didn’t care. Henreth Brubaker would be dead before the week was over.

Robert had purchased two dozen large red roses and chocolate truffles from one of the most expensive chocolatiers in town. He’d wanted to pick Sarah up from her house, but she had insisted she drive herself to Paulo’s. If she didn’t like what she heard, he knew she would leave.

Showered and shaved, Robert was ready when Sarah’s car pulled up. He had the flowers, the candy and his chivalry in full swing. He didn’t wait for her to park as he rushed to open her car door.

Seeing the lengths he was going through to impress her seemed to lightened the mood somewhat. However, he could tell there was still some tension in her delicate form. She didn’t rush into his arms, or hug him or kiss him. This amped up his anxiety.

Dinner was wonderful as expected. Angel was a fabulous cook and Sarah was an adventurous eater that didn’t shy away from trying new things. The mood lightened even more as Paulo and Angel joked with their guests and Robert was warmed once again by Sarah’s smile.

To finish off the dinner, Angel brought out some warm bibinka laced with coconut and what looked like a maui wowie cocktail drink. Robert took a sip of the drink and was nearly knocked off his heels.

“Whew. That’s got a kick.” He said, taking another sip.

It was strong and tropical, but good. He could taste of hint of pineapple and coconut mixed in with the alcohol.

Sarah seemed to be enjoying her drink as well as she took a healthy bite of the bibinka, complementing Angel on the delicious dessert. Robert loved how casually beautiful she was, inside and out. He could not wait to make her his wife.

He was happy for the drink. It took the edge off his nerves and gave him some liquid courage. As much as he was enjoying the dessert and libations, he was anxious for some alone time with Sarah. In fact, he could hardly wait. He discretely checked his watch and was trying to think of a way to politely excuse them both.

The first thing that hit him was the pain. It was like a hammer to his head. The next was the disorientation, followed by nausea.

Robert sat up and swung his legs around to the side of the bed. He stood up and the room spun around him as he placed his hand on the wall to steady himself. Someone was banging on the front door.

“Coming.” He called out.

As he moved along the wall for support things started to come back to him. *He was having dinner---or had he finished dinner?*

“Robert.” Someone shouted.

He was almost to the door when it hit him. *Dinner---drinks---Sarah?*

“Sarah?” Robert called out.

“Robert, open the door.” A frantic voice yelled again from outside.

“Sarah?” Robert called out again, turning to go the other direction, back to the room.

Where was Sarah? They’d had dinner and drinks. That’s where his memory stopped. He shook his head, trying to clear his foggy mind. He called Sarah’s name again, still no answer.

“Robert, open the door.” The voice was insistent.

Robert stumbled back the way he came, into the bedroom. Sarah was gone.

Robert was on his knees leaning over the commode retching when he heard breaking glass and the sound of movement on the hallway.

“Sarah?” He tried to yell, but his tongue felt like it was pasted to the roof of his mouth.

John entered the room in a rush. His old friend's face registered clear shock.

As Robert pulled himself up to the sink and looked in the mirror. He was shirtless. Purple bruises and angry scratches covered his entire body.

“What the heck happened?” John questioned, looking around as if he expected the boogey man to jump out at any moment.

“We have to find Sarah.” Robert stammered, still confused.

He shook his head as if trying to shake off a bad dream.

“I don't think anyone's here. I broke a window to get in. What happened to you?”

“We have to find Sarah.”

“Stay here.” John said.

Robert heard John rushing through the house, he was back within minutes.

“Sarah's not here and her car isn't outside.”

“She was here. We have to find her.” Robert reiterated, his entire body beginning to shiver uncontrollably.

John pulled Robert into a bedroom. Finding the closet empty, he rushed him into another room.

“Where are your clothes?” John asked frantically.

“I---don’t know.” Robert replied, still disoriented.

John pulled Robert into Paulo’s and Angel’s bedroom. Based on the condition of the room, it looked like they had left in a hurry. John yanked a shirt 5 times too large from Paulo’s closet which he quickly pulled over Robert’s head.

“We have to go, to her house. She has to be at home.” Robert said urgently as they rushed out to John’s hummer.

Robert noticed John watching him out of the corner of his eye as he drove. He was still shivering uncontrollably and shaking his head as he tried to gain clearer vision and focus. Something had happened to him but all he could think of was Sarah.

“We need to get you to a doctor.” John said, concern lacing his voice.

Robert protested vehemently from the passenger seat. He wouldn’t go anywhere until he confirmed Sarah was safe. He looked at his hands, covered with scratches. A sick feeling crawled through him.

“I think I’ve been drugged.” Robert said.

He leaned back in his seat, closing his eyes for a moment as a wave a nausea hit him again. When he opened his eyes, they were in Sarah’s neighborhood. Panic gripped him as her house came into view. As soon as they pulled up in front, Robert made a mad dash for the house.

“Sarah.” He yelled, tumbling to his knees before he could make it to the doorway.

He was attempting to stand when the police arrived, sirens blaring. There were two cars, four officers with guns drawn and trained on Robert as he tried to stand.

“Stay down.” John called to him.

From the ground, Robert thought he saw the slight movement of a curtain in Sarah’s house.

The officers were yelling for both men to put their hands up. John complied, but watched as Robert stayed on all fours. The order to put his hands up was repeated.

“He can’t stand up, he can’t put his hands up. He’s not armed. Don’t shoot.” John pleaded with the officers.

John was approached and disarmed. Robert was wrestled to the ground, his hands cuffed behind his back as he was dragged across the lawn and tossed into the back of a police vehicle.

“Can you tell me what’s going on?” John called out to the officers as Robert watched from the back of a police car.

John was led to another car and shoved in the back.

Through the fog that was slowly lifting over his mind, Robert began to realize he was being set up. But for what? And where was Sarah?

A detective wearing a sharp suit and an impressive looking sidearm entered the interrogation room. Tall and lean, he looked like he hit the gym several times a week.

He placed a cup of steaming liquid in front of Robert. Another officer wrapped a blanket around him that smelled like dirty laundry then left the room. The detective took the seat across from Robert, leveling him with a serious, steady gaze.

“Robert Anderson Duchovny, you have the right to remain silent---.”

Robert listened in silence as he was read his Miranda rights. He was still foggy, but pieces of the puzzle were starting to fall in place. He had asked about Sarah several times in the police car with no response.

It was time to get answers. After the detective finished, he took a sip of what was trying to pass as coffee to wet his parched throat.

“Can you please tell me if Sarah Levy is ok?” Robert asked.

It was the only question he wanted answered at the moment. Why he was drugged, arrested and everything else could wait. He just needed to know that Sarah was safe.

The detective leaned forward, his eyes boring into Robert.

“Why don’t you tell me.”

Anger was starting to creep in. He knew he had to control himself if he was going to get answers.

“I don’t know what happened. Sarah and I were having dinner with friends. Then I woke up and she was gone, my friends were gone. I think I was drugged. I just need to know where Sarah is. Did she go home? Can you send an officer or someone to check on her please---please.” Robert pleaded.

The detective retrieved his notepad, started writing notes.

“You had dinner with Sarah Levy? Can you tell me what time that was?” He asked, ignoring Robert’s request for answers.

Robert hit the table with his fist.

“Can you please send someone to check on her? Can you at least do that?”

The detective leaned back in his chair as he studied Robert, pen poised over the notepad.

“You’ve got a bit of a temper there, Mr. Duchovny.”

His interrogator motioned to a two-way mirror and another officer stepped in.

“Can you show Officer Daniels your hands.”

Robert spread out his hands.

“Please, just tell me. Sarah Levy---have you had contact with her?”

“Scraps and scratches on both hands.” The new officer commented as the detective seated in front of him took more notes.

“Remove your shirt.” The detective commanded.

Robert stood and complied with the request. The shivering started again.

“Same front and back, along with some bruising.” The officer commented as he noted Robert’s condition.

A camera was retrieved and pictures were taken.

“You want talk about how you got these injuries, Mr. Duchovny?” The detective questioned with a blank expression.

Robert took in a deep breath as his body shuddered uncontrollably.

“Oh God.” He moaned.

Something had been done to him. Had they, whoever it was, done the same to Sarah or worse? The detective watched Robert’s torment. His blank expression turned to one of raw hatred. The look was gone as quickly as it had come as he motioned to Officer Daniels to return Robert’s coverings.

“Why involve God in this, Mr. Duchovny? I just want to know what happened. I want to set the record straight, get your side of the story.”

“I need to speak to an attorney and I need to call Shaunessy Wiseman. He’s the Executive Assistant Director of the Intelligence, Investigation and Security Agency and the FBI. It’s a matter of national security.”

All pretenses were off after this request. Robert could feel anger and frustration coming off the detective in waves. The man looked at him in disgust. For a moment he thought the detective would jump across the table and strike him. But he leaned back instead.

“Get him out of here.” He barked.

Robert’s hands were placed behind his back and cuffed as he was led out of the interrogation room. As he turned the corner, he saw John being escorted towards the exit.

“John, call Shaunessy.” Robert yelled as their eyes met.

John started to head in Robert’s direction but was restrained.

“Call Shaunessy!” Robert said again as he was led away in handcuffs.

Robert had been sitting in an empty holding cell for what seemed like hours. They’d removed his handcuffs and given him a second blanket to try to control the shivering. The same officer that had photographed him brought him a stale donut and a tepid cup of water to go with the horrible coffee.

He knew enough about the process to know this was designed to wear him down, make him sweat mentally. They wanted to give him time to think about what they assumed he had done and maybe get a confession. He was trying hard to recall the events of the previous night when the detective entered his cell.

The detective had an undeniable dislike for him. He handcuffed Robert roughly and manhandled him out of the cell. Two officers joined the detective in the hallway, giving Robert sinister looks.

He was suddenly very concerned for his safety, but this could not override the unbridled fear he felt for Sarah. Not knowing what had happened to her was unbearable.

“Sarah Levy? Can you please tell me where she is?” He asked again.

The detective didn’t answer, wouldn’t even look Robert in the eye. He felt like a dead man walking as they approached an unmarked police vehicle. They were shoving Robert into the

back seat when two cars arrived, pulling up on each side. One was a black, unmarked sedan, the other a Mercedes Benz.

Shaunessy, flanked by three formidable looking IISA agents, intercepted the detective and officers. He handed an official looking document to Robert's captors as he showed them his IISA and FBI credentials.

"I'm taking this prisoner into custody." Shaunessy demanded.

The detective reviewed the document, still holding Robert's arm firmly in his grasp. The man gave Shaunessy a murderous look. The tension between the men was palpable as the detective reluctantly let go of Robert.

The men stood eye to eye, Shaunessy and the detective, neither man backing down as an IISA agent took Robert by the arm and rushed him to the unmarked sedan. As soon as Robert was out of sight a heated exchange started between the two men.

"Do you know anything about Sarah Levy?" Robert asked desperately.

"Sorry, Mr. Duchovny. I don't, Sir." The agent answered respectfully. "My apologies for the handcuffs too. I'll take them off as soon as we're out of view of the officers." He added.

The detective lost the argument, handed the papers back to Shaunessy. Robert watched as the man stormed back into the precinct followed by his comrades. Once the law enforcement entourage was gone the agent removed the cuffs. Robert rubbed his numb hands and wrists as Shaunessy approached.

"Shaun, what's going on? Do you know where Sarah is?"

Shaunessy eyed the precinct suspiciously. "Not here." He said, motioning Robert to the Mercedes.

They rolled out of the parking lot with the unmarked IISA issued black sedan following close behind.

“You’ve got to tell me everything you remember.” Shaunessy insisted.

Robert reached into this pocket, realized he didn’t have his cell phone. He turned up the heat with shaky hands, still fighting a chill that seemed to have settled into his core.

“I need your phone. I need to call Sarah.” Robert demanded. She was all he could think about.

A tense look passed over Shaunessy’s face. “She’s the reason we’re here, Robert. You have to tell me what you remember. She’s fine, as well as she can be.”

“What does that mean?”

Shaunessy went into the details of what he knew. As he spoke Robert’s soul sunk to the lowest depths of despair.

“I’ve got to talk to her.” Robert insisted, feeling like there was a hole in the pit of his stomach.

“This is a typical CIA set up. I’ve seen it before and so have you. How well do you know this woman?” Shaunessy asked directly.

It was the same question Robert would have asked someone in the same situation. But he wasn’t thinking like an IISA operative now. He was just a man and the woman he loved thought he had done horrific things to her.

“Give me the damn phone, Shaunessy!” He shouted, his desperation at the situation threatening to boil over.

“An emergency restraining order was issued against you this morning. How do you think that happened so fast? Did you know she has a brother, Detective Aaron Levy, the man you just

met? It's a good thing I got to you in time or I don't know if you would have made it to the jail in one piece. Do you understand? She sicced her cop brother on you before she even bothered to find out what happened."

Robert was stunned, his heart pierced by the words like a knife being thrust in and broken off.

"What do you remember?" Shaunessy asked again impatiently.

"We were having dinner with Paulo. Paulo and Angel were both there. Call him, he has to know what happened." Robert said, suddenly remembering that very important fact.

"I did already, as soon as John called me. Angel's mother had a heart attack. They took the first flight they could to the Philippines. He corroborates your story that you had dinner and drinks with him and Angel. He said they could tell you wanted some private time with Sarah so they left the two of you alone."

"What was I doing in the house? I was in the main house, not the guest house, when I woke up?"

"Paulo said the two of you were a little tipsy after having drinks. He thought you had spent the night together. He said he didn't want to bother you. So, he and Angel were quiet as they left."

"I need to speak to him. And I need to get back to that house with a forensic team. I need to---"

Shaunessy cut him off. "Robert. You can't go anywhere. I took you into custody to avoid you being beaten to death by Detective Levy in route to the county jail. You're going to have to stay where I put you while you wait for a preliminary hearing. You're being charged with a felony."

Felony. That meant prison time. Robert let it sink in. His mind was split in ten different directions. However, he could never believe Sarah had any part in the setup.

“We pulled some strings and the IISA has taken you into protective custody for now. You’ll be under the IISA’s protection until we can figure out our next move.”

“I can’t believe this is happening.” Robert said.

It was a cliché, but it was all he could think of. Last night he had been having dinner and drinks with the woman he loved, who he hoped to make his wife. He had a new home, a new business. Who would want to do this to him? His mind shifted again.

“Afghanistan. This has to be tied to that mission somehow.”

“My thoughts as well. I have a forensics team at Paulo’s house going through everything with a fine-tooth comb. If there’s any evidence there, they’ll find it. I also have a doctor waiting for you at the safe house. We need to run tests. Whatever is in your system, we need to figure out what it is so we can trace where it came from.”

“When can I get my hands on Achojah’s computer again?”

He could tell Shaunessy was reluctant to answer. Robert pressed him. “I need access to that computer. It’s the key to everything.”

“The laptop is gone. Pinder arrived with a CIA security team and confiscated the computer.”

“Who cleared that?” Robert asked, furious.

“The only one who could, Director Stanley.”

Robert sank into his seat and closed his eyes. For the second time in his life, he was tired, angry, afraid. Images of dead bodies pushed their way unbidden to the forefront of his mind pushing him to the breaking point.

Within the span of a few hours his life had been turned upside down and ruined. And the only evidence he had, the only piece to solve the puzzle and clear his name, had just been handed over to the CIA by the Director of the IISA and the FBI.

“Where are we going?” Robert asked.

“Chaffee. The FBI has a safe house where we stash people when needed.” Shaunessy answered.

“When can I get my things?” Robert asked.

He desperately wanted to get his hands on his Lenovo as soon as possible. If he could not get the terrorist laptop, he could still do research on his own. He also wanted his cell phone. The IISA, the FBI and the CIA might not be willing to work with him but he had other ways and methods.

“You’re IISA team are the only people who will know where you are. Jax was with the forensic team that’s doing the sweep of Paulo’s house. He got your personal items out before the police arrived. He’ll bring everything over later.”

“The police went to Paulo’s house?” Robert questioned.

“Yes, with their own crime scene team. They couldn’t do anything until they got a search warrant, which means someone had to wake up a judge. We got the ok from Paulo to send in our team. We were first on the scene.”

Robert was ready to press Shaunessy for more details when the other man’s phone rang.

Robert guessed, by the one-sided part of the dialogue, that the conversation was about him. Shaunessy didn’t look happy when he hung up. He glanced sideways at Robert for a moment before returning his eyes to the road.

“Detective Levy is a persistent man. And it seems Sarah’s parents might have some friends in high places as well. Her attorney---.”

Robert shot Shaunessy an incredulous look. “She has an attorney?”

Shaunessy was quiet for a moment before he continued. “They’re trying to get you removed from protective custody and placed in jail.”

It was a monster of a nightmare Robert wished he could wake up from. But he was wide awake and everything was happening in real time. In his current mental state, he was having trouble wrapping his confused mind around his unfortunate circumstances.

Sarah was accusing him of a heinous crime. Her brother was a police officer, who happened to be at the right place, at the right time. She had an attorney already lined up.

Things were not looking good, but his heart refused to wield to the notion that Sarah was involved. No one could fake what he felt and what they had shared. There had to be some explanation.

Had he actually done what he was being accused of? His heart threatened to erupt from his chest as his throat constricted. He forced down tears as a deep sickness churned in the pit of his stomach.

“I need to talk to Sarah.”

“You have to trust me, Robert. We need to get to her before charges are filed.” Shaunessy said vehemently.

“Why? To protect the IISA’s reputation?”

“To protect you.” Shaunessy retorted.

Robert could tell he had offended his boss and old friend.

“I’m going to reach out to her attorney, see what I can do. You’ve got to lay low until then. You understand? Don’t call her, don’t email her, don’t do anything until we can figure out who’s side she’s on and who she’s working for.” Shaunessy said forcefully.

This was the final stab to the heart.

“I just can’t believe it.”

Was Robert’s final plea to the universe before he laid back in his seat. He was in quiet turmoil the rest of the trip.

Henreth threw the newspaper on the table in front of Louka.

“What is this?” He demanded to know.

Louka had a soft-boiled egg, half a grapefruit and herbal tea laid out for breakfast. He had gotten up early, dressed, watched the sunrise, thought of how wonderful it would be to go home.

They had checked into a five-star hotel in Colorado Springs and Louka was enjoying the luxurious room, the amazing view and what was soon to be a lovely breakfast before the interruption.

Normally he would have been irritated at the rude, untimely intrusion into his morning. But he relished the look of fury on the other man’s face. The man’s holy grail had just been defiled and it gave Louka pleasure to see Henreth upset and disturbed. First crush the man then take his life, he thought. He had done the first and could not wait for the latter.

Robert’s arrest was the top story on every news channel. Louka had his mark right where he wanted him. He only needed to be patient and this was easily accomplished in such remarkable surroundings.

Henreth was still standing in front of him, fuming. Demanding an answer. He asked the same question again, pulling Louka out of his admiration of the breakfast and the opulent surroundings.

“Seems like your man Kosmos has a dark side.” Louka said without touching the newspaper.

He could not hold back any longer. He took a spoonful of the grapefruit. It was one of the best he’d ever tasted.

Henreth snatched up the paper. “This is a lie.”

“How do you know.” Louka asked.

He took a sip of tea and another bite of the succulent fruit.

“He wouldn’t do this. It’s not him, not his character. It’s one thing to---to go after a man. But to ruin his reputation like this.” Henreth’s face was beet red and flushed down to his hair follicles.

Louka was enjoying the tirade until some spittle flew from Henreth’s mouth and landed with a smack on his grapefruit. He pushed the entire breakfast aside in disgust. Even the herbal tea was no longer appealing.

“We have him where we want him, don’t we? He’s not hacking into your boss’s computer. As soon as he’s booked into jail, I have a team that will extract him. Your boss gets what he wants, we get what we want.”

Louka stood and yanked the cloth napkin off his lap, walking away. Not only had the foul man ruined his breakfast, he had ruined his appetite.

Robert watched as the last vile of blood was drawn. He had been examined, swabbed and several blood samples taken.

“I’ll get these off to the lab and get results expedited.” The examiner promised as he packed up his tools of the trade, along with the samples, and headed for the door.

Shaunessy spoke silently with the man before he slipped out of sight. Robert immediately felt that he needed to make amends.

“Shaun, I’m sorry about what I said earlier. Thank you. You are a true friend.” Robert offered apologetically.

Shaunessy patted Robert on the shoulder. “Jax is on the way with your things. We’re going to get to the bottom of what happened. And trust me, when we do, someone’s gonna hang for this.”

“It shouldn’t be you trying to figure things out. It should be me.”

Shaunessy paused for a moment, took in a deep breath.

“I feel like I got you into this with that damn laptop I gave you to test, then the mission. Let me help you. Get some rest, eat. This place has a fully stocked fridge, books, TV. No phone or computer, but those are on the way.”

“Thanks again my friend.”

Shaunessy nodded as he rushed out the door.

There was no way Robert could watch tv and he still had no appetite. After a very hot shower, he put on the only thing he could find in the closet, a white bathrobe he hoped was clean.

Surveying his new surroundings, he went through the drawers until he found a note pad and pen. He made himself strong, black coffee, all he could stomach at the moment, and sat down on the living room couch with the curtains drawn.

The unnatural feeling he had experienced earlier was almost gone. His brilliant mind was beginning to clear and it was starting to kick into overdrive. He took a swig of coffee. It was hot, but good and gave him a healthy boost of caffeine.

He was jotting down notes when the low growl of an approaching car put him on edge. Peeking through the window he saw Jax's non-descript Honda civic parked in front of the house. Jax glanced around cautiously as he approached, his unruly hair stuffed into a baseball cap. Once inside Jax gave him a big hug, startling him.

"I'm so glad to see you, Boss." Jax said genuinely as he handed Robert his computer and duffle bags.

Robert immediately retrieved his phone.

"Thank you, Jax. Please excuse me for a moment."

Robert quickly slipped into t-shirt and sweats in the bedroom as he retrieved his work phone.

His first call was to John. He could not guarantee that John's cell phone wasn't being traced so they kept it short. No charges were being brought against John which was a relief. Robert asked if John could call Mem and Addie to let them know what had happened, leaving out the morbid details.

John informed him that Robert's arrest was already all over the news and that he'd already received a call from a panicked Mem when she couldn't reach Robert. John had told her not to believe what she was seeing or hearing on TV. This seemed to comfort her, but both his mother and grandmother were anxiously waiting for news about him.

As much as he wanted to talk to them, Robert couldn't risk it. He was already taking a chance calling John. They kept the call under 30 seconds.

Next, he dialed Paulo's phone number. The call went straight to voicemail. He hated to pressure the man when he was dealing with a sick mother but he needed some answers. Robert left a brief message for Paulo to call him as soon as he could.

He considered the phone for a moment, punched in Sarah's number. It took every ounce of human control he had not to hit the dial button. He slipped the phone into his pocket. If Sarah called him, he would answer.

When he returned Jax was sitting on the couch looking at Roberts notepad. He looked away quickly as Robert approached.

Robert immediately booted up the Lenovo and activated the scanner which he had retrieved from his bag. Robert and Jax waited for the light to go green before they spoke.

"Director Wiseman has me, Mavis and Patti doing some special research. It can't be coincidence, the way everything went down. He thinks the CIA might have something to do with this." Jax offered, glancing at the notepad.

Robert knew Jax was proceeding with caution as he spoke. He continued.

"It all went down pretty quick. I was at the office finishing up a case when they arrived and confiscated everything, even our team's notes. I thought it was odd until I got the call from Assistant Director Wiseman. I got over to Paulo's place and got your stuff just in time. Black and whites and what looked like a crime scene van were rolling in as I was rolling out." He stopped for a moment, giving Robert a worried look.

It all went down quick---a little too quick Robert thought. Almost as if it had been planned. Robert was bringing up some files on the Lenovo when he noticed Jax still looking intently at him. He had something to say, but was very reluctant to say it.

"What's on your mind?" Robert gave him the permission to ask.

“Some people at the Bureau are saying you had a psychotic breakdown, some type of PTSD incident from the mission in Afghanistan. I’ve been getting calls all morning. Word gets around in this business, even on a Saturday.” Jax glanced at Robert’s arms and hands, which were still covered in cuts and bruises.

Robert looked Jax directly in the eyes as he answered.

“I know Director Stanley is doing what he thinks is best. He thinks I’ve been compromised so he’s taken possession of the project I was working on. I’m sure he’s also severed my IISA security clearance and authorization. He’ll do anything to protect the IISA, as he should. The organization is bigger than one man. You’re going to hear a lot of things about me the next few weeks and it won’t be good.” Robert paused to gauge Jax’s response only to be met with silence. He continued. “I can’t control what people say or think. All I can control is what I know about know about myself. I would never do what I’m being accused of, at least not consciously. If I find out---.” He paused again, not wanting to go to the dark place, but needing to get it out in the open. “If I found out I did this, I will turn myself in. I’ll take my punishment. But I have to know what happened. I have to trust what I know about myself.”

Jax looked down for a moment, nodding that he understood. When he looked up again, he had a look of silent determination Robert had seen when he was working.

“The whole team thinks this is a bunch of bullshit---excuse the French. We’ve been in this industry long enough to know a set up when we see it. I’m here for you. We all are. That’s straight from the team.”

“I need some answers. I’m sure my access to the IISA network has been revoked. I could hack it, but I still respect the agency.”

“That’s why I brought this.”

Jax reached down by his side and retrieved his laptop. He booted it up without saying a word. He knew what the obvious first step was.

“You want a background check on Sarah?” Jax asked.

“Yes, complete and thorough. I need to know everything. Go deep, even juvenile records if there are any.”

“I’m going to need a snack.” Jax said.

Robert took the bait. “Fridge is stocked. I’ll get food, you work.”

Robert returned with microwaved frozen pizza and chips. Both men put their heads down into their computers. It was going to be a long afternoon.

Afternoon merged into night. Robert had made himself another pot of strong black coffee and Jax was nursing his third beer.

“There’s nothing here, Boss. Not even a parking ticket.” Jax informed Robert.

Inside, Robert was enormously relieved. There was no past criminal record, no skeletons in the closet the CIA or another entity could have used to blackmail or force Sarah to cooperate.

Robert started to take the last sip of his coffee then decided against it. He was already wired and too full of caffeine and he needed to rest. Going to the kitchen to put his coffee cup in the sink, a glance at the clock revealed it was past midnight.

Robert returned to his work. He had been doing some research of his own. A master at penetrating systems, he had used some of his codes and back door access to hack into the CIA network. He confirmed there was actionable intel about Achojah’s computer and the imminent nuclear threat to the United States.

Both CIA missions to retrieve the computer and its valuable information had been legitimate. The details of the missions were blacked out. Robert would have to dig deeper and further for more details. But he verified there was a very real and very dangerous current threat to the United States. This made it all the more puzzling, even with the current situation, that the CIA had confiscated the laptop.

The cybersecurity team at the IISA, even without him, was the most effective team out of all the clandestine agencies. Why pull them off the case? It was clear that no other team had been successful in gaining access to the computers. Something nefarious was working behind the scenes.

“So, what do we have?” Robert questioned his protégé.

“Achojah, a known terrorist, pays Sula to create an un-hackable, un-traceable computer network for his criminal enterprise.”

“Then there’s this Louka character.” Robert added. “The man was a CIA Operative, and a good one. Why switch sides?”

“Money or something else was promised to him. But let’s face it, it’s usually money.” Jax offered.

Jax had that troubled look again. He was holding back, not wanting to say what was on his mind.

“Please, Jax. Everything out in the open. This isn’t about me. It’s a case. Let’s break it down the way we would any case. Consider all scenarios.”

“You’ve never---as long as I’ve known you---there’s never been anyone serious in your life, Boss. They knew how to get to you. Also, the last thing you did before all of this happened was to crack the encryption on Achojah’s computer. You were in. It was only a matter of time

before all the data on that computer was ours. The bad actors don't want us knowing what's on that computer, that's a solid fact. What's troubling is that someone with inside knowledge knew how close you were to having full access and that you were meeting with Sarah that night."

Jax was right and the implications were frightening. Whoever had tried to get him in Afghanistan was in the US.

The plan to frame him was so devious, it could not have been done without inside help. His mind didn't want to go to that place, but it had to. Was it someone at the CIA, the FBI or the IISA. Maybe someone even closer?

"Then there's this Dragonfyre character. I don't know how, Boss, but somehow, he fits into all of this. The hacks of the CIA on the first and second mission, he had access to confidential, top-secret information." Jax added.

"I need to talk to Paulo. I wonder if this sudden illness with his mother is a part of this."

As Robert's wheels were turning, he noticed Jax stifle a yawn out of the corner of his eye. Robert was tired too.

"Why don't you grab a room here. I don't want you driving home after three beers."

"I think I'll take you up on that." Jax said standing and stretching.

"And call your girlfriend. I know it's late, but she'll appreciate it." Robert said, thinking of the colossal mistake he had made not calling Sarah for weeks."

Jax gave him a quizzical look.

"You thought I didn't know? I don't care if you're seeing someone, Jax. I think it's great."

"Boss, I don't have a girlfriend. I---you know---I work a lot."

Robert frowned, "Asian girl, pretty, long hair?"

“Oh geez.” Jax said with a grimace. “I didn’t know she had approached you too. Name’s Marie Lim. She said she’s writing a book about cybersecurity or something and wanted to do lunch with us. She was pretty pesky about it. I told her no, but she kept calling and emailing me.”

“She told me she was your girlfriend. I ran into her at the office, literally. I thought--.”
Robert stopped in his tracks.

He went into the bedroom, leaving Jax standing in the living room staring after him. He returned with his jacket, retrieving the note from his pocket. It simply said, *must talk*, with a phone number listed. Robert held it up to Jax.

“After all the calls and emails, I checked her out. She’s CIA.” Jax said.

“Looks like we have a lunch date.”

Both men were up bright and early. Robert had loaned Jax a pair of sweats that were too large for his lanky frame. He pulled them up with one hand as he helped himself to coffee with the other. He took his coffee into the bedroom.

When Jax returned he had changed into his clothes from the previous day. He did a cautionary sniff of his armpits before he spoke.

“I called Maria Lim. She won’t talk to me, says she’ll only talk to you.”

“Any hint of what she’s got?”

“Only that she was hoping to get to you before they did.” Jax emphasized the word *they*.
“She’s 100 % sure you were set up, but won’t tell me anything more over the phone.” He added.

“I’m going to have to risk a meet up with her.” Robert said decisively.

Jax powered up his computer as Robert delved into the fridge for breakfast. Robert needed to stay close to the safe house. The warrant hung over his head, as did the promise to Shaunessy that he would stay put.

There were plenty of rural places to meet, but what if the woman wasn't on the level? A rural location would be a great spot to put a bullet in his head or set him up for something worse. He didn't trust anyone from the CIA and didn't want to put Jax in danger.

"Needs to be a public place." Robert finally said and Jax agreed.

"There's a park, one mile out." Jax brought up a map on his computer, turned it towards Robert. "There are limited cameras, nothing I can't handle."

"We can piggy back off the CIA's security network to take those cameras out. But we can't risk doing it now or any time before. You'll have to do it on the spot and it will have to be quick. Real quick."

"Piece of cake, Boss." Jax reassured him.

Robert liked it. He brought up a map of the surrounding areas. There were 3 routes back to the safe house, two through residential neighborhoods and one off a main street. He would avoid Route #3, the one off the main boulevard.

There was also a grocery store about a half mile away from the park. There would be enough people coming and going between the residential neighborhood and the grocery store for him not to look suspicious.

The only issue now was that he had no car and no keys to the house. Driving with Jax was out of the question. His face had been all over the news and he didn't want to be seen with Jax if he was recognized. He also needed invisible eyes on the scene which Jax could provide.

After breakfast they finally decided Jax would drive and Robert would jog to the park. Robert packed up his computer and clothes, then wiped down the house. They stuffed Robert's few belongings into Jax's trunk just in case things went south.

"Call her and tell her it's a go." Robert said.

Trying to be as inconspicuous as possible, Robert left the safe house through the back door. He didn't like leaving the house unlocked, but had no choice. Shaunessy hadn't left him a key. He assumed his boss thought Robert wouldn't be stupid enough to leave his safe haven.

He jogged the mile to the park, giving the appearance of someone that belonged in the neighborhood. A baseball cap pulled down low and sunglasses were his only disguise. Along with his sweaty, disheveled appearance from the jog he hoped he wouldn't be recognized.

When he arrived Jax was already at the park as planned, sitting under a tree with earphones on and his laptop fired up. He had a blanket spread out and was casually munching on a sandwich. He looked like a college aged kid catching some rays and getting in some study time.

Moving to a large aspen tree closest to the pond, Robert removed a small pack he was carrying, retrieved a drink of water. Bending down to tie his shoelace, he casually kicked over a rock under which a burner phone had been hidden. Retrieving the pack, he stealthily slipped the phone inside.

He did another light jog before he plopped down on a bench facing the pond. Leaning back, he put both elbows on the back of the bench, letting his hands hang down. As soon as he gave this signal, the phone rang. He answered the phone as nonchalantly as possible, carefully eyeing his surroundings.

“I don’t have much time.” Robert warned the caller.

“I need to tell you about Falcon 6.” A female voice said in hushed tones.

“I’ve seen it. Louka Stojanović, former Army sharp shooter turned CIA asset. I have his whole history and details on both failed missions. If that’s all you have, I’m gone.”

“You’ve been in my house.” She said, impressed.

“If you don’t want me in your house, you shouldn’t leave the doors unlocked.”

Robert could hack the CIA with his eyes closed. He had pulled Louka’s entire history using his laptop while eating breakfast and sipping his morning coffee. It had taken him 10 minutes to get in and no one was the wiser.

“He’s turned into some type of fanatic. There’s a bizarre tattoo of a serpent on the inside of his right thigh with strange writings on it I’ve never seen and can’t interpret. He also prays---chants---whatever you want to call it, daily. There’s more.”

“At some point we need to discuss how you know about his tattoos and what he does every morning. But I’m getting new information. Keep going.”

“I’m sending you a picture.”

The phone beeped and Robert glanced at the pic. He smiled and laughed just to make himself look normal as two people jogged by.

“Recognize anyone?” She asked.

“You tell me?” Robert questioned, not willing to divulge anything she didn’t know.

“That’s Sula Sood on the right. I haven’t ID’d the woman yet.”

“And?” Robert questioned.

Sula with a woman was nothing to pique his interest. Sula had had lots of women, all over the world.

“Sending another picture.”

“Now I’m intrigued.” Robert said.

“That’s billionaire financier Alexander Treager on the left, Louka in the middle---.”

“And our mystery lady again on the right.” Robert finished. “Where did you get these pictures?”

“Boss, the police just got an anonymous tip that a wanted fugitive might be in the park.”

Jax whispered urgently in Robert’s ear.

“Is this a set up?” Robert asked Maria point blank.

“I see Jaxson. If he’s giving you bad news, it’s not from me. Let me help.”

“Gotta go. Call Jaxson, give him the details. I’m interested, but I have to know I can trust you.”

Robert discreetly ditched the phone in the lake and started jogging towards the route that would take him back to the safe house.

“Time?” He asked Jax through the earpiece.

“5 minutes.”

“Were they looking for me?”

“No. They were in the area, just happened to be grabbing lunch. Don’t take route number 1. Route number 2 is clear, but you need to move fast. Meet me at the car. I’ll get you out of here.” Jax said desperately, obviously willing to chance being caught with Robert.

“If they catch us, you’re in trouble too. Stay put until I’m gone.”

Robert ran to Jax’s car and pulled his computer bag out of the trunk.

“She’s calling me now.”

“Pick up.” Robert said.

“She said she just drove around the back of the park and all of your potential routes are blocked. She wants you to meet her in the grocery store parking lot. She’s driving a dark blue Ford escort, early 2000 model. Trunk will be open.”

Robert didn’t like it.

“Check her story about the routes being blocked. I’m going for the safe---.”

“The safe house is blown. Officers are at the house and they’re blocking off the area.” Jax said before Robert could finish his sentence.

“I guess I’m going to grocery store.”

“I’ll stay here, let me know when you’re safe and then I’ll leave.”

“Thank you, Jax.”

Robert kept his jog at a casual pace. He turned his baseball cap backwards, keeping the sunglasses.

“Jax, can you kill the cameras in that area? I need a clear route.”

“Working on it now.”

Robert pressed forward towards the rendezvous point, trusting his right-hand man to bring down the cameras.

“Turn right.” Jax called in his ear as two black and whites sped up and passed by him. They were heading in the direction of the safe house. He was glad he had removed all of his personal items and wiped the place down before he left.

“Left.” Jax called out and he obeyed. “They’re going to start blocking off the entire area. You’ve got to get out of there.”

Robert made it to the grocery store parking lot just as a police cruiser was pulling in on the other side. Not knowing if he had been seen, he dropped down behind a car to tie his shoes. He could not do anything else that looked too suspicious.

“Cameras?” He asked urgently.

“Working on it, Boss.”

The cruiser was creeping through the parking lot.

“Cameras, Jax.”

“Almost there.”

The cruiser was definitely looking for him. He didn't dare make any sudden moves, anything that would alert the cruiser to his presence.

He shifted feet to tie his other shoe.

“He's almost on me.” Robert exclaimed silently.

“Go.” Jax yelled.

Robert rolled underneath the car beside him just as the cruiser came down his aisle. He checked to make sure no one was looking and he rolled two more cars down.

Having the cameras down was good. But now Jax couldn't tell him where Maria was parked.

“Did she tell you what she was wearing?”

“Brown jogging suit, black tennis shoes, blond wig. You've got 15 minutes until you're trapped.” Jax answered.

Robert looked frantically at the feet going by from his hiding place. Heels, boots, black tennis shoes, but with white pants, cowboy boots, flip flops.

“I don't see her.”

“She’s there, but I can’t see where you are.”

Fifteen minutes and Robert would be a fly caught in a spider’s web. A bus pulled up and passengers started filing in slowly. He dug in his pockets for his wallet and pulled out a twenty-dollar bill. Dashing from beneath the car, he rushed to the bus stop.

“I’ll give you twenty dollars for that day pass.” He offered to the first person he reached in line.

The man looked around. “This is a five-dollar pass.”

“Well, I’m in a hurry and I guess it’s your lucky day.”

“Your loss dude.”

Robert gave up his twenty for the pass and slipped quickly into a seat on the bus. He slid down in his seat, pulling his hat over his head as the bus rolled out. Robert watched as three police cars rolled into the lot and started blocking off the entry and exit. He sighed in relief.

“Jax? Can you hear me? Did you get out of there?”

“Yes. They’re blocking everything off and checking cars now. I got out just in time. Where are you?”

“I’m on a bus headed downtown. Can she hear me?”

“No, I’ve got you on a different frequency.”

“I need to figure out my next move. Don’t try to call me. I’ll be in touch.”

“Boss, they’ve got people looking for you everywhere. Let me help.” Jax exclaimed.

“I mean it, Jax.” Robert said, ending the call.

Robert hopped buses until he arrived at the shady side of Downtown Denver. It was the best place for him to hide and to beat the facial recognition software he assumed would be

deployed as they searched for him. He wished he had his jammer. It was in his desk at work, he'd never needed it before.

Several homeless people eyed him as he rushed away from the bus stop. He stuck out like a sore thumb and desperately needed to change his appearance. Walking several blocks, he located a thrift store and slipped inside.

The clothes he bought were a little too large for him, hopefully hiding his actual size. He slipped a black beanie over his head and shoved his hands into gloves. The computer, cell phone and peripherals he shoved into a large, dirty duffle bag, ditching his expensive computer bag in the donation bin. Pulling the hat over his head, he moved out onto the busy street.

His phone beeped and he grabbed it out of his pocket.

"Boss, where are you?" Jax said in a panic-stricken voice, ignoring Roberts previous order not to call him.

"I'd better not say."

"Whatever you do, don't go back to the safehouse. I acquired the cameras in that area and agents are crawling all over the place."

"IISA?"

"No, CIA."

"I'll find somewhere to go."

"Our friend is asking what happened."

"Tell her I couldn't get to her. I'll make contact as soon as I can. No more calls."

"Be careful." Jax implored him before the call ended.

Robert snuck into a local library and tucked himself into a corner. Powering up his laptop, he discovered the FBI had frozen his bank accounts and his credit cards were now useless.

“Really?” Robert said to himself, amused.

He accessed the Social Security Administration, created a false identity for himself. He reactivated an old social security number, changed the information on the record, then hid the record in a location no one would find it.

Using the false identity, he set up an account with an online bank that had looser standards than the brick-and-mortar financial institutions. Hacking his frozen bank accounts, he moved part of the funds to the new account. He then moved the rest of his funds to a Bitcoin account which he had also set up under the alias.

He then wiped his digital foot print from the bank and the Social Security Administration’s systems. The FBI would find the frozen accounts empty and would not be able to trace where the funds had gone.

Yes, he thought to himself, he was that good. They should have known they couldn’t lock him out of his own accounts. Hacking the bank was child’s play for him. No arrogance, just simple fact.

With that taken care of, he hacked into the FBI and the CIA using back doors he had installed previously. He needed to know where they were looking for him so he would know where to hide. He snooped through each database with ease.

“Should’ve taken my advice about closing these security loopholes.” He whispered to himself as he spied on their investigation.

Besides running facial recognition, they had agents watching his new house, Sarah's house, John's business and home and they were watching Mem and Addie's house as well. They'd also gained access to his office phone and emails and they were monitoring his entire IISA team. For national security reasons they didn't have the authority to monitor the secure smartphone system and Robert was glad for this.

Next, he sifted through breaking news to see what was being reported about him. Nothing was in the news yet about the manhunt for him or that he had left the protective custody of the IISA. That was good news.

On the other hand, he was heartbroken to see what he was being accused of and that a warrant had been issued for his arrest. He could not remember anything. Was it true? Had he experienced some type of PTSD psychotic breakdown and harmed Sarah? The thought made him sick to his stomach.

"Library is closing sir."

Robert jumped at the voice. He looked at his watch. He had been at it all day and had lost track of time.

He thanked the woman as she gave him a curious look before she walked away. He had forgotten his appearance. He must look like a homeless person to her.

Homeless certainly described his current state. He could not hide in his new house even though it was vacant and under construction, could not go to Mem and Addies, could not go to John's house or contact any of his other friends. He needed to find a place to stay, at least for one night, until he figured out a permanent solution to his predicament.

At the homeless shelter, Robert stood in line with his mismatched clothes and the large duffle bag. When he reached the check in desk the woman looked him over.

‘You’re new.’

“Yes---I am.” Robert said, stammering. Did she recognize him?

“I need to see your bag.”

Robert handed it over and she rummaged through it.

“We don’t allow any drugs here. You got anything on you? If you do, they’ll kick you out.”

“No drugs. I just lost my place to stay. I need something for tonight until my brother can pick me up. He’s---he’s from out of town.” Robert said, making up a false story on the spot to justify him being there. The woman didn’t care, didn’t even look twice at him.

“Pick out a cot and it’s yours.”

Robert went to a cot in the farthest corner he could find. Anything would be better than being out on the street with a top-of-the-line computer, a smart phone and 200 dollars cash in his wallet. He pulled out his notepad and was getting ready to settle in when two rough looking men approached.

“What’s in the bag?”

Robert was assaulted by the man’s body odor. The other man didn’t smell any better and Robert could see needle tracks running up and down his arms.

“Just clothes. I don’t want any trouble.”

“You won’t have any trouble if you give us the bag.” The homeless thug said.

“You can give it to us or we can take it from you.” The other man chimed in.

Robert was overjoyed to see a security guard approaching.

“Out, both of you. You’ve already been banned from this shelter.” The guard yelled.

Two other men that looked like body builders approached to back up the security guard.

The homeless men backed down, giving Robert a dirty look as they were escorted out.

“Watch out for those two.” The security guard warned.

Robert thanked him, clearly shaken at the unexpected confrontation.

A man plopped down on the cot next to Robert giving him a hopeful look through glazed eyes. He was worse for wear and Robert guessed he was old enough to be his grandfather. He smelled of alcohol, cigarettes and urine.

“You’re new.”

“Yes, I am. I lost my place, just need a place to stay.” Robert said, not sure why he felt the need to explain himself.

“Look kid, we all have an excuse. Whatever your poison is, get off of it before you end up like me.”

“Ok, thanks.” Robert didn’t know how else to respond.

“You got any smokes?”

“I don’t smoke. Do they let you smoke in here?”

“They don’t let us do anything in here. It’s just a place to sleep. I take the smokes outside.”

The man laid down, turning away from Robert. He obviously wasn’t interested in conversation if Robert didn’t have what he wanted.

Robert discreetly reached into his bag and turned off the ringer on his cell phone.

After writing out his thoughts on the notepad, he spent an itchy night tossing and turning, unable to sleep. He wedged the duffle bag under his head, looped his arm through the handle. He could not risk someone snatching the bag as he slept. Not that he would get any rest that night.

“Time to clear out.”

Robert jolted upright at the sound of the voice. He had finally slipped into a restless sleep filled with bad dreams. His entire body hurt from the hard cot and he had been eaten alive by bedbugs or something worse.

“There’s a place down the street you can get a hot meal.” The security guard called out as men began to file out of the shelter.

Robert slipped his hand into his bag, turned on the cell phone’s ringer. He heard a few muffled beeps alerting him that he had messages. Not wanting to reveal that he had a phone inside the shelter’s walls, he threw his duffle bag over his shoulder and followed the other men outside.

He planned to use his new identity to get a place to stay, hoping he wouldn’t be recognized. It was a chance he would have to take. Spending another night in the shelter wasn’t a viable option.

As he was contemplating his situation shouts and cat calls greeted him as soon as he left the shelter’s walls. Chancing a glance over his shoulder, he saw the two homeless thugs from the previous night. He turned on his heels and started to walk fast in the opposite direction assuming they wouldn’t give chase on a busy street. He was wrong.

Glancing at the skyline, he could see the IISA’s headquarters jutting out above the other buildings. One call and he could have agents deployed within seconds. But he would also be

carried away in handcuffs. He couldn't take the risk so he nestled the duffle bag in his arms and broke into a full run. The two men were almost on him when his phone started to ring.

One guy he could take. But two was out of the question. If he ran into one of the shops, would they help him looking and smelling the way he did? He was about to take a chance when a blue ford screeched up and cut him off.

"Get in." Maria Lim yelled from the driver's seat.

He was momentarily stunned and froze in his tracks.

"Get in." She demanded again as the two hoodlums closed more distance.

Robert didn't have a choice. He jumped in as she peeled away from the curb. Robert watched the two men staring after the car until it made a sharp right out of view.

"Thank you." Was all he could muster.

"You're lucky I got to you in time. A few more minutes and we'd be scraping your sorry ass off the sidewalk."

Robert felt something underneath him. He reached under his rear and produced a jammer. He laid it on the center console.

"How did you find me?" He asked.

"My grandmother could have found you. What's your disguise? Robert Duchovny in bad clothes? The only reason you haven't been picked up is because your team has been feeding the FBI and the CIA bogus information and Jax is hacking the hell out of their networks."

Robert was grateful, but still unhappy his team had involved themselves against his wishes. He also wasn't thrilled with Maria's attitude.

"I didn't have anywhere else to go. The shelter was the only place I thought they wouldn't look for me."

“Well, you definitely smell the part.” She quipped sarcastically.

“You seem really hostile and it’s not helping the situation.”

“I told you not to go on that mission. I told you not to involve the woman.”

“You’re the person that’s been leaving me notes? What is this about and where are you taking me?” Robert questioned, his frustration at its peak.

“I’m taking you to a CIA safe house.”

“CIA? Is it safe?” Robert asked.

“Not completely. But the best place to hide you is right under their noses.”

“Why are you helping me?”

“Louka Stojanović, the man you know as Falcon 6. He was one of mine.”

“What do you mean, one of yours?”

“I’m a handler with the CIA Special Operations Unit. Louka was one of our operatives.”

“I read his file, but a lot of it was blacked out. What exactly did he do for the CIA?”

Robert knew, but wanted to hear it from her.

“What do you think? He was a paid, trained CIA Killer. The US government wants someone gone but they can’t have any known US involvement, they send one of these guys.”

Robert felt like he was digging deeper into a hole he wanted to climb out of.

“You’re saying the US government has assassins on its payroll?”

“For crying out loud. How long have you been in the clandestine industry? You can’t be that naive. Yes, the government is involved with a lot of things you don’t know about. Or, maybe you just don’t want to know. You prefer to look through everything with your rosy colored glasses sitting behind your expensive mahogany desk. You suits are all alike. That’s why you’re in this mess now.”

Robert was beyond the point of having patience with her. But she was taking him to a potentially safe place where he could regroup and figure out his next step. He didn't want to say anything that would make her drop him off on the next corner. She seemed slightly unhinged and capable of anything.

"You still didn't tell me why you're helping me."

"The first CIA mission to get Sula and Achojah's computer, I signed off for Louka to go. I did it against my better judgement. When they approached me about embedding him in the second mission, I said no."

"Why?"

"Something was wrong. Like I told you on the phone, he was behaving differently. He became very withdrawn, started these odd rituals. And then there was the cutting. He's been cutting these weird symbols into his skin. They're all over his body."

"Do I need to ask the question?"

"We were lovers. Then we decided to try living together."

"The CIA allowed this?"

"No. It was a secret."

"You were sleeping with the man you were supposed to be supervising?"

"Look, I don't need judgement from you. I'm here because you need my help and I need your help."

He could tell she was offended by the condescending tone in his voice. He had to bring it down a notch.

"You think he's been radicalized?"

"Yes. I reported as much to the CIA Operations Director."

“He didn’t listen?”

“No. And he got two teams killed. I should have gone higher up. I should have pushed harder. Those agents were people I knew, they were friends.”

“You want revenge.”

“I want justice. And you’re going to help me.”

“Why have you been leaving me notes?”

“After the first mission, I started digging. That picture I showed you, Louka with Alexander Treager, there’s no reason for the two of them to be together. I have more data and pictures I need to show you. There’s also my computer.”

Robert felt like he had to pull each bit of information out of her. He did his best to remain cool headed as he gently pressed her.

“What’s going on with your computer?”

“I found a weird file on it I can’t open. It’s not something I installed.”

“You and Louka lived together----” Robert trailed off, stating what he thought was the obvious.

“He didn’t have access to my computer or any of my passwords.”

“You scan for bugs?”

“Every day, like we all do.”

“What about cameras?”

Maria didn’t respond and he knew he had hit the jackpot.

“What about cameras?” She asked curtly.

She had obviously never thought of looking for cameras, but didn’t want to admit this.

“A camera installed in a vent or another place where you use your computer would have allowed him to see you logging in, to see your passwords and what you were looking at.”

“I need you to do whatever it is that you do and break into those files. I have to know where he is. You help me, I help you. Deal?”

“Deal.” Robert said, not having much of a choice.

With one hand on the steering wheel, Maria used her free hand to pull off Robert’s beanie. She replaced it with another cap and handed him a different pair of sunglasses. She tossed him a brown, wool sweater and he slipped into that as well. It smelled of perfume and barely fit. It was obviously hers.

She handed him an empty plastic coffee cup. “Keep this up by your face, like you’re drinking it.” Robert did as he was told.

It wasn’t much of a disguise, but would have to do. With most of his face covered, he hoped the facial recognition software wouldn’t pick up a trace on him.

Obedying traffic laws, his new accomplice made it to the freeway and merged into early morning traffic.

“This CIA safehouse, where is it?” Robert questioned and she gave him an address.

“Your guy Jax is already there.” She commented.

Robert sighed. He was still Jax’s boss, but the young man was obviously not going to obey his orders to stay away.

Leaning back in his seat, he analyzed his current situation and it wasn’t good. A cold sense of dread wrapped itself around him like a wet blanket.

Jax was standing at the door of Robert's new hideout with a baseball cap pulled over his head and sunglasses. Maria opened the door and the men stepped inside.

"Boss." He exclaimed.

He looked like he would hug Robert again but hesitated.

"I gave him the address before I went looking for you. You need to shower and get cleaned up, now." Maria said, crinkling her nose at him.

Robert noticed the appreciative look she gave Jax.

"Your apprentice and I will be out here---comparing notes." She quipped.

Robert showered quickly. Back in his own clothes he joined Maria and Jax in the living room. Jax was on his computer.

"They're looking everywhere, but no leads yet. They don't know you're here."

"Thanks to you and the team." Robert replied.

Jax shrugged. "You would do the same for any of us."

Maria turned to Robert, eyeing him up and down, sizing him up.

"Thank you for trusting me." She said.

"I don't."

"What?"

"I don't trust you. You were my only option. That or going to jail."

"I'm glad you considered me a better option than jail."

"You have my full attention now. Tell me what else you know."

"You saw the pictures and I know you've seen Louka Stojanović's file. So, I'll tell you what's not in the file. About 3 years ago, the CIA sent him on a mission. The mission went very well, a success. Missions were always a success with him, he's that good. However, after this

particular mission, he took a vacation. That was very odd for him because he rarely took leave and nothing for an extended period of time.”

She looked intently at Robert then Jax to see if she had their full attention. She did.

“After he came back, the odd behavior began. Praying, chanting, cutting himself. Don’t get me wrong, his performance in the field never wavered. He just developed these odd habits. There was this cleanliness thing too, as if certain things would defile him. He also started traveling more, all over the world. Egypt, Romania, Lithuania, Tangier, Spain, you name it. And not on company business.”

“You think he’s been radicalized?” Jax echoed Robert’s earlier question.

“It was obvious. But radicalized by who? As his handler, I do thorough checks on all of our---” She paused.

Robert could tell she was struggling with how much she should reveal. She had already crossed the line. There was obviously still some loyalty to the CIA. She took a deep breath, then continued.

“He was one of our best operatives but he still had to undergo all of the proper security, mental, physical and psychological checks. There are protocols and they are always followed to the letter. Nothing came up. No emails, no calls, no going to radical ideology web sites for research. No incoming mail or packages. And none of his trips set off any alarms. If someone is taking trips to known terrorist training locations, we have cause for concern. But his trips seemed to be exactly what he said they were, vacations.”

She was spilling everything and Robert wanted to hear as much as he could, while he could.

“This wasn’t in his file.” Robert commented.

“Of course it wasn’t. There was no indication that someone had gotten to him. And the trips, the bosses were glad he was taking them. He had already been all over the world working for the CIA. They thought some personal time to himself would blow off some steam. These guys can be wound up pretty tight if you know what I mean.”

Robert understood what she meant. He could not imagine going through what he had experienced in Afghanistan on a regular basis plus being the trigger man.

“What was the final straw for you? The thing that made you feel you needed to talk to me?” Robert asked.

“His behavior became extremely odd before Operation Recovery.”

Robert gave her a perplexed look.

“That was the mission you were on. He made several long-distance trips and I followed him one time to a church in Norfolk. When he returned, he didn’t want to be physical anymore. He started sleeping in a different room. And the chanting became more frequent. It disturbed me.”

“Wait, weren’t you his handler? I thought relationships between field agents and their handlers was strictly forbidden.” Jax questioned.

“They are, but it just happened. We kept it quiet.” She said with a bite to her tone.

“How long?” Robert asked.

“Five years.”

Jax gave Robert a warning look.

“The CIA ran a pre-mission check on him, even brought him in for questioning. He knew it came from me. I was the only one who could have raised the red flag. He was furious at first, but said he understood. I was a company woman and I still had a job to do.”

“Sounds like they didn’t listen to you.” Robert commented.

“No, they didn’t. Brendon Stout, the CIA Director of Operations, did an override of my mission rejection. They sent him on the mission anyway and the whole team is dead because of it.”

“Where did you get the pictures?”

“I put a tail on him when he took his last vacation. My contact in Tangier took the pics.”

“What does Sula Sood, Louka, Alexander Treager and Achojah Okonkwo have in common and who is the mystery woman?” Jax asked.

“My questions also. I showed those pictures to Brendon and he suspended me for 3 weeks, without pay, for using a CIA field agent in Tangier without his permission.”

“Tell me about the computer.” Robert said.

“Like I said, there’s a weird file I can’t open. I noticed it when I was going through old pics of Louka to delete the damn things. I just didn’t want to see them, didn’t want any reminder of him. When I went to the pictures folder there’s a folder titled Big Sur. We never went there together.”

“Encrypted?”

“Yes. And when I tried to open it, it locked up my entire computer.”

“Sound familiar?” Robert said to Jax.

“A file that protects itself.” The younger man answered, deep concern creasing his brow.

“It’s in my safe. I’ll bring it over later. The place is yours as long as I can keep the fact that it’s occupied off the grid.”

“I can help with that.” Jax offered.

“Aren’t you handy.” Maria said, looking him up and down again. “I’d like to know what other tricks you’ve got up your sleeve.”

“Key?” Robert asked.

She removed a key from her purse and tossed it to him. “The fridge is stocked. And you’ve got internet. Just be careful of what sites you visit.”

Robert gave her a disbelieving look.

She thumped her hand on her forehead. “Sorry. Forgot who I was talking to.”

Robert recognized the look on Jax’s face and knew he had something to tell him but didn’t want to do it in mixed company. Maria caught the silent hint as well.

“I’ll leave you two alone. I’ll come by about six with the computer. I need to cover my tracks before anyone figures out what’ve been up to and we all get pinched.”

She could return with CIA agents or the police, Robert thought. But he didn’t have much of a choice. She had helped him out of a bind in Denver and was providing a place for him to hide. It was a good start in building a bridge towards trust.

“Will you be here?” She asked Jax with a smile.

“Probably not. I need to get back to work.”

“I’ll see you later.” She said, leaving the two men alone.

“Assistant Director Wiseman called me. He’s furious. Director Stanley has also revoked your protected custody status. He’s put the full resources of the FBI into finding you.” Jax informed Robert.

“Thank you, Jax. I want you and the team out of this. You’ve all done enough.”

“With all due respect, Boss---No. You can’t do this by yourself. You need us. We’re family and you don’t just turn your back on family. None of us is going anywhere until we solve

this. I'm also one of the best hackers in the country, besides you, and I have access you don't have anymore."

For once in his life Robert didn't know what to say. Jax was right. He did need them. He was torn between needing the help and possibly putting his team in legal jeopardy.

Jax grabbed his computer bag and threw his coat over his shoulder.

"I'll come by after work. I'm dying to see what's on that computer."

"Me too." Robert said simply as Jax left him alone.

His next call was not going to be pleasant.

"Where are you?" Were the first words Robert was hit with as soon as Shaunessy answered the phone.

"Probably best if you don't know."

"Best if I don't know? What---you don't trust me now?" The man was apoplectic.

"It's not a matter of trust, Shaun. I don't want you to have to lie to Director Stanley or anyone else."

"You need to come in."

"I can't solve this from inside a jail cell. I need you to get the CIA, the FBI and CSPD off my back." Robert countered.

There was a pregnant pause. Robert knew there was more bad news.

"Your toxicology results came back negative. No traces of any chemical, drug or substance was found in your system."

This rocked Robert back on his heels. It couldn't be possible.

Shaunessy continued. "That was the only thing stopping the Director from turning you over to the police. As soon as we got the test results and he saw your picture plastered all over

the news, the hammer dropped. They've frozen all of your assets and your driver's license and passport have been flagged. They've revoked all of your security clearances and a federal warrant has been issued for your arrest."

Shaunessy exhaled deeply. He obviously did not want to go to a place he had been trying to avoid.

"Robert. The mission you were on, it was pretty traumatic. You said it yourself. You're not a field agent. Seeing people killed, and in the brutal fashion you described, that would have a negative effect on anyone."

It was the PTSD story the Director and the FBI had been putting out. Robert wouldn't believe it. Not until he knew more.

"This is not PTSD. Something happened to us that night. I can't come in until I know what happened and why." Robert insisted strongly.

"If you come in, I can help you. I can't help you if you run." Shaunessy said sincerely.

"I want you to disavow me. Go along with whatever the Director says. It's the only way to protect you, my team and your family. Someone wants me off this case, Shaun. Enough to frame me for a crime I didn't commit, to ruin mine and Sarah's lives. I can't back off of this."

"You're putting us in a bad situation here, Robert."

"Does my IISA team still have access to Pandora?"

"Achojah's computer is at CIA headquarters. Shane wants a CIA team working alongside the IISA team so the CIA can monitor everything we do. He's also demanding the passwords and access codes to get past the security settings you added. It's the only way he'll let us have access. We're all playing nice because there's still an imminent threat to the US."

Robert absorbed what he was told. “Remember what you told me when you picked me up?” He asked.

“Classic CIA set up.” Shaunessy said quietly. “Who do we trust?”

“I’ll give Jax the access codes. But it’s not going to be enough. That computer has a program unlike anything I have ever seen. I had just scratched the surface.”

“Can Jax crack it?” Shaunessy questioned.

“No. But he can mess around with it enough to fool everyone into thinking he can. At least long enough for us to figure out how to get the laptop to me.”

“I am not hearing this.” Shaunessy said in a whisper, even though they were on a secure line.

“You’re not hearing this. Disavow me. I’ll work out the details until then. There’s a lot at stake here.”

“I know.” Shaunessy agreed.

There was silence on the other end of the phone. Robert let it continue, waiting to see where the other man stood and which side he would fall on. Helping Robert could destroy the career he had worked hard to build.

“I have a meeting with the top brass next week in Washington. It’ll give me a better read on the situation. You keeping this phone? They’re trying to trace it, unsuccessfully so far.”

“I took care of that. They won’t be able to trace my phone unless they break my encryption. They would have to bring the entire system down to do that. I also have my computer and tablet, both secure.” Robert answered.

“I’ll be in touch.” Shaunessy said, ending the call.

Robert infiltrated the Department of Defense's online calendar to see when the elite meeting was happening between the top brass. He then exploited the unprotected intercom system in the secure conference room so that he could unofficially sit in on the meeting.

No one knew Robert was silently listening in except Jax, who was seated in his best suit next to Shaunessy wearing a small dot sized camera in his nostril and a hearing device in his ear. Jax tilted his head up and scanned the room so Robert could see who was in attendance.

The attendees included Shaunessy and Jax, Secretary of Defense Edgar Page, several members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the heads of Homeland Security, Director Benjamin Stanley, Director Shane Kaggen, Pinder Haise, the CIA Operations Director, Brendon Stout, and the CIA's Cyber Security Director, Aakash Singh.

Aakash had always had a beef with Robert. He had applied for the Cyber Security Director's position at the IISA and Robert had gotten the job instead. The government, and even the CIA, the man's own organization, had filtered assignments to Robert's team because they were the best and everyone knew it. Robert had been an unintentional thorn in the man's career from day one. Aakash had a look of smug satisfaction on his face.

On the intercom were all of the top military and agency heads from the White House, the NSA, the DOJ and other senior officials at the Pentagon.

Robert noticed Shaunessy was sweating so bad there was a spreading of moisture under his arms. Obviously nervous, he loosened his tie to get some air.

"Where is he now?" From the Homeland Security Director.

"I don't know. We had him in a safe house. For reasons unknown he left." Shaunessy answered honestly.

"Have you spoken to him since that time?" The Homeland Security Director asked.

“Briefly. He said he’s innocent, wants to prove it. He’s not coming in.”

“This guy isn’t a field agent. Track him down. We need to get this guy off the street and behind bars before he jeopardizes this entire mission.” Came an angry reply from the Assistant Attorney General.

He was sitting in because his boss had a meeting with the Vice President. He was puffed up with pride in his temporary position of power and it came through in his voice.

“I disagree.” Secretary of Defense Page said calmly. “We need Robert Duchovny. We have to admit that there is no one in this country, on this planet for that fact, that can do what he does. That’s why we recruited him for the mission.”

“We brought him in to save American lives. Not so that he could have a psychotic breakdown.” The Assistant AG retorted.

“Look, I don’t know what’s going on. But I trust Assistant Director Wiseman’s assessment. This man is not a loose cannon, not unstable. He’s our best shot at getting into Achojah’s computer. We need to know what is so important that Achojah was willing to pay Sula millions to protect it and to kill anyone who got in the way.” This was from Secretary Page again who seemed to be the only level head in the room.

“The CIA also doesn’t have any leads on his whereabouts.” Pinder informed the group.

“We’ve been running facial recognition throughout the US and nothing has come up. His computer is untraceable and the frozen funds in his bank accounts disappeared. We’ve also been trying to turn off his secure phone but the signal seems to be blocked.” Director Kaggen said, looking around the room.

“He helped design the secure phone system. I’m sure he knows how to manipulate it.” Director Stanley offered.

“Can’t we just bring the whole system down?” From one of the Joint Chiefs.

“We have too many field agents and assets that use that phone system. There’s no way we can take the entire system down without affecting our agencies and the current missions we have running all over the world.” Secretary Page responded.

“Well, he can’t be doing this all by himself. He obviously has someone helping him.” Pinder stated in an accusatory tone, taking a jab at Shaunessy and Jax.

Robert heard the sound of paperwork shuffling through the intercom as someone was going through a file.

“What do we have on his friend and future business partner, Jonathan James? And what about the foster mother, the grandmother and this woman, his girlfriend, Sarah Levy?” The paper shuffler asked.

“Ex-girlfriend.” Aakash Singh chimed in sarcastically. He was obviously enjoying Robert’s predicament.

“Sarah Levy is staying with her brother, a detective with the CSPD. Mr. James has been at home or at his office in downtown Denver, no unusual activity. The mother and grandmother are both retired. Besides normal errands, nothing’s been out of the ordinary.” Pinder answered.

“Do we have a wiretap on the phones?” From the DOJ head.

“We do. But if Robert calls them all we get is garbled speech we can’t decipher. We know he’s called Mr. James several times. But the security firm seems to have some type of encryption on its phone as well. No calls to the girlfriend or his family.” Pinder offered.

“Were you able to do a trace on the James calls?” Anger and frustration was creeping into the voice on the intercom.

“We tried. He hangs up before the trace is complete.” Pinder answered, obviously flustered that he was on the receiving end of the berating officials.

“We’re doing all we can.” Director Kaggen said in defense of Pinder. “But you have to understand what we’re dealing with. This guy might not be a field agent, but he knows cybersecurity. As you heard earlier, he helped design and set up many of our networks. He knows how to get around the safeguards. We’re using every resource at our disposal to track him. He can’t stay hidden forever. At some point, he’s going to have to make a move. That’s when we’ll get him.”

“How do we make this go away and get him back on the job?” This was the Attorney General. He had finished his meeting with the VP and was now on the call.

“Wait. You’re still trying to deal with this guy after what he did?” The Assistant AG chimed in, obviously insulted.

“Is accused of doing. He has sternly held fast to his innocence.” Shaunessy added.

“They always do.” The Assistant AG countered.

“That will be all, Gregory.” The Attorney General dismissed his assistant from the call and the man hung up in a huff.

“I understand how some of you may feel. However, we have to take into consideration the larger picture here.” Secretary Page said.

“Offer him a deal. If he pleads guilty, he’ll do six months in jail. We’ll house him here in Virginia where he can work on the computer during the day. At night, we’ll keep him under protective custody. He’ll be in the best federal prison. It’s more like a country club. We’ll make sure he’s very well taken care of.” The Attorney General offered.

“He won’t take the deal. His life and reputation have been destroyed, not to mention Sarah’s life. He needs to get to the bottom of this, to clear his name.” Shaunessy said.

“Well, while he’s thinking of himself, American lives are at risk. If he’s the patriot you say he is, he’ll come in and do his job.” From the head of Homeland Security again.

“Is there a plan here that doesn’t involve throwing someone who has worked tirelessly for his country to the wolves? Can we put some assets and resources to find out what the heck happened? Robert would never do what he’s being accused of. This stinks to high heaven and you all know it.” Shaunessy retorted.

“We don’t know anything. All we know are the facts we have in front of us and that he’s in hiding.” From Director Kaggen.

“And he’s doing a huge disservice to his country.” The Homeland Security Director added.

Director Stanley addressed Shaunessy. “Shaun, we know how close you and Robert are. We know he’s a good friend. But we don’t have time for this. We need him back on this team now. If you know where he is, you need to get a message him. Make him the offer. If he takes it, we’ll put full resources behind protecting him and his family and getting to the bottom of what happened.”

“We’ve tightened the noose. The guy’s cut off. His only option is to come in if he wants any semblance of a normal life after all of this blows over. He can come in and face this or I’ll make sure we use every resource at our disposal to hunt him down. And I mean every resource.” The Attorney General said.

“What does that mean? You’re threatening him now?” Shaunessy was furious and was no longer trying to hide it.

“Shaun.” Director Stanley gave Shaunessy a warning look.

“I think I’m done here.” Shaunessy said, grabbing his brief case and standing.

Robert expected someone to protest. He knew his friend was in trouble when no one did.

“Make him the offer. I hate to sound cliché, but he needs to understand it’s an offer he can’t refuse. If he doesn’t accept and comply, he will be considered an enemy of the state.”

This came from the Attorney General and Robert knew his words had the full weight of the US government behind them.

Shaunessy stepped outside followed by Jax. He had soaked through his shirt and jacket and he looked a mess. Director Stanley followed behind him, closing the door.

“Can you give us a moment Jaxson.” The Director said. It was not a request.

“Yes sir.” Jax replied.

Jax walked down the hallway, but not too far. Robert could still hear the conversation.

“What the hell was that, Shaun?”

Jax turned slightly so Robert could see as well as hear the confrontation. The Director was so angry he was red in the face. Being the second in command, anything Shaunessy did was a direct reflection on the IISA, the FBI and him. Robert knew Shaunessy was treading on thin ice.

“I’ve known Robert for years. He’s a decent man. Do you know how many lives he’s saved? How many disasters have been averted because of what he does? His years of devotion to this agency, to this country, means nothing to these people.”

“I know how you feel. We just need him to do his job. I’m sure his phone is still on and he’ll answer if you call. Make him the deal. It’s his only way out of this.” The Director said, his words empty and without emotion.

The Director put his hand on the door handle to go back into the room. Before he did, he stopped and turned to Shaunessy. "It's the only way out of this for all of us."

It was a veiled threat. If Shaunessy failed to get Robert to cooperate his position at the IISA and the FBI could be in jeopardy. Shaunessy stood outside for a moment, watching as the Director re-entered the room and closed the door behind him.

Shaunessy was quiet as he and Jax walked to his Mercedes. He used a hand-held scanner to check his car. The scanner beeped, alerting him that there were tracking devices affixed to the vehicle. Jax slipped inside the car and closed the door.

"You hear all that bullshit?" Jax whispered to Robert in his two-way earpiece.

"I did. Where's Shaun?"

"He's outside scanning the car for bugs. He's pissed. Never seen him like this before."

Jax said.

"Can he see the device?"

"No---my hair---."

For once Robert was thankful for his protégé's unruly tresses. Jax turned so that Robert could see what his boss was doing.

There was a beep towards the back of the vehicle. Robert watched through the camera as Shaunessy looked under the rear bumper. Locating the last GPS device, he removed it and attached it to the car beside him.

Back in the car he glanced at Jax who was a master of the poker face. Shaunessy waited until they were out of the parking garage before he spoke.

“What I’m about to do could be considered treason. If you don’t want any part of it, I can drop you off at the deli up the street. You can get a sandwich, take a taxi back to the hotel and forget we ever had this conversation.”

“Does this have something to do with Mr. Duchovny, Sir?”

“Yes, it does.”

“Then I would very much like to commit treason too.” Jax replied without hesitation.

“Jax, I want you out of this” Robert whispered in his ear. He was ignored.

They drove a few miles in silence. Just before the deli Shaunessy pulled over at the curb.

“Last chance, Jax. I can’t guarantee I’m not going to end up in jail or worse. You can walk away from this.” He said, looking Jax in the eye.

“Walk away. Please walk away.” Robert begged in the earpiece.

“I’m in, Sir. Whatever it takes.” Jax confirmed.

Shaunessy pulled away from the curb and back onto the street. He hit a button on his phone, put it on speaker. When the person answered they didn’t speak a word but Robert could hear breathing on the other end of the line.

“I need a full kit. Non-traceable. One hundred percent off the grid. And I mean off the grid.” Shaunessy emphasized. “Not even the agencies can know about this.”

The man on the line gave him a price

“That’s double what we normally pay.”

The man didn’t speak. They were buying his silence.

“I’ll pay it. But you screw me over, you’ll pay dearly. Do we have an agreement?”

Shaunessy asked.

The other man agreed to the terms.

They had crossed the line and there was no turning back. Robert noticed through Jax's nose camera that Shaunessy's hands were shaking. The man flinched nervously in his seat when his secure phone rang. He put the phone on speaker again.

"I have a plan. Robert's not going to like it. But it will buy us time. I assume you've already ordered the kit?" Secretary Page asked.

"I did."

"When can we have delivery?"

"48 hours."

"Good. We have to face the fact that the FBI and the CIA have potentially been compromised. Someone knows what we're talking about in our own house and I don't like it. Neither does the President. However, we can't put anymore assets on this without being detected and without knowing who the traitor is."

"What do we have the authority to do, sir?" Shaunessy questioned.

"You have full authority to do whatever is necessary. It just can't be traced back to the administration or the President. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Robert needs to get to the Philippines. Paulo and Angel Santos are the first key to solving this mystery. My intel shows that they flew into Manila. However, they have both left the area. Angel is off the grid, but we've been able to trace Paulo. And by the way, we have photos of Angel's mother shopping and eating out with friends, healthy as a horse."

"So much for the sick mother." Shaunessy responded.

"Is Robert's personal computer still secure?" Secretary Page questioned.

"Yes, and Robert has it in his possession."

“I am sending him information on Paulo’s location and a mission plan within the next 24 hours.”

“We need some type of security. Robert can’t just waltz into the Philippines without protection and he can’t get help from Jonathan James this time. It’s too risky.”

“You’re going to have to be creative. I’m limited on what I can do without raising suspicions. You’ll have to think outside the box.”

“I’ll let him know.” Shaunessy paused, thinking how to delicately approach the next subject.

“We need Achojah’s computer. We both know there’s no one else that can break the encryption. How do we get the computer into Robert’s hands without anyone knowing?”

“I’m working on that. Let’s just say we’re not alone in our suspicions. We know what needs to be done. Tread carefully Shaun and don’t trust anyone. We have a Judas in our midst.”

Shaunessy’s conversation with Secretary Page did not make Robert feel any better. He saw Shaunessy turn up the air conditioner in the car, then the man popped a couple of tums before he made one more call, again on speaker phone so that Jax could hear.

Robert knew what was coming. He answered his phone, but remained silent until the other man spoke.

“I’m assuming you heard all that?” Shaunessy questioned.

Robert didn’t answer. He didn’t want to get Jax in trouble with the boss.

“Jax’s hair is a little bit wilder than normal and he’s not one to turn his nose up at people. I put two and two together.”

“Ahhh---I---ummm---I just wanted to know what was going on. Thank you for defending me.”

“In 48 hours, send someone to DIA airport, locker 13A. The combination is 45-18-67. It can't be you, John, Jax or anyone else close to you.”

“They have eyes and ears on everyone I know.” Robert commented.

Who was he going send?

“Right now, the surveillance is only state side, nothing international yet. This is 100 % off the books. That means no security and no help.” Shaunessy warned.

“Understood.”

“As I'm sure you heard, we're working on getting Achojah's laptop. I don't know how, but this is coming directly from Secretary Page.”

“I know you and everyone involved is helping me at great risk to yourselves. I promise your trust in me is not in vain.”

“I've always trusted you and you've never failed. We expect nothing less.” Shaunessy said without hesitation.

Nicholas Hobbs had been in love with Sarah for as long as he'd known her. But Sarah needed something mentally and emotionally that Nics could never provide. He had settled for admiring her from afar and protecting her.

He knew people called him Aaron's attack dog. He didn't care what people thought. He had put the fear of the Lord almighty into Sarah's ex-husband and he was about to do worse to Robert Duchovny. Far be it from him if the man was still breathing by the end of the week.

As he exited his Crown Vic, he spied Aaron sitting at their usual table looking over the menu. He couldn't say anything to his long-time friend, a decorated CSPD detective, about the dark thoughts circulating in his mind. Nics had ghastly plans for the man who had hurt Sarah.

The eatery was a classic 50's diner and a favorite local hangout. After speaking to Sarah, Aaron had informed him that he was no closer to getting to the bottom of what had happened. He hoped Nics could help.

Their table was private, away from prying ears. Judy, the waitress, had already brought over menus and two waters, one without ice.

"Nics." Aaron said as the other man sat down.

Nics was a name that only his close friends called him. Everyone else called him Nicholas or Mr. Hobbs. Others didn't call him anything at all and avoided him like the plague.

He was former Army and had done several tours in the middle east. A Humvee carrying him and his team had been hit by a roadside bomb. The entire team had come out of the explosion critically injured or deceased.

He had survived, but was badly scarred from the incident. One side of his face looked like he had washed with sandpaper. His body was scarred also, but he was lean and kept himself in extremely good shape for his work. He had a rough, convict look about him and people avoided eye contact with his clear, grey eyes.

If people saw him coming their way on a dark street, they'd cross to the other side. But that was just his persona. Nics was hard as nails, but decent and trustworthy. Aaron had brought him in on several of his cases.

Judy came by with two coffee cups. "Hello there." she said as she filled the cups, "Two eggs, over easy, rye bread, side of potatoes." She asked, knowing Nics usual.

"Yep." Nics responded in his raspy voice, another casualty of the bombing incident.

"You order already?" Nics inquired of Aaron and he acknowledged that he had.

Aaron waited for Judy to leave before he slid a file across the table. As Nics looked over the contents, he frowned, his face twisted at something he read.

“What the F---.”

Judy interrupted with breakfast, then hurried back to the kitchen.

“The guy’s IISA, pretty high up the chain” Aaron informed him.

“No wonder those guys in the fancy suits showed up.” Nics pushed his food aside and leaned towards Aaron. “Let’s just talk plainly here. From what you told me it sounds like they’re going soft on this guy, if they can even find him. I’m going to handle this. You don’t know anything about it, your hands will be clean.” Nics insisted in a whisper.

Nics sensed Aaron wanted to get his hands on Robert Duchovny too. He could see it in the man’s face. He longed for it, ached for it. But his badge stopped him. Nics had no such limitations. He had never broken the law or done anything illegal. He was about to break his perfect track record with Robert.

Judy slipped by, refreshed their coffees and water, then shuffled away in a hurry as if she sensed the heaviness between the two men.

Aaron finally spoke. “I would love to take this guy out into a dark field somewhere and beat him to death. But I have never used my badge for personal gain. I can’t tarnish it now with a vendetta. I just need to know what I don’t know about this guy and I’ve hit a dead end.”

Nics looked over the pictures taken of Robert at the police station and the file.

“Gotta be others out there, women afraid to talk.” He paused as he eyed the pictures, leaned close to Aaron. “Look, I might need to get a little dirty on this one.” He whispered.

“I need this clean, Nics. I don’t want anything this guy can wiggle out of.”

“I promise you, there won’t be anything I bring to you that won’t hold up in a court of law. Just let me handle how I get it.”

The two men ate in silence. Nics downed the rest of his coffee and swiped a napkin over his lips. He threw a fifty on the table.

“Thank you, Judy.” He called out, waving to the back kitchen.

“The usual fee?” Aaron asked, standing as well. Nics shot him a look, he was genuinely offended

“This is on the house.”

Robert stood up with a start as a blond woman entered his safe domain. His first thought was that he had been betrayed and the woman was there to turn him in or worse. It took Robert a moment to recognize the features, the stance, the eyes. It was a darn good disguise. He let out a sigh and returned to his seat.

“You could have just said something. You nearly gave me a heart attack.” He chastised her.

“Where’s the fun in that.” Maria countered, laying two bags next to the adjacent chair and helping herself to a beer in the fridge.

She popped the cap and took a sip before she sat down. Opening one of her bags, she retrieved her laptop, handing it over to him.

“I took off all of my personal stuff, except the weird file.”

Robert booted up Maria’s computer as she sat beside him. As he was trying to unlock the mystery file hidden on her computer, his mind went through different scenarios and his limited options.

He needed to get to the Philippines to find Paulo, but Robert was smart enough to know he couldn't do it alone. Secretary Page had given him explicit instructions that he couldn't depend on anyone he knew for assistance. He was going to have to take a chance on people he didn't know.

After doing battle with the file, he was finally victorious and it opened up to reveal its secrets. He was intrigued by what he saw.

"Interesting." Robert commented as he went through the file.

"What? Did you get in already?" Maria leaned forward.

"This file wasn't as heavily protected as Pandora."

"Pandora?"

"Achojah's computer. The one we retrieved in Afghanistan. This computer has a similar encryption on the file. It's just not as sophisticated as the master computer."

"What's in it?"

"Do you really want to know?" Robert questioned.

"Yes." She answered stiffly, almost as if she knew what was coming.

"You mentioned that, as an agency asset, he was continuously being monitored for signs of radicalization."

"That's true of all our agents."

"How do I explain this? In simple terms, he had a ghost program running within your computer. It was piggy backing off your computer's program. If he sent or received an email, it went to this q.com file. I can see several emails going back and forth."

Robert paused, grabbing his Lenovo. He started transferring files from her computer and making a record of the email addresses Louka was sending and receiving from. He would track the emails and hoped to get some answers on who had been pulling Louka's strings.

"What else?" Maria asked, masked anger in her voice.

Robert needed time to unpack what he was seeing on her computer. But he knew he wouldn't get anywhere until he answered her questions. He put the computer aside and looked into the face of an infuriated woman.

"It's going to take some time to research everything. There are emails, several file folders and pictures. I need to---"

"Pictures? With who?" Maria interrupted.

"The woman. The one you showed me in the photos from Tangiers." Robert said, no need to lie at this point.

Robert could see fury raging behind the woman's feigned calm demeanor. Her worst nightmare had been realized. She had been living and sleeping with a terrorist that was planning to betray her, her country and the CIA right under her nose. It wasn't something a person in her line of work ever wanted to hear.

Robert continued. "As much as you and the CIA might have investigated this man, you wouldn't have found anything. He had everything hidden in this ghost file. Untraceable and undetectable."

"What you're saying is that I was a mark? He used me to gain knowledge about the missions and he used my computer to hide what he was doing?"

"I'm sorry, Maria. That's exactly what I'm saying."

"Don't apologize to me." She snapped.

“Do you want me to be honest or do you want me to lie to make you feel better?” Robert inquired.

She pulled herself together as much as possible. “Is there more?”

“Yes. I can see malware too. It’s very sophisticated. He or whoever he works for has been pulling data off of this computer. They had intimate knowledge of the CIA missions you were involved in, the last one being the mission I was on in Afghanistan.”

Maria paled and looked as if she was going to be ill as her eyes filled with hatred. The rage boiling inside her turned into something viscous Robert hoped he would never have to see. Still, she kept her composure.

“You saw all of that while I was sitting here sipping my beer?” She asked, furious but obviously impressed.

“I did. It will take time for me to investigate everything I’m seeing here. But this is a tremendous help, Maria. This data gives me very deep insight into what we’re up against.”

“I want in.” She demanded.

This was the point of no return. Robert was either going to have to trust her or he had to send her packing. He turned his options over again quickly in his mind. He would be in jail if she hadn’t been there. She had trusted him enough to hand over her computer and had provided a safe roof over his head for the time being. He pondered his limited choices and made a game time decision.

“I need your help with something.” He said simply, seeing if she would bite.

She leaned back in her chair, crossed her legs and put her arms on the arm rests.

“Robert Anderson Duchovny needs something from me? How about that.” She said with a satisfied, smug smile.

Robert knew trusting her meant he was going to have to walk a very fine line. She was going to be a handful to deal with, a loose cannon that could go off at any time.

“I have something that I need to retrieve.”

“Where?” She questioned.

He gave her the location and the locker number.

“No one knows about you except Jax. With your disguise you should be able to get in and out unnoticed.”

“I’m not being watched. I can guarantee that. I’ve been very careful. I’ll do this. But I want in, one hundred percent.” She replied, stating her conditions.

“Can I ask you why?” Robert asked.

“There is some sideways crap going on here and I don’t like it. I don’t like being used and I don’t like being played. I don’t like---” She trailed off and Robert saw a glimpse of tears in her eyes.

It was plain to see that she had been in love with Louka. He had broken her heart and left her a woman scorned. She took a deep breath, stuffed it down and continued. “I don’t like having the blood of people who trusted me on my hands. I want to find that son of a bitch and when I do---” She let the sentence trail off.

Robert didn’t want Louka killed. He wanted him brought to justice and the people he worked for to be exposed. But for now, he needed Maria. He just hoped, when the time came, he could reign in the raw hatred she had towards the man who had betrayed her in the worst possible way.

“You come back with the package and I’ll brief you on everything I know. Then we can discuss our next steps.”

“Done.” She said, standing to leave.

“Do you think someone from the CIA will show up here at some point?” Robert questioned.

“Yes. You should always be concerned and vigilant. You were so wrapped up in what you were doing you didn’t even hear my car pull up.”

Maria retrieved her purse.

“I’ll be back tomorrow. I’ll be a redhead this time, so don’t let the disguise startle you.”

With that she was gone.

Back home, Sarah put away groceries and had time to shower before Maggie arrived.

As promised, Maggie was loaded down with dinner and some of her famous homemade muffins. Her good friend filled her in on everything that had been going on at school while Sarah had been away and updated her on her students.

The substitute teacher seemed to be faring well, but the students really wanted Sarah back and were being very vocal. They even created a petition that was signed by each student and personally marched up to the principal’s office.

Sarah was touched and desperately wanted to get back to the classroom and her kids. She enjoyed tutoring, but teaching was really her joy and passion. She didn’t want to miss too much more of the school year and hoped she could get back to teaching soon.

“Parents are starting to bark at the principle too.” Maggie said, giving Sarah hope it may happen sooner than later.

Sarah took in a deep breath as she slowly nibbled on one of Maggie's muffins. She had not shared with anyone what was happening to her and needed to get it off her chest, to know she wasn't going insane.

"Can I tell you something?"

"Of course. You know you can tell me anything." Maggie responded to the seriousness in Sarah's voice.

"I've been having these dual memories, like I'm experiencing two different realities. Imagine if you and I are sitting here talking now and we're certain this is happening in this moment. But then, tomorrow, you wake up and you remember this moment, but it's entirely different. It started after the night---the night everything happened. I was so sure of what happened the morning after. But as time goes on, the memory has started to break into two different memories."

Maggie's brow creased in thought. "The mind is a powerful thing. You may just be so traumatized that you're trying to forget what happened."

Maggie retrieved her purse. Digging through her wallet she pulled out a card, handed it to Sarah.

"I've referred her to many women, saw her myself after my husband died. You should give her a call."

Sarah took the card.

"Aaron referred me to the same person." Sarah said as she looked the card over.

Maggie took Sarah's hands in hers. "Make the call, Sarah. You can't do this alone. I'm here and I know your family is here too. But I think, with what you're telling me, you might need more than we can offer."

“Thank you, Maggie.” Sarah gave her a big hug.

Sarah changed the subject. She wanted to think about anything but the incident. She asked about the kids in her class. Maggie gave her the update and she couldn't help but laugh at some of their antics in her absence.

As the minutes turned into hours, her home felt warmed again by her friend's presence. It was late when Maggie finally decided to call it night.

“Don't be a stranger. Call me if you need anything.” Were Maggie's parting words.

Sarah promised she would.

Alone, Sarah made some calls to set up tutoring appointments. Then she curled up with a good book and a steaming cup of tea. It was all part of her attempt at getting back to normal.

That was the last memory she had before she woke up face down on the floor. Stumbling as she stood, she made her way through the pitch-black house. Panic started to set in as she slid her hand desperately over the wall searching for a light switch.

Turning on the light in the kitchen, she glanced at the clock. It was past midnight. She had been out for hours.

When she tried to stand, visions begin to flash unwelcomed through her mind. That night, what she thought had happened mingled with the alternate memories.

Sarah collapsed back onto the floor.

“What is happening to me?” She cried to the empty room.

It was past midnight when Robert's phone rang.

“Boss.” Jaxson greeted.

“What do you got for me?”

“I was able to gain access to Aakash Singh’s computer.”

“How?” Robert asked.

He knew the young man was good at his craft, but wanted to make sure nothing could be traced.

“I used that trojan horse malware you showed me last year. Apparently, Singh has a weakness for---he likes to visit certain web sites. I caught him online when we were working on Pandora with the CIA team. He logged off as soon as I walked by, but I saw it.”

“He didn’t fall for it?” Robert asked incredulously.

“He did. I set up an account and profile on a site I know he visits and sent him a friend request with the trojan horse attached. Not only did he click on the link, but he accepted the request. He’s been chatting endlessly with my fictional character, Roxanne.”

Robert put his head in his hand, shaking his head in disbelief at what he was hearing. It would be comical if it wasn’t so tragic.

Jax continued. “I have access to his computer and his email. Since the CIA hasn’t been able to hack the system, he’s been trying to get your secure phone shut down.”

“I know. I’ve received several signals to shut down which I have intercepted.”

“He was able to gain access to your company email. There’s nothing there of course. Just emails back and forth between the team and other agencies. Nothing above the classification levels you both hold. They also have an online trace running, trying to see if there are any unusual hits on your name. Something did come up. Do you know someone named Nicholas Hobbs?”

“Doesn’t sound familiar.”

Robert typed in the name. The search brought up a link to Hobbs Private Investigative Agency. He went to the web site.

“Looks like he does a lot of work with the Colorado Springs Police Department and other law enforcement agencies. I’ll have to look into this further.” Robert said as he scrolled the web page.

“The CIA also sent a team to the Philippines. They swept all the safehouses and they have facial recognition running in cooperation with the Philippine government. You know what that means---”

“I’m going to have to tread carefully.” Robert finished the sentence. “Sounds like they’re looking for Paulo too. Thanks, Jax.”

Returning to his work, he was unpacking and reviewing the files on Maria’s computer when a key turned in the lock and a red head entered. He was assaulted by the smell of what he knew was Chinese food and his stomach rumbled. He hadn’t eaten since breakfast.

Maria had a large black duffle and a briefcase. She placed both on the floor by the table Robert was working at.

“I noticed you were getting low on food when I got my beer. I grabbed you a few groceries along with your favorite, Chinese. I got you some bagels as well.”

Robert retrieved the duffle bag and brief case and brought them to the kitchen table. Maria grabbed a white container out of the bag and started eating noodles straight out of the box with chop sticks. Robert picked up the nearest box and dug in as well.

“I upheld my end of the bargain. Now it’s your turn.” She demanded.

“First, let’s see what’s in the bag, shall we?”

Robert opened the duffle bag. Inside were 2 secure phones, 6 two-inch stacks of \$20, \$50 and \$100 bills, 7 passports, drivers licenses and other government identification cards, all for different countries. Robert's picture was affixed to each official item, but his appearance had been altered. Someone had provided a brief description for each of the alternate identities.

There was also a kit that contained dark hair dye, contact lenses, makeup, putty, artificial hair and other items he could use to disguise himself. They had included a Jammer, a GPS scanner and a wiretap device.

In the brief case there was a Walther PPK, complete with 5 fully loaded clips, additional ammunition and a silencer.

Robert had heard about these types of kits, but never thought he would see one. Maria finished her noodles and nodded her approval.

"They got you the best money can buy. Someone's looking out for you."

Retrieving his laptop, Robert motioned for her to sit. She pulled up a chair next to him. He showed her all of the intel about the new mission. She reviewed everything with a trained eye and detailed scrutiny.

"It's a good first move. Paulo can give us some answers. Who's on the team?"

"So far you're looking at it." Robert answered

She gave him an amazed look. "Are you kidding? Do you realize who Paulo Santos is? I worked with this guy. He'll take us apart if we go in there alone."

"As you can imagine, we're short on options here. Do you know anyone we can trust?"

"Everyone I trusted was on Operation Recovery with you. Who's pulling the strings here? It has to be someone very high up to authorize this."

"I can't say. And we're on our own."

“That high up, huh. Don’t want to get their hands dirty if this goes south.”

“I understand if you want to walk away from this.” Robert said.

“I didn’t say that. This just makes things a lot more challenging.”

Robert brought up a schematic of the building Paulo was allegedly hiding in. They also reviewed the surrounding streets and highways.

“There are street cameras here and here.” Robert pointed. “I can access the cameras and control the feed. I can also set up a proximity warning on my phone. It will let us know if anyone is approaching. It will give us about 20 minutes. The intel says Paulo is on the top floor.”

“We’ll be sitting ducks.” She spat the words out, looking at Robert as if he was a complete buffoon. “Paulo will pick us off one after the other. We’re going to have to walk it. Park a mile away, then go in through the back.”

She picked up the Walther PPK, slide in a clip, cocked the gun and aimed.

“You know how to use this beautiful weapon?”

“I have military training. But if you’re asking me to shoot Paulo, it’s out of the question. How about a radical concept? I go in through the front door, hands up. I call out his name, tell him I’m just there to talk?”

“You have got to be the biggest moron on the planet. The man just set you up.”

“We don’t know that.” Robert said, offended.

Maria rubbed him the wrong way, in every way, and he was starting to regret the alliance he had made in desperation.

She rolled her eyes and continued. “For all you know he’s working for Achojah. He’ll blow your head off as soon as he sees you, hands up or not. He’s an excellent marksman. If he’s going to shoot you, he’s going in for the kill. You’re as good as dead.”

Robert didn't want to believe his old friend could be that nefarious. There had to be something else behind this. In his heart, he felt Paulo was in trouble.

"There's something else going on here. Think about it. You don't set someone up, leave the country, then go to the Philippines to see your family. Why even stop there? Why not take whatever payment you got, change your name and retire? And why is he hiding in a decrepit building in the worst part of town? The intel says he's been there for some time. What's he waiting for?" Robert countered.

Robert could see the wheels turning in Maria's head as she considered what he had said.

"You're right, none of it makes sense. But I'm not going in through the front door. We park, we go in through here."

She enlarged the schematic of the building and pointed to the worst possible place to enter.

"That's a death trap." Robert commented.

"Exactly. It's the last place Paulo will expect us to enter. He's probably got the front door and the back entrance wired." She pointed at both to show Robert what she was referring to.

"Wired? As in explosives?" Robert asked

"Yes, explosives. Your good friend, who you think would never hurt you, was trapped in a building on one of his missions in Syria surrounded by terrorists who wanted him dead. He rigged all of the entrances and exits of the building with explosives and blew everyone to smithereens when they tried to come in after him. He showed up at the Al-Tanf garrison a few days later driving one of the terrorist's jeeps. So excuse me if I approach this with caution."

Robert knew Paulo had been on some dangerous missions. But this was the first time he was hearing details. He urgently needed to talk to Paulo, but wanted to stay alive as well.

“We go in this way, carefully.” He finally conceded

“It will be messy. But it’s do-able.”

Maria leaned back, looking Robert over. She sighed before she spoke.

“Sorry to burst your bubble about your buddy Paulo, but you’re playing on a whole new level now. You have to assume you’re always in danger and your life depends on your every move. You’re not behind a desk anymore. You have to stop thinking like Robert Duchovny and think like they do. You’re too predictable.”

“Really? Explain.” Robert asked, honestly eager to hear what she had to say.

“How do you think I knew you liked Chinese food and bagels? I surveilled you for months trying to figure out the best time to approach you.”

“For how long?” Robert asked, surprised.

“Three months.” She offered. “And you didn’t even notice. Every morning, you go to Larry’s bagel shop. You get a coffee and bagel sandwich. If you’re feeling adventurous, you might get a pastry. Then, for lunch, you usually grab a sandwich from the cafeteria and you do a working lunch at your desk or in the lab. You like turkey a lot because you get it every time. Then, after work, you stop at the same Chinese restaurant. The owner knows you so well she calls you honey and slips in free egg rolls with your order. Do you want to hear more?”

“I think I get the picture.” Robert said, holding up his hand in defense.

“You need to be unpredictable in this game or you’re going wind up caught or dead. And everyone around you will end up the same way.”

“Teach me.” Robert requested with conviction.

This was new territory for him and he valued Maria’s insight and knowledge.

She went to the kit, pulling out the passports.

“Who are you on this mission?” She asked.

“I don’t know. Pick one.”

“You need to select one. You have different identities here. Who is most likely to go to the Philippines? Think about your cover in Afghanistan.” She exclaimed.

“I was a businessman there on business.” He offered.

“Yes. So, pick one.”

Robert went through the ID’s and the description list thoroughly. After careful consideration he pulled one out.

“This guy. Telecommunications Executive.”

“Why?” She questioned, but he could tell by her look he was on to something.

“I’m going to Asia for business. I can fly from the US into South Korea, then to the Philippines without raising suspicion.”

“Good.” She said, impressed but not done. “Next step, you have to become this guy. Not overdoing it, but just enough to avoid detection. You need to not be you. Robert always has his nose in a computer, everywhere he goes. You name your computers after women, which is a little depressing, and you take it everywhere you go. You accessorize with a computer bag.”

“Ok, ok.” Robert interrupted, holding up his hands like a bank robber caught in the act. “I got it. No computer, no Chinese food, no bagels. I need to become---”, he picked up the passport, “Eugene Dougray.”

“Ok Eugene, when you go to the airport what are you going to do to avoid bringing attention to yourself? How can you blend in? All our intelligence agencies have eyes everywhere looking for Robert Duchovny and I can guarantee that they’re watching the airports. How are you going to play your part to avoid being caught? Study the layout of the airport, where are the

cameras? Study your route to the airport. How will you get there without being noticed? We shouldn't be seen together in the US, not even in disguise, so you need to find your own transportation. Where are you going to stay in the Philippines? It doesn't look like any plans were made."

Sifting through the items provided, she was right. They'd given him the means, but not the method. With the Afghanistan mission everything had been planned and put into place, he just had to show up. And even with all of the planning, things had still gone terribly wrong. He was suddenly overwhelmed with the task that lay before him.

"I gotta get home and get some sleep. You're a smart guy Robert, smarter than most I've heard. You'll figure this out. I can help, but I can't do it all and it seems that you and I are all we got. I don't want to go to jail and I don't want to disappear. This plan has got to be as solid."

"I'll do everything in my power to make sure nothing happens to you." Robert said, meaning every word.

Like her or not, she was sticking her neck way out for him and he didn't know how he could ever repay her. He knew some of what she was doing was personal, very personal. But she was putting herself at risk none the less.

He grabbed one of the secure phones and wrote down John's business address on a piece of paper.

"Is there any way you can get this to Jonathan James? I've been told his business is being watched."

"Of course it is. And I already know where the business is located. Remember--- surveillance---3 months. It's another place and person you need to avoid. They're watching your friend John six ways from Sunday."

“What about Sarah and my family?”

Maria jammed the phone in her purse, rolling her eyes. “Get your mind off the girl and on the business at hand.”

After Maria was gone, he spent the next few hours going through every detail of the mission. Glancing at the clock he saw it was past 4 am. He squinted his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. A headache was brewing behind his temples.

Mentally spent, he stripped down and headed for the shower. Looking in the bathroom mirror he barely recognized himself.

He had stopped shaving and his hair was growing out along with a nice 3 o'clock shadow. His alias had a mustache. He hoped to get some real facial hair going so he didn't have to use the artificial stache they'd provided in the kit.

After a hot shower he popped an ibuprofen followed by a sleeping pill, then slipped into bed. As he often did, he pulled out his phone and looked through the pictures.

Sarah and Robert on their first date, dinner and then the museum. Beautiful hikes where she always beat him to the top. Then one of his favorites, Sarah, Mem and Addie all smiling over Mem's beautiful banana pudding. Going through the pictures he smiled and laughed quietly to himself.

There was a moment, in the stillness and calm of that moment, that he thought of calling Sarah. The phone luminated her phone number and he was tempted to just hit the call button. He wanted desperately to hear her voice, to explain everything to her, to tell her he still loved her and thought about her every day.

Robert was still determined to have a life with her. But now was not the time. As long as he stayed away and everyone thought she wanted nothing to do with him, she was safe. He laid

the phone down gently on the nightstand. He didn't think he would sleep, but weariness overtook him and sleep came quick and deep.

Louka was on a mission in Lima, Peru. He was there for the usual task, killing. There was a weapons dealer planning a sale of nuclear devices and information to North Korea. With the new technology and a sample of the nukes, North Korea would be able to jump ahead years in its quest for nuclear proliferation. The CIA had gotten wind of the sell and Louka had been dispatched to solve the problem.

His mark had a penchant for futbol. It would be the last game the man ever attended. Louka's team had done reconnaissance at the stadium, planning out the details on how, when and where Louka would take the man out. No boxes were left unchecked.

Louka met with his team again the next day to go over the assassination step by step. Then he did a dry run alone to make sure he could get the job done and get out undetected. After that he had a full day to relax, to take in the sights of Peru. Not that it meant anything to him.

He had grown cold. Not in the physical sense, but in a mental, emotional and spiritual sense. The faces of the people he had killed haunted him. He wondered how many of them were actually guilty of the things they were accused of. What if the person he was sent to murder was just an ordinary guy who had gone afoul of the CIA for whatever reason.

How many innocent people had he killed for private vendettas or a simple case of mistaken identity? How many times had people died because of bad intel?

Louka had turned his blood to ice to do the job and it left him dead inside. He was a dead man walking, but no one around him knew. Not the people on his team, his superiors, or Maria Lim, the woman he slept with every night.

Passing the psych examines was easy because he knew exactly what they wanted to see and what they needed to hear. No one knew he planned to put a gun to his head and pull the trigger. When his team came to retrieve him from his five-star hotel after the mission they would find a corpse.

On what was going to be his last night on earth he decided to give himself a grand final meal. Finding a popular corner café, he ordered like a king. For once he finally felt at peace. Something about his upcoming demise had caused a mental and emotional release.

He didn't have any close family or friends that would miss him, only a few distant relatives in Kosovo and Europe. Before leaving the states, he had drawn up a simple will. Along with the killing of one unfortunate arms dealer, these would be the last acts of Louka Stojanović, his life gone like the flickering of an extinguished flame.

As he enjoyed his meal, he watched everyone around him. The differences in the human spirit was on full display that night. Animated conversations were going on all around him, different languages, a gesturing of hands.

He was lost in the commotion, relishing the anonymity when a woman approached his table. She said something in a foreign language he could not understand over the noise of the crowd.

“Excuse me?” He asked, noticing how strikingly beautiful she was.

Like a goddess from an Arabian Nights fairy tale, she wore a simple, long salmon colored dress, gold sandals. Long dark hair fell about her exposed shoulders.

“English?” She asked with a thick accent Louka could not place. It was odd, because he was good with accents and placing people. It was part of his job.

“There is no place to sit. All tables full. May I join you? The waiter said I could if it is ok with you.” She asked casually.

Louka’s first thought was that he had been made and was being set up. However, he decided he would play whosever game it was. They had no idea who they were dealing with or how lethal he could be, at a distance and up close.

This was a common ploy. Men had weaknesses, especially solitary men like him. The allure of a woman as goddess-like and exquisite as the woman before him could weaken even a hardened, highly trained man like himself. Many men in his field had found themselves dead or worse at the hands of a beautiful woman.

Normally, he would have shut the game down immediately. Or he would have played along simply to get the woman alone and torture her until she told him who had sent her. But on that night, if he could add a little pleasure to his last hours on earth, why not? The amazing beauty would more than suffice, no matter what her plans or schemes were. He motioned for her to sit.

A waiter came to the table and smiled in her direction. They seemed to know each other. He heard a name that sounded like So-lanj.

“Is that your name?” Louka asked.

“Yes, yes. My name is Solange.” She offered, extending a delicate hand for him to shake. “And you?” She asked in that gorgeous, silky accent.

“James Moore.” He lied, shaking her hand.

“Thank you for sharing your table, Mr. Moore.” She said, flashing a perfect set of white teeth.

“My pleasure, and call me James.” He responded as he lifted his glass to her.

The waiter returned with a delicious looking tropical drink and her meal. She nodded to him, saying something in a language Louka didn't understand.

"Seems like he likes you." Louka observed.

"I come here a lot. My father, he is here on business quite often. When he comes, I like to come too. This is one of my favorite places to eat. The food---." She pinched her fingers together and blew out a kiss through voluptuous lips as she opened her palm. "The best anywhere in town."

"It is good." He agreed.

When she looked down to enjoy a taste of her food, it gave him a moment to look her over head to toe. This woman could kill him any day and he would die a happy man he thought to himself. He hoped she wouldn't try to kill him that night.

If she was still around after his job, maybe she would spare him the bullet and the mess. Poison perhaps? He made it a point to keep a close eye on her. One turn of the head and she could quickly poison his drink or his food. The beautiful assassins were that quick and that lethal and he wanted to at least sample the goods before she killed him.

"I plan to see the ruins tomorrow. And you?" She asked in between bites.

"I'm here with friends. Seeing the sights as well." He answered. Her company had definitely improved the meal.

The busy café buzzed around them as they ate with little conversation. The meal left him satisfied. But he felt that there was more satisfaction to be had that night. He waited for her to finish her meal.

"I was going to take a walk. You want to join me?" He asked.

If she didn't turn him down, he would know for certain that she was someone's asset and had been sent to take him out.

"A walk sounds nice. I was going to walk back to my hotel, just down the way. You can escort me? Keep me safe?" Solange replied.

"It would be my pleasure." Louka said as he waived the waiter over, motioning for the check.

The game was officially afoot. When she stood, it would give him a chance to look her over for weapons. With what she was wearing, it would be difficult to conceal a gun. But a small knife perhaps? He knew Maria, his handler and lover, kept a knife hidden on her person and had a reputation for being quite lethal with the weapon.

"Let me pay. I interrupted your dinner and you were kind enough to allow a stranger to sit at your table, let me extend this courtesy." She insisted when the check arrived.

Before Louka could respond she gave her card to the waiter who rushed off to ring up the bill. Louka examined her every move as she grabbed her bag and a light sweater. The waiter returned her card. Even the act of putting her credit card back in her purse was fluid, hypnotizing.

As they walked, she talked about her father, a man in the shipping industry. She said his business took him all over the world. She casually talked about all of the places she had been and which places she liked best.

Something about the subtle tones of her voice and her gentle accent was soothing to him. He let her do the talking and found himself actually becoming curious, wanting to know more about her. It also kept him from talking about himself.

As they strolled under a dark, warm, starry night, he lost track of time. There was a moment where he forgot everything. Forgot why he was there, that he was going to kill a man the next day. There was only the night and this amazing woman. His suspicions began to evaporate. Maybe she was just an innocent beauty looking for a table in a full restaurant.

“This is me.” She informed him as they stopped at the entrance of a beach front, luxury resort.

Louka felt a pang of disappointment. He didn’t want the night to end. He was hoping she didn’t either. If this woman was just looking for a single night’s pleasure, he would not disappoint.

“It’s nice.” He said simply, looking the place over. It was one of the most expensive resorts in town.

“I have done all the talking and have not learned anything about you. Do you want to come up for tea?” She questioned, giving him an innocent, beautiful smile.

Gorgeous women didn’t invite you to their room for tea within hours of meeting. She was looking for something. Whether it would be good or bad for him he didn’t know. But he wanted more of her and was hoping it wasn’t the latter.

He was putting himself and his mission at risk, but he didn’t care at this point. He was curious and was dying to see what the chance meeting was leading to.

If there was someone waiting for him, or if she planned to do it herself, he welcomed it. He could handle himself. Maybe dying at the hand of a fellow assassin was a better death than suicide. And if she tried and failed, he would have all night to make her regret it.

“Tea sounds great.” He said, allowing her to lead him to her room which was on the top floor overlooking the ocean.

The room was pleasantly cool, candles lit everywhere. Pillows were casually placed around an ornate table and a Peruvian woman was setting up the tea. Solange thanked her in Spanish and Louka loved how the words flowed from her lips. The woman served the tea as Solange and Louka sat, then she excused herself with a bow.

The windows were open and a curtain danced to the flowing breeze that was coming in from outside. A full moon lit up the entire room.

“My father owns this place. I love this room. He gave it to me, for when I stay here.” Solange said.

“He must be a very affluent man.” Was all Louka could offer.

He hadn't had anything to drink but he suddenly felt intoxicated. The night, the woman, it woke up something in him he had not felt in a long time. He looked at the tea, wondering if it was laced with poison.

Solange took a sip of his tea then handed it to him. He was inwardly shocked. It was as if she had read his mind and wanted to show him the tea was safe. Louka watched her throat move as she swallowed the tea, then he took a sip. It was sweet, with a hint of mescal.

Louka downed the tea in one gulp. Solange took his cup, looking at the leaves. He was curious as she moved them around with a finger.

“You have a troubled heart, Louka Stojanović. I can see it and feel it.”

She tilted her head, looking through him with her dark, mesmerizing eyes. The whimsical woman in the café was suddenly gone, replaced by the nymph before him.

The room spun around him. He could hold his liquor so it wasn't the mescal that was having the effect on him, it was her. He was becoming drunk on the woman's beauty.

“Who are you?” He asked. She had to be aware of what she was doing to him.

“I have not been honest with you, Louka. You see, I have a sense about people. It was something I was born with. I felt something in you, a deep longing, a deep sorrow in your soul. It made me so sad.”

She leaned over and ran her hand down the side of his face. He closed his eyes and her touched soothed him to the core. Just that one touch.

“I know you are not who you say you are. You are hiding something. Something dark that has taken over your life. You could hurt me, have your way with me. But I took a chance because I think I can help you.”

Her words penetrated him like a knife. How could she know what he'd kept hidden from everyone else? He took her hand and pressed it against his face. The sweet scent of her flowed through his entire body, warming him. The flicker of candlelight playing off the tones of her golden skin and her mahogany eyes.

“Did you put something in my tea?” He asked her plainly, knowing somehow that she would not lie to him.

“The tea is meant to calm the spirit, the mind, the body and the soul. Everything in this room is sacred. It is meant to bring your spiritual energy into balance.”

Louka ran his hand along the delicate line of her face. Suddenly feelings and emotions he had buried deep inside him since he was a child came to the surface. Without warning, he broke down into tears. He was humiliated by the outpouring, but he couldn't stop.

Hunched over in a stranger's room, it was as if all the pain and anguish he had experienced throughout his life, the death of his parents, a lifetime of anger and hatred, it was slipping out of his body all at once. He clinched his chest, feeling as if his heart would explode.

“Let it go.” She said, her warm hands gently rubbing his back. “Let it all go.”

And he did. Louka spilled everything to her in between gut-wrenching sobs. His history, what he did for the CIA, why he was in Peru. He didn't care who she worked for. He didn't care if she took a knife and plunged it into his back. He felt free, unburdened. He would give anything to stay in this moment with Solange forever.

He finally found the courage to look up at her.

"You must think I'm a monster."

She took his face in her hands. "Never. We have a soul connection. This is not coincidence. We were meant to meet here. Do you believe this?"

"Yes." He said and he really meant it. He had spent most of his life lying but he couldn't lie to her.

"Louka, do not be ashamed of what you have done. There are evil people in this world. They kill, they destroy. They think that there is no one to stop them. But men like you make the sacrifice. You do what must be done. This man you have an appointment with tomorrow. Close your eyes. Search your soul. What does it tell you about him?"

Louka did what she asked. Suddenly he could see everything. The man, all the horrible things he had done. He was particularly fond of young girls, very young girls. Louka opened his eyes and shuddered. He didn't know if what he had seen was real or if it was the mescal laced tea. He shook his head to clear the visions from his mind. He told her what he had seen.

"Now, who is the monster?" She asked.

"How? How can I see these things?"

"There are many things you can do when your spirit's energy is focused. Now, you are seeing through me. But I can teach you to do this yourself."

Louka leaned in and kissed her. He wanted her more than anything he had ever desired. She allowed the kiss, didn't stop him as he undressed her and ran his hands over her body.

They made love, a passionate, earth moving love he had never experienced or dreamed possible.

Louka should have been reluctant, suspicious. But afterwards, laying in her arms, his life's purpose was crystal clear. He had never been more certain about anything in his entire life and he wanted to live. He wanted to live---for her.

A humming filled the room, interrupting their intimate moment. He couldn't tell where the sound was coming from. He looked around, checking the table, checking under the pillows. He had to stop the noise.

Solange and the room starting to blur around him as the persistent ringing of his phone pulled him out of his trance state. He snatched up the phone.

"What." He growled, furious that he had been awoken from such a sweet memory.

Louka listened intently to whispered information. He was less irritated when he ended the call. It was the news he had been waiting for. The sooner he wrapped things up, the sooner he could go home to take his place at Solange's side. This was his single focus now.

He slipped from bed, his mind going one hundred miles per minute as he dressed.

According to the phone call he had received, he was very close to ending his mission and retuning to the Mal'akh and Solange. He was going to get everything he wanted.

Robert was on a secure video call with Shaunessy Wiseman. The man was at home, sitting in his favorite chair. His boss had an exciting, successful career, an amazing home, a

wonderful wife and two lovely daughters. Shaunessy's life had been the fulfillment of a dream until the Afghanistan mission.

Bethany, Shaunessy's wife, entered the room. She gave her troubled husband a kiss on the cheek.

"Hello, Robert." She said, looking into the camera, unphased by the fact she was speaking to a wanted fugitive.

Robert returned the greeting. She left afterwards, only wanting to show her nervous husband some love and support.

"We ready?" Robert asked Shaunessy and the other man nodded.

With his superior's approval Robert brought Secretary Page and Jax onto the call. Secretary Page's screen was black, a voice but no video.

"Go time is coming up. We need to get the computer." Secretary Page said immediately, not wasting any time broaching the difficult subject or saying hello to his son in law.

"What is the plan?" Shaunessy asked, clearly afraid of the answer. Robert knew the man was already in so deep he felt like he was suffocating.

"Every morning, the computer is transported to the secure room where your IISA team is working with the CIA's cyber security team."

"I know that." Shaunessy said, a little shorter than he should have.

He was on edge. The Secretary seemed to sense this and he paused to give Shaunessy a chance to compose himself.

"Sorry." Shaunessy apologized, sweat forming on his brow.

“We’re all taking chances here, Shaun. Don’t think I don’t realize the position this has put you and my daughter in. I’m deeply troubled that I have to ask you to do this, but we need that computer.” The Secretary stated plainly.

They heard some shuffling in the background as if the Secretary was retrieving something. Robert heard the man cover the phone with his hand and he strained to hear what was being said. The Secretary came back on the line.

“I just got confirmation that our guy has been added to the security team. Tomorrow, our man will be the one transporting the computer from the locked security room to the safe room where the teams are working. There is a long hallway between both rooms with no windows. Are you familiar with it?”

“Yes.” Shaunessy said in a sickly tone.

“That’s the route the computer is transported every morning and it’s our only chance to make the switch. A decoy computer has been left in your desk, bottom drawer, along with a special brief case under the desk. Get to the office early. When they are ready to transport the computer, you need to be in that hallway. Make the switch, and then make any excuse you can to get out of there. I’ll have a man at the Freedom’s Beans coffee shop around the corner. You’ll go there. Sit the brief case down by your foot. He’ll do the same with his briefcase. Ask him how his day is. He’ll say I wish it was Friday, I got a hot date. You then take his brief case and he’ll take yours. Don’t forget to get yourself a coffee.”

“I don’t know if I can. How am I going to get out without being detected?” Shaunessy stammered as he spoke.

“The brief case has a secure compartment that can’t be detected. You’ll be able to pass through security well enough. Just make sure the man gives you the phrase before you let him take the case.”

“I can’t do this.” Shaunessy countered. He was turning green and looked like he was about to vomit.

“We don’t have anyone else on the inside we can trust. Everyone’s putting their rear on the line here, Shaun. That computer needs to be in Robert’s hands before he leaves the US. This has to be done. That’s an order from as high up as it gets.”

“Ok.” Shaunessy said weakly. He was sweating profusely, his shirt soaked.

“Someone needs to take care of the outer hallway cameras. I’ll leave that up to you, Robert.” Secretary Page ended the call without so much as a goodbye.

Shaunessy dropped the phone and ran to the restroom. Robert could hear him losing his lunch. When he returned, he took in several deep breaths before he spoke.

“Since no one else knows about this, it’s going to have to be you and Jax.” Shaunessy said, glancing back and forth between Robert and Jax.

A guilty look flashed in Jax’s eyes which he quickly suppressed. He had clearly let Mavis and Patti in on their secret. Robert didn’t mind.

“Has Secretary Page told you what the diversion is going to be when I leave for the Philippines?” Robert asked.

“We can’t worry about that right now. Let’s just focus on getting Achojah’s computer.”

Shaunessy looked around his office as if it might be the last time he would sit in his comfy chair, in his own home. It very well could be, Robert thought to himself.

If Shaunessy was caught they would lock him up in prison for a very long time and throw away the key. But they needed to unlock the computer's secrets and Robert felt that they were running out of time.

Sarah had a late breakfast with Maggie then jumped on the freeway headed to Denver. She was still nursing the wounds from her meeting with the school board.

At the meeting she was informed her temporary leave would be more than temporary. The board didn't like the press surrounding what had happened. There were also concerns about her boyfriend being a fugitive and about her judgement. Sarah had left before the meeting ended.

The next day she received a call that the board had not ruled in her favor. An appeal would need to be filed if she still wanted to teach. As much as she loved her kids, she had reached a breaking point. She wanted to get on with her life, but the current circumstances were making this impossible.

Sitting at home grading papers and waiting for the school board to make a decision on her future wasn't what she considered a career. So, she'd started looking for a new job.

Turning on the radio, hoping for traffic news, she got an update instead on the fugitive, Robert Duchovny. Thus far he had successfully alluded capture. She listened to the story briefly than turned off the radio, opting for the sound of noonday traffic over the depressing news.

She should hate him but she couldn't. *Why was that?* He had hurt her, in more ways than one. She thought about Mem and Addie, John and Celia, her brother Aaron and her family, her best friend Maggie. It was amazing how one incident could affect the lives of so many people.

Was he really suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder as Aaron had been told by Robert's boss at the IISA? Had he snapped? Sarah wished he would turn himself in. If for nothing else than to get the help he needed.

And why hadn't he called her? She'd heard from everyone else about what they thought had happened. Not calling her solidified his guilt in her mind and crushed her soul. He had told her he loved her. But he had damaged her in the worst way and now he was gone.

Arriving at a well-kept building in downtown Denver, Sarah made her way to the parking garage. Not having to pay for daily parking was a big plus. The commute to Denver from Colorado Springs would be a bit of a headache, but the job posting said they would allow the right person to work from home several days a week.

Checking her appearance in the mirror, everything looked great except the eyes. They looked a little more tired and puffy than she would have liked. Applying a new coat of lipstick and doing one last mirror check, she gave herself the stamp of approval and stepped out of the car.

The building was Tudor style and immaculate. Her interview was on the sixth floor. Noticing the large windows lighting the building, if she got the job, it would come with a gorgeous view well.

The job was looking extremely promising until Sarah stepped into the office and came face to face with Celia James.

The women considered each other in silence. Both were caught up in strange circumstances that neither of them could comprehend or control.

"I must have the wrong place." Sarah said. She wasn't a very good liar.

“No, you’ve got the right place. I saw your resume, your qualifications and your letters of recommendation. I thought this might be a little awkward for both of us, but I hoped maybe we could get past it. You’re the best qualified applicant I’ve seen for our contract writer position and someone I know John and I can trust.” Celia said.

“You lost all of your employees because of Robert?”

“Yes, we did. Everyone knows about his affiliation with John and their upcoming partnership.” Celia answered honestly.

Sarah could not read the woman’s emotions. There wasn’t fear or surprise or anger.

“Thank you for the kind words and consideration. But this just won’t work for me.”

Sarah replied.

“I understand.”

Sarah turned to leave. At the doorway she stopped, turned to face Celia, fixing her with a piercing gaze.

“You know where he is, don’t you?” Sarah asked.

“I know he still loves you and he won’t rest until he finds out what happened.”

Sarah turned and left the office.

The day had come. Shaunessy was in the bathroom facing the mirror. He tilted his head up.

“Can you see?” He asked.

“I can?” Robert confirmed.

“What if I have to sneeze?”

“Don’t do that.” Rober answered.

Shaunessy was dressed in one of his best suits. Robert noticed he wore a pricey Rolex and his hair was perfect. He straightened his tie with shaky hands.

“I’d feel better if I knew where you were.” Shaunessy said nervously.

Robert looked around the safe house he was stashed in.

“No, you wouldn’t.”

“What if something happens?”

“Jax is the backup.”

“What if something goes wrong with him?”

Robert knew he had to calm his old friend down or the plan was never going to work. He was already sweating through his expensive shirt and wringing his hands.

“Take a deep breath. Remember, you’re the Assistant Director of the IISA and the FBI. You’re supposed to be there. Someone says something to you, remind them of that.”

“But what if something goes wrong?”

Unbeknownst to Shaunessy, Mavis and Patti had been brought into their secret plan. If both Robert’s and Jax’s systems went down, which was highly unlikely, they could easily take over. However, Robert couldn’t share this with Shaunessy. He could only reassure him.

“We have everything under control. You just do your part, we’ll do ours.”

Shaunessy checked the wire he had under his shirt.

“You’re going to have to remove the earpiece before you go in. I’ll be able to hear everything with the wire and I’ll be able to see you, but we won’t be able to talk.”

“What if they search me?”

“The last time I checked they weren’t frisking senior members of our clandestine agencies. You’re going to be fine, Shaun. Just relax. You’ve got this.”

“Is Jax monitoring too?”

“I’m online, Sir.” Jax confirmed.

Wiping his hands on a towel Shaunessy exited the bathroom. His wife Bethany gave him a kiss and a hug. Robert noticed the man lingered in her arms a little longer than just a normal morning good bye.

“You’ve got this.” She echoed what Robert had said.

Inside his BMW Shaunessy cranked up the air conditioner to the max and turned on classic music.

“Just do what you would normally do.” Robert coached him through the earpiece.

Shaunessy pulled the BMW into the back entrance of CIA headquarters and Robert saw him remove the earpiece. With his security clearance, he had a special badge that allowed him to forgo the usual security checks that all of his underlings needed to gain access.

This was something Robert was very thankful for. They had been told that the secret compartment in the briefcase was untraceable, but he still had an uneasy feeling about Shaunessy going through a security checkpoint. He was happy the man could just slip in and out through the backdoor.

Stepping from the car, Shaunessy smoothed out his suit and grabbed the briefcase. The secure badge gave him access to the back stairwell that all the CIA heavy weights and big wigs used. Robert watched as he casually made his way up the stairs.

Via the cameras placed strategically throughout CIA headquarters Jax had been recording Shaunessy wherever he went inside the building. As Shaunessy made the switch, Jax would run a loop from several days ago with the same suit, tie and shoes, even the Rolex watch.

If he needed to make a quick getaway, Jax could take over the cameras and broadcast Shaunessy in a different location, giving him a modest chance to escape.

Robert held his breath as Shaunessy stepped out of the stairwell just as the security guard was exiting the vault with Achojah's computer and the companion computers on a cart. Robert could only hope that this was Secretary Page's man.

Shaunessy opened the door and motioned to the guard. "After you."

As they entered the hallway and the door closed, the time was now or never. The guard turned his back towards the closed door leaving the cart unattended. Shaunessy wasted no time opening the briefcase. He pressed his thumb on the side as instructed but the secret compartment did not open.

He wiped his hand on his pants and tried again. It still didn't work. The guard peeked over his shoulder.

"Hurry up." He implored Shaunessy.

Robert started to calculate the odds. Had anyone seen them enter the corridor? There had been two agents in the distance involved in conversation. Had they been too distracted to notice? Would someone notice the long amount of time it was taking the computer to get from point A to point B?

"Come on." Robert said under his breath.

Shaunessy wiped his hand and tried once more to no avail. His hands were visibly shaking now. Robert saw him try to steady himself as he took several deep breaths.

"What are you waiting for?" The guard hissed through clenched teeth looking at his watch.

Shaunessy pressed his thumb hard on the side panel again, then tried all of the fingers on his right hand. The case still didn't open.

Wiping his hands one more time, he used the thumb on the left hand. The left gave him success and the secret compartment popped open quiet as air.

Shaunessy quickly grabbed the fake computer out of the compartment and shoved Achojah's computer in. He closed the secret compartment and his brief case as the guard ran to the cart. They had just started walking again when the door at the end of the hall opened.

Pinder Haise peaked in. "It's after 8?" He said, irritated with the guard. He gave Shaunessy a suspicious look.

"Sorry, had to use the restroom." The guard said simply, wheeling past Pinder.

"What are you doing here?" Pinder asked, questioning Shaunessy's presence in the hallway. Pinder had obviously decided to take his irritation at the lateness of the computer's arrival out on him.

Robert knew Shaunessy had never liked the man. He could tell by his superior's demeanor that he was put off by someone who was his equal questioning him. The old Shaunessy, the man people loathed and feared, instantly took over.

"I've been here every day working alongside my team. We've had some issues with the master computer and Jax thinks someone has been tampering with it when my team isn't here."

There was an immediate look of alarm on Pinder's face and Shaunessy grasped at that.

"What are you doing here?" He asked suspiciously, turning the tables.

Robert enjoyed watching the Assistant CIA Director squirm.

"The Director told me to check in on the progress and to check security. He got the same report that you did from Jax. Do you think it's Duchovny?"

“I’m not at liberty to discuss anything with you until we discover where the breach is. If Director Kaggen has questions, I can brief him directly.”

Shaunessy stepped around Pinder into the secure lab. Jax had the fake computer open and was already pretending to work on it. Jax had installed a mirror copy of the desktop on Achojah’s computer onto the fake and it looked great.

Jax had also installed a bunch of copycat programs and files that he would miraculously open to make it look like they were making progress. Robert noticed Pinder looking nervously over at Shaunessy and Jax as they reviewed the bogus files. Jax BS’d his way through an explanation of what he’d found so far. Shaunessy nodded in agreement.

The kid was good, Robert thought, very proud of his protégé. Jax knew his stuff well enough to speak as if things were going well and they were making progress. After a bunch of tech speak Shaunessy leaned into Jax as if he was whispering something private to him.

On cue they both glanced at Pinder then continued their whispered, feigned conversation. Pinder’s face visibly blanched. Shaunessy was truly enjoying the moment.

They were not out of the woods yet. Shaunessy still needed to get his contraband into the hands of Secretary Page’s agent who would deliver it safely to Robert. But seeing Pinder Haise agonizing internally was worth the price of admission.

Shaunessy spent the customary amount of time checking on his team as not to arouse suspicion. Then, feigning urgency and needing to rush off to a meeting, he patted Jax on the back.

“Good work. Keep me posted. Good work team.” He called out.

“Thank you, Sir.” Jax said confidently.

As Shaunessy was leaving the room Robert noticed Pinder get up from his chair, moving casually towards Jax. He wished he was a fly on the wall for the conversation, but they had more urgent business at hand.

Back in the BMW, Shaunessy made his way out of the parking garage and headed towards the rendezvous spot. The parking lot was full and the coffee show was hopping with activity. Robert wasn't happy about the meeting place, there were too many chances that the exchange could be seen. But he assumed, for the same reason, it was the perfect place.

He hoped with the buzz of activity, the hissing sounds of brewing coffee and executives having their customary morning chats, the swapping of briefcases would go unnoticed.

Shaunessy waited his turn in line, eyes darting around the room. The coffee shop had two lines, one group lined up from the left and the other from the right. They had two cashiers wringing up customers and a full barista crew on each side that banged out the order before a patron had even signed the credit card receipt. They were efficient and fast, perfect for a location that catered to CIA agents and businessmen and women.

“Get the raspberry cheese Danish and the Kenyan dark roast, it's the best.”

Robert flinched and Shaunessy nearly jumped out of his shoes at the sound of Director Kaggen's voice. Of all people to see, it was the Director of the CIA himself. He was standing next to Shaunessy, not in line. Was this coincidence? Had Pinder said something to the Director about seeing Shaunessy in the hallway?

“No---no---.” Robert said to himself, clutching his forehead in his hands.

Shaunessy hid any inner turmoil he might have been experiencing. Screaming at the top of his lungs and running out wasn't going to serve him at this point, Robert thought. However, sweat was starting to spread under the man's armpits.

Anyone observing this could chalk it up to the warmth of a fully packed coffeehouse but Robert knew better. This was an instance where Shaunessy would have to play it cool even though everything in him was probably telling him to run.

"The pastries look pretty good through the glass. You had the Kenyan?" Shaunessy asked casually. Robert could see his knuckles turning white as he tightly clutched the briefcase.

"If you like dark roast, that's the best." Director Kaggen said as he motioned to one of the baristas. "Two Kenyan's large and 2 raspberry Danishes, put it on my tab."

"Thank you, Director." Shaunessy said cordially.

At first Robert thought his boss had been pinched, but Director Kaggen was just using Shaunessy to cut in line.

"Didn't know this was an agency hot spot." Shaunessy commented as the coffees were being made.

"Best coffee and pastries in town." The Director said with a wink, grabbing his coffee and a brown bagged pastry. "Pinder said you would brief me after your meeting today?" He added.

"Of course, I'll call Melinda to set something up as soon as I'm done. I'm going to include Jax. That ok with you?"

"Since he's running point when you're gone, I think that's a good call. Kids got a good head on his shoulders. I see him taking over that whole team someday."

Shaunessy agreed and the two men parted ways. As he was walking out a man walked past him, bumped him slightly, whispered in his ear, put a briefcase in his hand and took the case with Achojah's computer.

It happened faster than Robert could blink. He eyed the crowded coffee shop thinking someone must have noticed, but they were none the wiser.

Robert watched as Shaunessy and the man stepped out of the coffee shop heading in different directions.

Robert got the call shortly after the switch had been made. He toyed with the idea of calling Maria for a ride, but decided to go it alone. He hated to leave the sanctuary of yet another safe house, but at least he had a key this time.

Taking the bus, he hit a local department store and bought clothes he would normally have never touched. He walked down the street to a local gas station and slipped into the bathroom to change.

With the overgrown hair, mustache and beard, a white tee and baggy jeans, he was looking rougher for wear by the day. He had the Walther PPK concealed in his hip and pulled a large jacket on to conceal the weapon.

Looking at himself in the mirror he was shocked at how quickly he had transformed. There was a fleeting moment where he saw his father in the mirror's reflection and he had to look away. This was temporary, only a part he had to play. Not the permanent life his father and mother had chosen.

Two more bus rides and he reached the downtown train station. As he made his way through the station, he noticed pedestrians clearing a path for him as he walked by. No one wanted any trouble. It served him well. He didn't want anyone to look too closely at him.

He was still being featured on the morning and evening news. With a new crisis in the world almost daily, his story was not as prominent as it had been previously. However, there was still an ongoing manhunt for him and they were not going to let it die. The FBI was doing everything they could to keep the public on alert.

The locker area was deserted. He doubted many people used a train station locker to store anything other than contraband. They really should be shuttered, he thought as he retrieved the duffle bag that contained Achojah's computer and shoved it across his shoulder. Anyone looking would think he was a passenger leaving the station with the customary luggage.

Two hours later he was safely back in his temporary shelter. Dinner was tikka masala chicken and basmati rice he'd picked up. Digging his fork in and taking the first bite, he thought that Indian food could very well become his new favorite over Chinese.

Comfortable and with a full stomach, he powered up Achojah's computer, watching for any sign that a tracking program had been installed. Once he confirmed he was in the clear, he got to work.

The Pandora program had evolved in the short period of time Robert had been hands off. His Lenovo was already powered up and he had several peripheral devices plugged in, ready to perform the hack.

A copy of the program he had copied previously was still in prison on his Lenovo, keeping his computer safe from harm. However, when he looked the program over carefully, he

was alarmed to discover it had tried to run code on his computer. Essentially, trying to break itself out of the digital prison he had created.

Robert ran a complete scan on his computer and learned that the imprisoned program had come alive right around the time he'd brought Pandora home, while he was eating dinner. How could the program on his computer have known that Pandora was in the vicinity?

It was like an outlaw knowing his posse was outside ready to do a jailbreak. The implications of what he was seeing chilled him to the bone.

The program behaved like a living, breathing thing that could grow, adapt, change and learn. It was exhibiting the qualities of something alive. In his many years working with computers, programs and code, he had never seen anything like the Pandora program.

Robert fortified the digital prison on his Lenovo and wrote some code to protect his programs and software, just in case. It was like putting the Pandora program in super max, in solitary confinement and then building a gated, protected wall around the prison to stop anything from escaping.

“Let’s see you break out of that.” He challenged the program, turning his attention again to Pandora.

The program had locked itself up tight, undoing some of his previous gains. It had also written a firewall into the program to protect itself.

“You are crafty, aren’t you?” Robert mused.

He ran the same code breaking virus he had ran previously to break in. Somehow the program had learned to protect itself and the firewall successfully blocked his penetration attempts.

Robert stood, locked his hands together and stretched his arms over his head. He tilted his head in all for directions, stretching his neck as he watched Pandora running code on the computer. It was incredible. It was learning at an exponential pace.

Whoever had written the program was a genius, beyond that. Robert knew everyone in the game and didn't know anyone white or black hat, that had the skills necessary to create such a devious masterpiece.

It had to be someone new. Someone he had never seen before, but someone that had a dangerous knowledge of computer code and programming. Someone that was at the same level as he was. A formidable foe.

Dragonfyre. He thought to himself.

He snatched up his secure phone. As usual, Jax answered on the first ring.

"I need you to do some research for me and get back to me as soon as you can."

"Shoot, Boss." Jax said eagerly.

"Run a check on everyone with advanced degrees in cybersecurity, computer science, programming and mathematics. Throw in bioengineering and artificial intelligence as well. I'm not just talking about people that got straight A's. I'm talking genius level, prodigies."

"I'm on it. Did you see what's happened?"

"The program has evolved." Robert informed him.

"Prognosis?" Jax asked eagerly.

Jax had obviously been waiting for Robert to get the computer analyzed so he could get an explanation for what he was seeing. Robert had none.

"Still working on it. We're in new territory with this one. I'll keep you posted."

"Sounds good. Let me know if you need anything else."

Robert was ready to hang up when a troubling thought stopped him short.

“Jax, wait. You have access to the CIA system they’re using to analyze the computer?”

“Yes. Our IISA Team has full access, which is surprising.”

“Run a check on the CIA system for me. A complete check.” Robert urged.

“What am I looking for?”

“I have a copy of the Pandora program contained on my computer, but it’s been very active. I’m wondering if it’s tried to access the CIA network.”

“Do you think it could do that?” Jax questioned.

“Yes, I think it can do that. It tried on my computer. I have special firewalls installed on the networks at the IISA and the FBI. Nothing should be able to penetrate those systems. But the CIA, or should I say Aakash Singh, wouldn’t let me set up the firewall on the CIA’s network. I’m going to check the IISA and the FBI, just in case. If you find anything, let me know ASAP. I need to isolate it.”

“Will do, Boss.”

Robert rushed to his computer and did a secret scan on the IISA and the FBI’s networks. He saw the usual intrusion attempts from hackers all over the world, but nothing had successfully penetrated the system. His phone rang.

“Boss. It’s in the CIA network. It’s like---I can’t explain it. It’s like the program laid an egg and its waiting to hatch.” Jax exclaimed, alarm in his voice.

“I need control of your computer. I want you to watch everything I’m doing. You’re going to have to tell everyone that you did this and you need to be convincing. As soon as I hack in the system is going to send an alert to Singh. When he calls you in a panic, tell him exactly

what you found and that you considered it an imminent threat and couldn't wait for his authorization to contain it.”

“I'm at home.”

“What can he say? You're dedicated to what you do. You just thought about this potential issue and you had to check the system, as far as your security clearance would allow. And when you did---well, you know the rest.”

As soon as Jax gave Robert control he immediately went to work. First, he created a containment program similar to what he had on his Lenovo. As he was explaining the procedure step by step, he heard a clicking on the line notifying Jax he had an incoming call.

“Answer it. I'm going to keep working.” Robert said.

After a brief moment of silence Jax came back on the line with Robert. “It's Aakash. He asked me to cease and desist until he can personally see the threat. He's heading to CIA headquarters now. He threatened me, said he's calling Director Stanley and Director Kaggen.”

In the few minutes Jax had been off the line, Robert had built another containment system just in case he needed to move the files on the CIA's network into a protected place. He had no idea what the egg would do when he tried to move the bizarre program.

“Call Shaunessy right now and tell him what's happening.”

“Yes, Boss.”

Robert made a decision to move the CIA's more delicate and classified files into the containment system before he tried to move the egg program. To his relief, the program didn't start running code or release a virus when he approached it. It was just that, an egg, not quite mature yet. He made a copy and moved it quickly into the digital prison he had built on the CIA's network.

He then made a copy of the egg program and moved it to the prison he had on his Lenovo for further examination.

Once he knew the files were safe, he moved the CIA files back to their correct location and removed all traces that he had hacked into the system. No one except Jax would know how to track his digital footprints.

When Jax came back on the line, it sounded like he had run a mile.

“The Assistant Director is making some calls to calm things down. But they still want me to go in now and show them what I found.”

“No reason for you to rush in. You’re doing something important here.” Robert assured him.

Robert went step by step with his protégé over what he had done and why he did it. Jax asked him several good questions, which he answered. The kid knew coding and programing better than most and Robert had no concerns that he could stand his ground against Aakash Singh.

“Don’t let Singh or Pinder bully you. Tell them you thought this threat was too real to wait. After what you’ve seen from the Pandora program, you couldn’t allow that thing, whatever it was, to access and infect the entire CIA network.”

“Could it really do that?” Jax asked again in disbelief.

Robert glanced at Pandora. The computer was still running code.

“Yes, I’m afraid so Jax, and worse. I’ll give you more details later. However, I would be dishonest if I told you this wasn’t the scariest thing I have ever seen. I’m glad we caught it before it hatched.”

“I sure miss having you here, Boss.” Jax said.

“Well, I hope to be back real soon.” Robert said, trying not to let his concern and fear of his uncertain future creep into his voice.

“Did you get the call?” Jax questioned.

“Yes. I got the go time from Director Page via email.”

“Please let me know before you leave.”

“I will.” Robert assured him. “Go now. You want to be fashionably late, but not disrespectfully tardy.”

This made Jax laugh, which is what he wanted. They said their goodbyes and Robert turned his attention back to the daunting task before him. He knew what he had to do but it was too large of a decision for him to make alone. He needed guidance and there were only a handful of people he trusted.

“The guy’s a ghost. For someone that has no covert mission experience he seems to be awful good at evading every roadblock we’ve put in his way.” Aaron fumed.

“How’s Sarah holding up?” Nics questioned.

“Doing good. The school won’t let her go back to teaching, too much controversy they said, which is BS. So, she’s job hunting. She’s at the shooting range almost every week now and getting a lot of Aunty time in with the girls. I know what this---this man---did to her isn’t going to go away overnight. But she’s slowly healing and getting back to normal.”

Nics could hear the disgust in Aaron’s voice towards Robert.

That’s good.” He commented.

Nics felt a sense of relief hearing that the woman he secretly loved was doing better. He hoped and prayed that what had happened would not scar her for life. She had proven herself strong and resilient.

Life had thrown her many curve balls, just like him. But she always came out swinging. This deepened his feeling for her and made him all the more determined to find the scumbag that had hurt her.

“What about the computer crime, digital forensics angle? Find anyone willing to help with the investigation? Nics asked.

“I’ve approached every civilian cyber security and digital forensics company and no one wants to touch this. It seems they all have some kind of misguided respect for this guy. I know the FBI and CIA are actively looking for him as well, but they haven’t been forthcoming with information.”

“I got a plan. Might be a dead end, but I thought I would give it a shot.”

“Anything I need to know about?” Aaron questioned.

“Best that you don’t. I’ll call you and let you know if I get any new information.” Nics said.

Nics was parked on a one-way street, at the end of the road, in a shady part of town. He locked the Crown Vic and set the alarm as he exited the car.

Per the instructions he’d received the person he was looking for lived in a small house located in the rear of the property. A dog barked incessantly as he approached.

Nics knocked on the door of a shoddy looking guest house. The front house didn’t look that great either, but he wasn’t one to judge. Nics didn’t care about the guy’s choice of

neighborhoods if he could get the job done. All he knew was the kid was called The Phenom and he came highly recommended by Nics underground sources. A pimple laced kid opened the door.

“My guy give you the details?” Nics asked as the kid let him in.

“Easy way to make five hundred bucks. Show me the cash.”

Nics looked the kid over. He was exactly that, a kid. Nics refused to work with someone that wasn't legal. He had made that clear to his contact. They'd found the next best thing, a man that looked like he had just barley started shaving. Nics had been told he was 19, but one of the best black hat hackers in the US.

He pulled out five hundred and laid it on the table. The kid snatched it up, counted the bills and shoved them into his back pocket.

“Show me what you got.” The kid said.

Nics slid a manila folder across the desk that contained all of Robert Duchovny's known email addresses, telephone numbers and his home and business address. The kids mouth dropped as soon as he looked at the first page.

“You're kidding.” The Phenom laughed sarcastically. “No way man. No freakin' way.”

“Why not?” Nics asked frowning.

“You know who this is?”

“Of course, I know who it is.”

“No way man.” The kid moved away from his computer.

Pulling out the cash, he handed it back to Nics. Nics refused to take it.

“What's the problem? You want more money?”

“It’s not that. You have to be nuts to try to do a direct hack on Kosmos. You’re crazy man.”

“What’s a Kosmos?” Nic asked, perplexed at the unfolding drama.

“Him.” The kid exclaimed, pointing at the file. “Duchovny. You don’t know who this guy is?”

“Well, it seems I don’t. Educate me.”

“This dude’s elite, man. Beyond elite. He’s the head of Cybersecurity at the IISA and an all-around bad ass. You don’t mess with Kosmos.”

“You afraid of the IISA?” Nics asked, hoping to get the kid’s ego going.

“I’m not afraid of the IISA, but I’m afraid of him.” The Phenom said pointing to the folder. “You need to go man.”

“So what, is the guy going to kill you or something?” Nics sensed legitimate fear from the kid. Maybe this is what he had been looking for.

“Don’t be stupid.” The kid belted out.

Nics sharp look silenced the kid and he immediately backtracked, choosing his words carefully.

“I didn’t mean, like you know, you were stupid. I’m just saying it would not be smart to try to hack any system or email or phone that has anything to do with Kosmos.”

Nics was growing tired of the back and forth with The Phenom and his irritation showed.

“There’s your money. Just take it and go.” The kid put the money on the table and held up his hands, backing away.

“I’ll give you two thousand.” Nics offered. He saw a flicker in the kid’s eye. “That’s a lot of money for something this simple. If you won’t take it, maybe someone you know will?” He added.

“You have it on you?” The kid asked.

Nics reached into his back pocket, pulled out an envelope full of cash.

“It’s yours if you do this, and you can keep the five hundred too.”

“Twenty-five hundred large isn’t going to help me when Kosmos sends a kill virus to my computer and wipes out my whole system. This system is worth three thousand. I’ll lose my system and my profit.”

“I’ll give you five thousand.” Nics countered, already pulling out the cash. “He can do that?” He questioned. The whole thing sounded farfetched to him.

The kid gave him an incredulous look. “You gotta be joking, man. You don’t know? The guy’s legit. Kosmos has hacked the Pentagon, the CIA, the NSA, you name it. They use him to test their systems and he always gets in, always. Little guys like me, just trying to make a buck, he kills our systems. He sends the Kosmos kill code and poof.” The kid used his hands to demonstrate the explosion. “Your system is toast man.”

The Phenom sat back in his chair thinking it over.

“I’ll do it for six thousand. It will take me some time to replace my system and I’ll need some cash to pay my bills in the meantime.” The kid finally offered.

“Done.” Nics pulled another envelope out of his other pocket. He counted out the money, handed it over. He thought for a moment. “Can you send him a message? Something that only he can see?”

“Maybe. It just depends on how quickly he wants to destroy me.” The kid rubbed his laptop. “I’m sorry to do this to you, Mystique. We’ve had some good times.”

“Can we get on with this please.” Nics said, impatient.

The kid had already booted up his computer and was ready to work. He pulled the file next to him and looked it over.

“These all the emails you have for him? And this is his cell phone number, you’re sure?”

“Yes. But you can’t contact him directly. Everything is being monitored.” Nics responded.

“I got that, old man. Nothing’s going to be sent in a way that spying eyes can see. What is the message you want to send to him?”

“Tell him a friend of Sarah Levy’s is looking for him and if he has any balls he’ll respond.”

“Oh man. That is cold-blooded, bro. Is all that stuff true? He just doesn’t seem like the type.” The kid had obviously seen the news.

“Just do it.” Nics demanded.

Nics stood behind The Phenom as he worked. His fingers moved at a frantic, quick pace. The laptop’s view split into two screens, each one processing data and code at an astronomical rate. It took only a few minutes before the entire screen went black.

“Oh my gosh. It’s him.” The kid exclaimed, almost jumping out of his chair.

“How do you know?” Nics asked.

“Wait for it.” The Phenom said with glee.

On the black screen. Someone on the other side began to type in white letters.

“Phenom, what are you doing?” The invisible hand asked.

“You got his attention with the message. He didn’t just kill my computer. We’re actually talking to Kosmos. Oh my gosh.” The kid screeched, standing up.

Nics look drove him back into his seat.

“Tell him only cowards and guilty men hide.” Nics said.

The kid gave him a wide-eyed look. His mouth a perfect O.

“Type it.” Nics commanded.

The kid typed the message. He opened a chocolate bar he had next to his computer and started to munch as they waited for a response.

The invisible hand began to type and Nics felt the heat rising in his face as he read each word.

I would never hurt Sarah. I have been set up and I need to prove it. I can’t do that behind bars. You must be Nicholas Hobbs, Detective Levy’s associate?”

Nics stiffened. How did Robert Duchovny know who he was?

“I don’t know what game you’re playing or why you’re hiding. But you had better hope the authorities find you before I do.” Nics said.

“Oh man. This is intense.” The Phenom exclaimed.

“Type it.” Nics commanded again and the kid complied. They waited a moment for the response.

No games. I just want to know who did this. We are on the same side. If you want to get to the bottom of it, you could help me. Sarah deserves to know the truth.

Nics considered this. The man was either a lying piece of crap or he really believed he was innocent. Either way, he could use the man’s willingness to his advantage.

“It sounds like you want to talk. Let’s meet. You say when and where and I’ll be there.”

Nics offered.

Agreed. I’ll be in touch. The typed words promised.

“How do we find each other?” Nics asked.

I’ll send you instructions.

With that The Phenom’s computer buzzed, the screen shimmered, then the computer went completely dead.

“Oh man” The Phenom threw up his hands. “He killed her.”

A moment later the electricity to the guest house was cut. Both men were left in the dark.

“Son of a---.” Before Nics could finish, the kid’s cell phone beeped.

The Phenom held it up so they both could see the screen. Someone had typed the words.

No more illegal hacks. I warned you what would happen. Then the cell phone was killed as well.

“I’m going to need another thousand for the phone.” The kid said in the dark.

“Don’t push it kid.” Nics said, turning away and heading back to his car.

He wasn’t concerned about showing the kid his back. He could take The Phenom out before the kid could even get out of his chair. Besides, the kid was already six thousand dollars richer and Nics didn’t think he would jeopardize that. He had a sense about people and he was usually right.

Back in his car Nics called Aaron. He didn’t want to tell him about what had just happened over the phone. They made a date at their usual place, the diner, for 3pm the next day.

Duchovny wanted to meet and that was good. It would give Nics a chance to make his move. No trial, no jail time. Robert had hurt someone he loved and Nics would hurt him back.

There would be just enough pain and suffering for the guy to experience a small portion of what he had put Sarah through. Then it would be lights out. Everything that would happen would be between Nics and God. Not even Aaron could know, not ever.

Sarah was so accustomed to teachers' hours she no longer needed the alarm clock to wake her. In her pajamas, she waded towards the kitchen. On her way, she grabbed the tv remote and casually turned on her favorite news station. The coffee maker had a timer. A fresh, hot cup of joe was already waiting for her.

The mention of Robert's name drew her attention away as she was getting ready to pour herself a cup.

"Robert Anderson Duchovny, head of the Intelligence, Investigation and Security Agency, Cybersecurity Division and a wanted fugitive, has been apprehended. While details are sketchy, we have live footage here of Mr. Duchovny being taken into the Denver County jail for processing---" The reporter delivered the news in the same monotone fashion they usually adopted whether they were talking about mass murder or the latest weather update.

The coffee carafe Sarah had in her hand dropped to the floor and shattered. She listened in horror as the reporter reiterated the crimes Robert had been accused of and, with her teacher's yearbook picture flashing across the screen, they reported her as the accuser. She started to go numb until her cell phone rang.

"Sarah." It was Maggie. "Are you watching the news?"

"I---yes. I just saw it." Sarah said, her socks soaked through with coffee.

"You need to get out of there. Come to my place."

The alarm in Maggie's voice prompted her to action. Pulling off her socks, she ran into the bedroom and threw some clothes, a pair of tennis shoes, a few toiletries, her 357 and her computer into a duffle bag.

She snatched the cell phone off the counter as someone knocked at the door. The knock was immediately followed by the doorbell ringing. Her phone also beeped. It was an incoming call from her mother. She ignored both.

"I'm on my way." Sarah informed Maggie.

"I've got the garage door open. Just pull right in." Maggie said, sounding as frantic as Sarah felt.

As soon as her garage opened enough for the car to fit, Sarah edged out. Her persistent neighbor was at her door, her hand still raised as Sarah peeled away. The woman did a little wave and sprinted towards the car as if Sarah would stop for her.

As Sarah got to the end of the street and made the right turn towards Maggie's house, she could see the news vans rounding the corner to her street, coming from the opposite direction. The neighbor was still standing in the driveway waiting for the news trucks to arrive, obviously wanting to associate herself with Sarah as much as possible.

As promised, the garage door was open and Sarah pulled in. Through the door she smelled fresh coffee and fresh baked apple muffins. Maggie was more of a tea drinker so she knew the coffee was for her. The delight of the wonderful smells was almost cancelled out by what she saw on the television.

The only clip they had of Robert was him being led into the Denver station by police. His hands were handcuffed in front of him and his head down. He had a greenish colored t-shirt over

his head trying to hide himself from the reporters. Once he was inside the station, there was nothing else to see. The news stations kept showing the same loop over and over again.

The loop suddenly ended and her townhouse came into view. The neighbor was still standing in her driveway eagerly waiting for someone to ask her questions. Other neighbors had gathered as well. News vans were everywhere and the police were at her door, knocking at an empty house.

“We are live at the house of the woman at the center of this firestorm, Sarah Levy---.”

The anchorman said eagerly.

Sarah sat down on the couch, putting her hand over her mouth. It was all she could do to stop from screaming. Maggie sat a tray in front of her. Coffee, cream, sugar and apple muffins.

“You want me to turn if off?”

“No. I want to know what’s happening.”

Sarah was starving and the smell of the coffee and muffins made her stomach growl. She took a bite, unable to peel her eyes away from the newscast.

“What do you make of this?” Maggie asked.

“I’m speechless.”

Sarah’s heart was racing in her chest so fast she thought it might explode. She was happy she had made it safely to Maggie’s without crashing her car. She hated to feel like this, hated the situation, hated being on tv, hated the news, hated nosy neighbors. Her phone buzzed again, her sister. She let the call go to voicemail.

As she watched the man she had once loved being hauled into the station, she still could not summon hatred for him. She should despise him in a way that was not even imaginable. He was the cause of everything. But she couldn’t no matter how hard she tried.

She had endured another restless night haunted by nightmares. Everything ran together in her thoughts and her dreams. She could no longer separate fact from fiction. Everything was blurred and confused. Was this her mind's way of coping with what happened like Maggie had said?

Her phone again, Aaron's phone number. This call she answered.

"I just heard the news. Do I need to come and get you out of there?"

"I'm at Maggie's." Sarah informed him.

"The Chief got the news before I did. He sent officers to your house right away. We just don't know what to expect with Robert's connections."

"No one knows I'm here and I have the 357."

"Good girl. I am heading over to Denver to see if I can take custody."

Sarah didn't know what to say. She could not image the scene she had just witnessed, Robert in handcuffs. It all seemed surreal.

"Ok." Was all she could muster.

"I'll check in on you later. Stay put. I'll come and get you. Love you, Sis."

Several more calls came in. Numbers she recognized, family, friends, teachers she worked with and numbers she didn't recognize. Sitting at her best friend's house she felt like Alice in Wonderland tumbling down the rabbit hole. If the doorbell rang and it was the Cheshire cat, she wouldn't be shocked.

Maggie was cleaning up in the kitchen, humming a tune. Grabbing the remote Sarah turned off the TV. She'd had enough for one morning. There was also the job interview that was scheduled for 1:00 pm that day. She could only hope they weren't TV watchers.

Her phone rang, another unknown number. A quick check of her voicemail confirmed that the potential new employer had indeed seen the news that morning. The caller made a rushed excuse that they'd hired someone else and needed to cancel her interview.

The next voicemail was from her sister, Esther. Her sibling was already on top of the money-making opportunities. As Sarah's representative, as she was calling herself these days, she had gotten several calls from movie studios, publishing companies, news shows and agents wanting to know if Sarah wanted to do everything from writing a book to TV interviews. There was even talk of a movie.

Sarah was not interested in any of it. But she would deal with her sister later. Since the interview was cancelled, it meant she could stay indoors and hide. Yes, hide, she thought to herself. Good old fashioned putting your head in the sand and not thinking about the nightmare scenario she was currently involved in.

"I'm gonna take a shower." She called out to Maggie.

"You know where everything is. Make yourself at home." Maggie responded from the kitchen.

This too shall pass, Aaron had said to her. Now, here she was, staying at another house that was not her own.

When, she thought to herself. When was it ever going to over?

Henreth entered the room reeking of cigarettes and cheap liquor.

Louka was in a capital mood. After being in a holding pattern for so long, they finally had their man. His mood was damped by the sight of the filthy man he loathed stumbling towards him.

He threw Henreth a disgusted look. “You stink.” He chided the man as Henreth plopped down in the chair next to him and lit up another cigarette.

“I stink? Well---you stink. You and your whole lousy band of weirdos. I’m sorry I’m not all pure and clean like you and your snooty friends.” Henreth answered with a flourish of his hands.

“My brothers and I live in a state of being you could never understand.”

“I don’t care about you and your freaky friends, that phony priest and that mumbo jumbo witch your banging---.”

The man was drunk, but this didn’t stop Louka from aiming his gun right between the man’s eyes. He’d gone too far.

“You gonna shoot me? You think this is the first time I’ve had a gun in my face. I’ve been threatened by bigger, meaner and badder men than you. So put your wiener back in your pants boy before you hurt yourself.” Henreth said, his speech slurred.

Louka could hardly contain his rage as his finger fondled the trigger. Every part of him wanted to paint the walls with the man’s brains, the way he had done with the CIA agents in Afghanistan, but the words of the Prophet kept ringing in his ears.

Just a little more time and Achojah and the filth before him would no longer be in the world. He had personally been given permission to see to it. He took a deep breath and holstered his gun.

“That a boy. See, we can play nice. I know you don’t like me and I don’t like you either. We just have to get this one thing done, then we never have to see each other again. We wouldn’t even be in this situation if you had done your job.” The man said with a belch.

“You’re the one that compromised everything by handing over the real computer to Duchovny. The real one---not a fake like we agreed.”

“You don’t know him like I do. He would have known.”

“You don’t know that.” Louka spat, infuriated.

“And you’re the one who failed to get Duchovny in Afghanistan. We’d have Duchovny and the computer if you had done what you were supposed to do instead of shooting up a whole market and drawing a bunch of unwanted attention to our little affair. You screwed up big time.”

Henreth was saved from death by the ringing of Louka’s phone. He took the phone into the other room.

“It’s time to move and you need to hurry. The window of opportunity is very narrow.”

His contact said in silent tones

It was go time and Henreth, the idiot, was drunk. Louka found him in the kitchen making himself a pot of black coffee.

“It’s time to go. Can you handle yourself?”

“Can you?” Henreth shot back

Henreth poured the black coffee into a mug and holstered his gun. The two men had never unpacked, always ready to move at a moment’s notice. Louka threw his toothbrush and shaving kit into his bag. The only loose items in the room. When he turned Henreth was already packed and standing by the door.

The two men made haste to a rental car. Once inside, Henreth made a quick call.

“My guys are ready at the dock. The ship is just waiting for its precious cargo.” He informed Louka.

“He’s at the Denver jail. My person on the inside is putting up as much red tape as possible to stop him from being transferred. They’re already getting calls demanding that he be remanded to federal custody so we need to move fast. You sure that ship is ready?”

“Ready and waiting, with a full medical staff to make sure he stays unconscious, but alive, during the journey. You sure you can get him out of the jail undetected?”

“I have people in place that have been ready for weeks. They’re well trained and well paid. He’ll get to the docks unharmed.” Louka promised.

Louka was excited to see Robert face to face. He wanted the man to know, before they drugged him and shipped him off, that he was the one that had finally taken him down.

He didn’t like Robert Duchovny. Men like him thought they were intellectually superior to everyone else. They treated men like Louka, the ones who did all of the hard work and got their hands dirty, like they were beneath them. Once they got what they needed from him, Louka hoped that he would have the pleasure of personally finishing the man off.

He glanced sideways at Henreth who was focused on the road. As the two men drove in silence, but with a purpose, Louka thought of the other thing that would bring him immense joy and reward---killing the man sitting beside him and ridding himself of the filthy, former life he’d been forced to live once and for all.

Neither side trusted each other. Louka had two armed men with him and Achojah had sent three additional thugs to guard his interest in the matter. It hardly seemed fair, four against three. What the four men that worked for Achojah didn’t know was the Louka’s people had taken over the cargo ship. The 10-man crew had been murdered and replaced with Mal’akh.

The night was hot, muggy and especially dark. Even the moon and the stars seemed to be hiding from what was going to transpire on the dock that night. A man would be drugged, kidnapped, transferred to another country and held prisoner for the rest of his life. Perhaps tortured if he refused to do what was commanded of him.

Louka was at the end of what had been a long, difficult task. He would return to the Mal'akh a changed man, but a hero, taking the place at the right hand of the Prophet and earning Solange as his bride. But for now, there was the matter at hand.

He had three of his favorite weapons on him. A 45 tucked in his jeans behind his back, a 357 holstered on his left side and a long knife strapped to his ankle.

Taking Henreth's men out would be easy. His brothers, now the ship's crew, could do that. But Henreth--he didn't want the man's death to be quick. After all the time he had wasted with the man, he wanted to take his time with him, just like Duchovny. That's what the knife was for.

Show time Louka thought to himself as a dark van pulled up. From the information he'd received, Robert had been drugged when he ate his last meal in solitary confinement.

The story that would be told to everyone was that he was found unconscious and taken to the infirmary, examined and pronounced dead.

An order would be signed for him to be cremated before anyone could check the body. Someone would lose a job, but the person would be highly compensated and set up for life by the Mal'akh.

Considering the high profile and unpleasant details of the case, no one would be surprised by the prison style hit on Robert's life. Most people would think that justice had been served. No

one would expect that Robert Duchovny was unconscious, highly medicated, and on a cargo ship bound to Algiers.

Louka and Henreth stood guard as Robert was removed from the back of the van on a stretcher. The outside of the van looked like a soccer mom type vehicle. But on the inside, it was decked out like an ambulance. The man that had been on the passenger side checked Robert's pulse as the medical staff from the ship stepped forward to examine the unconscious man.

Robert was covered and wrapped from head to foot with a dark, plain prison issue blanket. A space had been cut open at the nose and mouth for him to breathe. His breath was deep and steady, exactly what the medical staff wanted to see.

"Get him on the ship now." Louka commanded.

Henreth had taken down the cameras in the area, but Louka didn't want to take any chances. The sooner they concluded their business, the better. The plan had been that Louka and Henreth would join the crew and medical staff on the ship. The plan was about to change.

Louka wanted to make sure that Duchovny was safely on board before the final scheme was executed. He didn't want his prize getting hit by a stray bullet after all he had gone through to get to this moment.

As the medical staff were wheeling Robert towards the boat Henreth called out for them to stop.

"Aren't you going to check?" He asked.

"What?" Louka spat at him, irritated that he was prolonging the inevitable.

"Don't you want to make sure you got the right guy? I don't know about you, but I don't want to take this guy all the way to Achojah and find out we got the janitor."

Louka went up to the motionless form and yanked back the blanket.

“Satisfied? He said, looking around at his men, getting them ready for the action that was about to go down.

Henreth looked the sleeping man over, tilting his head to examine the face. He started to laugh, the sound echoing through the empty harbor.

“What’s so funny?” Louka demanded to know. “What are you laughing at?”

Louka pulled his gun and aimed it at Henreth’s mid-section. Henreth’s guys reacted immediately, as did Louka’s two guys. The medical team stayed in place not daring to move.

“It’s not him.” Henreth said as he contained himself.

“What do mean?” Louka leaned in close to the face, turning it to the right and left. “Is this some type of game?” He asked, all guns still drawn.

“I’ve been studying this guy my whole life. I can tell you, that ain’t him. Darn good decoy though. This guy even had his gait and his mannerisms down, but it explains the t-shirt over the face.” Henreth circled his head with his hand to emphasize the point.

Henreth motioned to his guys and the group of men started in the opposite direction towards the parking lot.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Louka shouted after them.

“I’m going to tell Achojah that you failed once again. He’s going to have to start moving quickly to clean up the mess you’ve made. Oh, and don’t try anything.” Henreth nodded up towards the deserted buildings all around the dock.

Louka looked up to see Nigerians everywhere, in every deserted building. They stepped from behind empty shipping containers, they leered at him from a broken-down ship that Louka thought was vacant. A soft liquid sound from behind him produced two men in scuba gear bringing their weapons up out of the water.

“Achojah knows about the double cross.” Henreth informed him. “The only reason you’re not dead right now is because you’re too stupid to kill. Tell your boss or your Prophet or whoever’s boot you’re licking the deal is off.”

Henreth motioned to the three men with him again. Louka watched them walk away, fuming to the point that he was ready to explode. His eyes bored into their backs as they disappeared around the corner from his view.

Once the men were out of shooting range, Achojah’s men slowly faded into the darkness as well. Louka waited until they were all gone to speak.

“We need to put him back.”

“What?” The men from the van protested. “Do you know what we went through to get him out?”

“No one knows he’s gone. We don’t want them to know that we know the guy’s a decoy.” Louka leaned down, examining the face closely.”

“Are you sure Achojah’s man wasn’t just playing you?” One of the guys asked.

Louka shot him a venomous look as he answered. “He wouldn’t have left if this was the real Robert Duchovny. Put him back in his cell, tear up the death certificate. He’ll wake up in the morning with a doozy of a headache, but he, and whoever he works for, won’t be the wiser. This thing is still in play.”

Louka watched as they rolled the sedated imposter back into the van.

“Follow the van. Make sure they make it back to the Denver jail.” Louka said to one of the men standing next to him.

In the darkness he stared at the blunted lights of the cargo ship that was supposed to be his ticket to freedom and the life waiting for him with Solange. He cursed Robert Duchovny in

every way he knew possible. Once he composed himself, he turned to one of the men next to him.

“You know where the girlfriend is?”

“Yes.”

“Stay close to her, but out of sight. We might need her.” Louka commanded and the remaining man obeyed, heading towards the parking lot.

“How long can we keep this here?” Louka asked one of the crew men regarding the cargo ship.

They were only supposed to be docked that night, leaving at the break of dawn. This gave Louka little time to find out where the real Robert Duchovny had been stashed.

“This is not over.” He said to the night as he headed back to his car to plan his next move.

Robert entered the 5-star hotel through a revolving door. A bellhop immediately rushed to grab his bags out of the idling rental car outside. At the front desk he gave his alias, pulling out his ID, passport and credit card.

He was calm on the outside but inside he was a bundle of nerves. Was this going to work? Was it taking a little longer than necessary to check him in? He was thinking of all kinds of terrible scenarios when the man at the front desk handed him back his ID's and credit card.

“Mr. Duggary, your assistant asked that I let her know when you check in. Li Xiu?”

“Please do. And do you have a menu for room service? I would like to order before I go up to my room.”

The man handed him a laminated menu.

“How about the charcuterie tray and a bottle of wine, best in the house please.”

The man nodded with a smile. “Of course, Mr. Duggary. I will have it sent up to your room shortly.”

Robert turned to leave, then stopped.

“One more thing, can you please send Ms. Li Xiu up to my room when she arrives?”

“Yes Sir.” The man said with another nod.

Robert pulled a fifty-dollar bill out of his wallet and handed it to the man. His eyes lit up.

“Thank you, Sir.”

Robert guessed Li Xiu must be Maria. If it wasn't, he would have to deal with the situation when the mystery woman arrived. His mind turned to a state of worry again. Did someone know he was there? Was this just a ploy to find out when he checked in? He almost wished he hadn't ordered food. What if he opened the door to a full Swat Team?

Using his hotel key to gain access, the room was as promised. He had a corner 3 room suite with an amazing view, a living room and full kitchen.

A light rapping at the door made him almost jump out of his skin. He sheepishly answered the door to a bellhop wheeling in his bags and another man with a tray full of culinary delights.

Robert's flight was over 15 hours and he was famished. Airplane food only went so far and he'd rejected most of it. He made sure he tipped both men fifty as well and made it a point to use every lock on the door.

Secure in his room, he kicked off his shoes. He really needed a shower, but hunger called. He took in his surroundings as he ate. This was his home for the next few days. It was a far cry from the safe houses he'd been holed up in.

Upon entering the room he was greeted with soft music, a bottle of champagne, a small refrigerator full of water and the warmth of a heated gas fireplace. The lights had been dimmed, making the fireplace more luminous and the room more inviting.

Sitting in the luxurious room, eating alone, he thought of Sarah. It would have been wonderful to have shared something like this with her. Maybe on their honeymoon. How soon would they have gotten married? Would they have had a large ceremony, a small, intimate service, or maybe they would have eloped, sneaking off to a place like this to start the rest of their lives together. He was lost in his thoughts as he heard three taps at the door.

Through the peephole he saw a stunning Asian woman. A part of his mind he knew it was Maria. But like a chameleon, she had changed again. He opened the door and she moved past him silently.

“Nice room.” She said with a Chinese accent she didn’t have before.

She dug into one of 2 bags she carried and removed his scanning device. He had given it to her previously to avoid scrutiny from TSA as he went through security at the airport. She had obviously not flown commercial.

Robert scanned the room and waited for the green light before he spoke. Maria had already broken into the wine and poured herself a glass. Robert wasn’t much of a drinker himself. He had ordered the wine for show, trying to be unpredictable as he’d been told.

“I almost didn’t expect to see you here.” She said, dropping the accent, gulping down the wine and putting the bottle down hard on the table.

“I’m no spy, but I’m not that inept.” He said jokingly, in spite of the seriousness of the situation.

“You don’t know?”

Maria went to the TV and turned it on, switching channels past the cooking shows and daytime TV dramas to a station that had American News. She was helping herself to the charcuterie board as the news brought Robert down into a nearby chair.

“Do you want to explain yourself?” She asked in between bites.

“I don’t have words.” Robert answered honestly.

His only guess was that the so-called arrest was Secretary Page’s way of making sure no one would know Robert had left the US. Thinking he was behind bars, the FBI and the CIA would no longer be looking for him. The Secretary had outdone himself.

“Mind if I shower before we get started?” He asked Maria.

He needed to make a quick, private call and he honestly did need a shower.

“Need some company?” She teased. “I am your assistant you know.”

Robert was caught off guard. She was someone he couldn’t get a read on. Was she being serious or joking? He was going to assume she was serious and didn’t want to have any misunderstandings between them. This was business for him. They both needed information, needed to find answers to their questions. To him, their partnership was for that reason only.

“I think I can manage.” He said seriously, wanting to send a clear message that he wasn’t interested in taking their relationship past what it was.

“Suit yourself. I’ll be here, eating your food and drinking your wine. And you should watch the phone calls. He’s being watched you know.”

In the bathroom Robert silently locked the door. He was put off that Maria knew he planned to call John, but he made the call anyway. His friend assured him he would discreetly let everyone know Robert was well. They ended the call within seconds.

As the hot water beat down on his weary body he tried to unpack what he had seen on TV. He didn't approve of someone being in hand cuffs on his behalf. He knew why he hadn't been told the plan. He never would have agreed to it.

And how long could the ruse last? At some point the imposter would have to appear in court and would have to face scrutiny. He didn't know what the end game was, but it made him feel even more pressed for time.

Like the room, the shower was splendid and he gave himself an extra moment to savor it. He assumed the wine and salacious news would be enough to keep Maria busy. When he exited the shower, this was confirmed. She had poured herself a second glass of wine, helped herself to more of his food and was analyzing Robert's body double on TV.

Maria extracted two laptops and a bunch of other gadgets Robert had given her to smuggle out of the US from her duffle bag. She handed him a case from the other bag that contained the Walther PPK, the clips, ammo and silencer.

Robert whistled, impressed. "How did you get all this past TSA?"

"Military transport. They know I'm agency, so no one checks my bags."

Maria watched as Robert set up a work station with his Lenovo, the 2 computers and his peripherals.

"What time are we going?" She asked.

It was the question he was hoping to avoid, but knew she was itching to get started.

"I need 24 hours."

"Twenty-four hours?" She exclaimed, standing up to pace around him. "I thought you did all of the research and networking back in the states?"

“I need to make sure that the connections I established are still secure. I also want to double check the building schematics and do some additional recon on the area before we move. You said it yourself, we need to proceed with caution where Paulo is concerned. Better safe than sorry.” He lied.

He needed to buy some time, but couldn’t tell her why. He had already established the connections he needed to bypass the security for the traffic lights and the cameras in that area and more. The entire system could be controlled from his laptop.

She was furious. He could almost see the smoke rising from her head as she fumed. There was no way she could make a move without him, even though he knew she was thinking of this. She would be in serious trouble without control of the cameras and the stop lights.

He could sense the weighing of the pros and cons. Could she do it without him? Ultimately, she obviously decided against it. Snatching up her purse, she headed for the door.

“I’m going to get some rest. I suggest you do the same. We can’t go at night, so we’re going to have to waste more precious time. We’ll meet 5am sharp, day after tomorrow.” The words were short, curt.

“I’ll call---.”

The door slamming behind her cut him off. As usual, he was glad for peace again. His ruse had not been a total lie. He did need time, just not for what he had told her. With a complete computer network set up in his hotel room, he fired up all the laptops. He had a lot of work to do before showtime.

Sarah turned the key in the lock to her house. Previously she had been happy to be home, now it just seemed cold and empty. As she stepped inside and closed the door the memory of her

and Robert sitting on the couch together, the first time he had kissed her, hit her like a slap to the face.

In that moment she realized she wouldn't be able to stay in the townhome. Looking around her old place of residence with foreboding, she began to think it might be best to leave Colorado as well.

The entire house smelled of stale coffee. Sarah went to the kitchen, wet a towel in the sink. On hands and knees, she started to clean up the mess she had left behind the day she'd fled for Maggie's. As she was wiping the floor there was a light knock at the door.

Good grief, Sarah thought. Sarah was done with the nosy neighbor and was ready to give the woman a piece of her mind. She must have been watching Sarah's house waiting for her to come home.

Infuriated, Sarah snatched the door open, startled by a man holding flowers. She was immediately gripped with panic. She should have looked before she opened the door. The house had been vacant for days, no one was expecting her to be home. Who was he? A reporter? What if he tried to push his way inside?

Thinking quickly, Sarah stepped outside, away from the townhouse and the doorway. If he tried to shove her inside, she could scream for help. Off to the side of the townhouse, out of the range of her windows, she noticed the flower delivery truck. It looked legitimate, but nothing was as it seemed these days. The man didn't seem surprised by her behavior.

"Hello Ma'am. Sorry for the late delivery, but this just came in. The person said they wanted to get it to you ASAP."

He pushed the flowers in Sarah's direction. The light on her neighbor's porch turned on, illuminating the darkness. A face peaked out the window. The man followed Sarah's gaze to the neighbor's house. For once, she was happy for the pesky woman.

"Do I need to sign for---?"

"Enjoy your evening." He said, moving away from her as the neighbor opened her front door.

"Is that you, Sarah?" The neighbor called.

"I just got home."

"Beautiful flowers."

Sarah could see the woman shoving her feet into slippers and pulling on a coat. She looked at where the truck had been, it was gone.

"Who are they from? Crazy time to deliver flowers." The woman asked.

"Have a good night."

Sarah quickly rushed inside and locked the door. Setting the flowers on the counter, she grabbed the card and read it. It was from the other teachers at her school, telling her to hang in there and how much they and the kids missed her. It brought a smile to her face. She missed her kids too. It just seemed odd to deliver the flowers so late at night. What was the rush?

Maybe they cared, she corrected herself. There were people who still cared about her. The whole ordeal was turning her into someone else. Someone that was suspicious of every motive, who saw the boogeyman behind every action and around every corner. She didn't like the new person she was becoming.

Something assailed Sarah's senses and she realized it was the roses. They were gorgeous, but very pungent. The last time she had gotten roses was that night, the night she'd had dinner with Robert at Paulo's house. The scent was overwhelming.

Suddenly the room spun around her. She grabbed the roses and tossed them into the bathroom, closing the door behind them. But it was too late.

The flashbacks came unwanted to her mind, crowding out every other thought. Each time something changed. This time she was not lying down, but sitting up. The traumatic event replayed in her mind like a movie, but something was happening in the background.

Normally she tried to run from the visions, push them out of her head. But this time, she wanted to see. She had to see. The room spun around her as she tried to steady herself.

"I need to see." She said to herself, her heart racing, her breathing erratic.

She blacked out.

At five am sharp Robert heard an urgent knock at the door. He checked his watch. He'd only had three hours sleep. Maria greeted him, unamused.

"Are we doing this or do you plan to waste more time?"

Without answering, he headed to the bedroom. It took him a few minutes to throw on some jeans, a shirt and jacket. He didn't even bother to look at himself in the mirror. He knew he looked terrible.

He shoved all of his belongings into his suitcase, stuffing the computers and his peripherals into the computer bag. Taking a large gulp of cold coffee from the previous night, he nodded to Maria that he was ready.

In the car Maria commented that he looked like hell. He definitely looked the way he felt. He was running on fumes. Maria tossed him a package of sweet rolls, a bottle of water and a red bull. He ate and took alternating sips of both liquids. He felt a little better with something in his stomach, the H2O and the dose of straight caffeine.

He had spent his day and night setting up the two computers Maria had given to him to match Pandora as much as possible. His handiwork had paid off and the fakes were exact replicas of Pandora, except for the real protected files.

He had also managed to further unlock several of Pandora's encrypted files, discovering a cache of pictures of what he assumed was Achojah's family along with real estate and business documents. Everything looked legitimate, but there was no such thing as legitimate when you were dealing with a terrorist.

Robert had copied the files over to his prison on the Lenovo. Then he had sent the files to Shaunessy via a heavily encrypted email he'd set up for Shaunessy's eyes only.

Robert knew Shaunessy would forward anything Robert gleaned from Pandora directly to Secretary Page where real action could be taken. By who and how soon was a mystery to him. But he at least knew the data was getting into uncorrupted hands.

Before he had shut down for the night, he had taken a moment to look through the pictures. Achojah had 3 wives and 14 children. He could be seen smiling at birthday parties and celebratory dinners. There was a picture of him golfing, pictures of him on the beach holding up a tropical drink complete with an umbrella. It was a different life. Strange to see from a man Robert knew was a thief, a liar and a murder.

How could someone become so evil and have no conscience or regard for the unspeakable harm he had caused and the evil things he had done and planned to do? Robert had

been pondering this when exhaustion had overtaken him and he had fallen asleep. The next memory he had was the sound of Maria banging on the door.

Now here he was, driving into the unknown. Robert booted up his computer and started his negotiation with the host computers he would need to control the cameras and the lights in the neighborhood. Working made him feel good. It also gave him something to do to avoid talking.

“Are we good?” Maria asked, his tinkering having the opposite effect on her. She obviously thought he wasn’t ready.

“Just getting access to the networks I need.”

The computer beeped and Maria tried to see what he was doing out of the corner of her eye while also keeping her eyes on the road.

His computer screen split in half, code running on each side.

“I have control of the cameras in the area and I’ve set up a warning alarm. If anyone gets close to the building it will set off a proximity alert which will be sent to my phone. I’ll turn it on once we’re inside. It will give us advance notice if anyone is approaching.”

“Lights?”

“Got control of them too.”

“Did you review the layout of the building like I asked you too?” She snipped at him.

She was determined to be irritated with him and he realized there wasn’t much he could do to calm the situation.

“Went over it, memorized it and I know where Paulo should be. I’m good to go.”

“Where are the other computers?”

“In the trunk. I removed the spare tire. Didn’t have anywhere else to stash them.”

“Did you bring your gun?”

“In the trunk. Same place.”

Robert planned to leave the gun when they went in. He knew how to use a gun, but knew he wouldn't be good in a fight. This was Maria's area of expertise and he decided to let her lead in this area. With what he had set into motion, the less firepower the better. They were already walking into a tricky situation.

“Did you bring yours?” He countered, getting irritated with her attitude and from the lack of sleep.

She patted her jacket, left side and they left the conversation there.

It was a two-hour drive to the decrepit building in the bad part of town Paulo had chosen as his hiding place. Robert couldn't imagine what had made Paulo want to hide in an area that was unsafe and why he would stay in the Philippines.

They parked the car around the block and made their way with stealth around the back of the building, Maria with her gun drawn and Robert with his computer bag slung over his shoulder.

She quickly picked the lock on the back door with ease, using a device she produced out of the only thing she had brought, a small backpack.

The back of the building was typical of a warehouse. It had three large doors where semi-trucks would have parked to load and unload and one solid metal entrance door where employees would have entered and exited for the day.

In a previous life, the building had obviously been a thriving, bustling business. Now it was beaten down and closed, standing as a former relic in a neighborhood that had seen better times.

“Watch your step.”

Maria whispered a warning to him as they stepped around broken glass, trash and parts of the building where the roof had caved in. Water could be heard trickling from damaged pipes. Robert didn't want to think about the scurrying sounds he heard all too close in the darkness that surrounded them. The only light they had was from a small flashlight Maria had in hand that she somehow held while also holding her gun.

As they moved deeper into the building, the smell of something long since dead assaulted their senses.

“Smells like something died in here.” Robert commented quietly.

“Something or someone. This is a good place to hide a body.” She retorted.

“Great.” Robert said, as he looked around anxiously.

“Keep moving.”

Moving carefully through the rubble of the building, they made it to the main warehouse. Maria eyeballed the warehouse from top to bottom, gun at the ready. Once she determined it was abandoned, she motioned for him to follow her inside.

Almost as quickly as she did this, she held up her fist for him to stop. She pointed to her eyes, then pointed downward. There was a device of some kind that Robert didn't recognize.

“Explosive.” She educated him quietly as she stepped around it and motioned for him to do the same. In this particular moment, he was extremely grateful for her expertise.

She pointed to her eyes again, then pointed to another device that was located at the top of the stairs. A metal staircase led to what Robert assumed were the managers and big wigs offices back in the day.

“He’s got to be up there. It’s the best place for him to defend himself from an attack. It’s what I would do. Follow my lead. Don’t move unless I move and don’t make a sound.” Maria whispered.

They turned to start their ascent but were stopped by the sound of something clinking behind them. It was the sound of cocking guns.

“Robert Anderson Duchovny and Maria Lim, weapons down, turn around slowly, hands where I can see---” Aaron hadn’t finished his sentence before Maria had turned, quick as a startled cat, gun trained on Aaron and Nics.

Robert put his hands up, hoping Maria would do the same, but no such luck.

“I’m giving you to the count of three---” She said quietly.

“Maria, please put the gun down.” Robert whispered.

“This gun is not going down and I guarantee you, you’ll have one less hand before you can get a shot off.” Maria threatened.

“Maria, this is Detective Aaron Levy, Sarah’s brother, and his associate, Nicholas Hobbs.”

“I don’t care if they’re the Queen of England and the Prince of Wales. I’m not lowering this weapon until you lower yours.” She demanded in a whisper.

They were locked in a three-way standoff with all weapons drawn and pointed at each other. Robert was in the middle, his hands still in the air, when his phone began to silently beep and pulse.

“What is that?” Aaron asked.

“Proximity alert. I need to check it.” Robert said.

“Don’t move.” Aaron trained his gun on Robert and started reading him his Miranda rights.

“Do you realize why we’re here?” Maria said in an agitated, whispered tone. “We don’t have time for this. Drop your weapons now.”

“I’ve got to see what this is. Please. I trusted you enough to bring you here. Now, you need to trust me.” Robert urged them.

“You brought them here?” Maria snarled through clenched teeth.

“We got the invitation.” Nics said, keeping his sights on Maria as Aaron covered Robert. “We’re not leaving without you. You’re going back to the states, one way or another.”

Robert guessed that ---*one way or another*---meant that Nics didn’t care if Robert was breathing or not on the journey home. The look the man gave him was murderous. Robert was starting to regret his decision. His only option was to try to reason with them.

“The alert means that someone is on the way here. Could be a friend, but probably foe. I really need to check. I just need to get my computer---.”

Robert moved to slip his computer bag from his shoulder and was immediately met with calls not to move by Aaron and Nics.

“Put down the bag, nice and slow. And Lady---you had better get that gun out of my face or we’re going to see who loses some fingers today. I’m not going to tell you again.” Aaron warned.

“All you put weapons down!” A voice boomed from the top of the stairs.

The behemoth of a man known as Paulo Santos was looking down on them. He had a fully automatic weapon in one hand and a detonator in the other. He nodded towards a device he had hidden under the stairs that Maria had missed. It beeped as he armed it.

“I’ll blow you all to kingdom come. Weapons down, now.”

They did as they were told, slowly.

“Robert, get the computer, see who our company is.” Paulo said.

Robert immediately grabbed the computer bag and powered up the Lenovo. It was too late. Two cars loaded with men could be seen on the cameras Robert had hijacked. They pulled up in front of the building and parked. Robert began typing frantically on his computer.

“Give me your cell phones.” He commanded of Aaron and Nics. They gave him a look that said they weren’t giving him anything.

“Do what he says!” Paulo demanded from the top of the stairs. They reluctantly complied.

Robert tossed the phones to Maria. She quickly pulled a bottle of viscous liquid from her backpack, pouring the liquid into each phone. The phones melted and died as Robert continued to type at a frantic speed.

“Maria, check it out.” Paulo commanded

Maria headed for the window. Once there, she silently called out what she saw. Two cars, eight men in suits, heavily armed and headed their way.

Aaron leaned down to retrieve his weapon, but was stopped by a shout from Paulo.

“Don’t move. I’ll shoot you. Robert, work faster.”

“Working as fast as I can.”

Robert didn’t know where to begin. He didn’t know who the guys were, or who had sent them. He had covered all the bases, the car had not been bugged and he knew that there was no malicious software on his Lenovo.

“Did you tell anyone you were coming?” He asked of Aaron and Nics.

“No. Kind of regret that now.” Aaron answered.

Robert was finally able to tap into one of the phones outside. The phone he acquired showed a kill order with a picture of Paulo and the address.

“Three guys heading to the rear, others headed our direction.” Maria called out.

“Let us get our weapons.” Nics requested, looking up at Paulo.

“Shut up and let him work.” Paulo answered from his place at the top of the stairs.

Robert sent an urgent text to the assassin’s phone. *Target no longer at location. Target moving east on highway. Intercept and eliminate before subject reaches civilian area.*

Robert’s heart was beating a mile a minute. Would it work? His question was answered when he heard a whistle from outside.

“They’re returning to the cars. All getting in, they’re leaving.” Maria informed them.

She waited until the car was out of site before she moved back towards the men, her weapon trained on them.

“What are they doing here?” Maria asked, nodding towards Aaron and Nics. Her gun now pointed at Robert’s head.

“I asked them to meet us here. I wanted them to know the truth.” Robert answered, his hands back in the air.

“Come up. Maria, you take point.” Paulo said. He disarmed the bomb, but still had his weapon trained on Robert, Aaron and Nics.

Maria nodded in Paulo’s direction. Robert didn’t like the fact that the two seemed to have teamed up against him. As the men turned to head up the stairs, Maria snatched up Aaron and Nics guns and tucked them in her waistband.

With Maria taking up the rear and Paulo in front of them they were herded up the stairs.

“To the right.” Paulo said, pointing them to a door.

The room was small, dank and smelled of cheap food and an unwashed man. There was a cot, a small table, a bathroom, a portable stove and cooking pot. In the corner was a bag of dirty clothes, several duffle bags and a box filled with cans of soup. A pot of soup was on the portable stove bubbling. They had interrupted breakfast.

Robert looked around at the meager surroundings.

“Paulo, we need to get out of here. I don’t know how long the diversion will last. They might be back.” Robert warned.

“Paulo Santos?” Aaron questioned. The man nodded, gun still trained on them.

“Robert is right. We can’t stay here.” Maria interjected.

“Cover them.” Paulo said to Maria, nodding to Robert, Aaron and Nics. She complied.

“Hey.” Robert protested.

“Hey nothing. You brought them into this.” Maria quipped.

“Before we go, there is something you should see.” Paulo said, motioning towards the duffle bags

“We don’t have time for this.” Robert urged him. But Paulo didn’t move.

“You have to see this, now, before we go any further. You have to understand why.”

Paulo motioned to the duffle bags again.

Robert obeyed the command, eager to get out of the building before the hit squad returned.

“Not that one. The one in middle. Sit it there.” Paulo said, nodding towards the bed.

Robert did as Paulo asked, wondering where the request was leading and what it had to do with their current predicament.

“Open it. The black one is yours.”

Inside the bag were clothes that were in desperate need of a wash and a hard, silver case. In the case were two virtual reality headsets. One white and one black. Robert slipped the black one on.

“Hit the play button.” Paulo commanded and Robert complied again.

Robert could only watch a few minutes before he took the headset off in disgust, tossing it on the bed. He tried to shake the horrific images from his mind.

“What is this?” Robert asked, his stomach twisted in knots at what he had just seen.

“Memory implantation.” Paulo answered simply. “The video images, in conjunction with scopolamine, has been a very useful tool to implant memories. Scopolamine also makes people open to suggestions and it’s untraceable in the body.”

“Paulo, what the hell are you saying?” Robert asked, something far worse than rage coiling inside of him.

Robert could not wrap his mind around what he had seen and what he was being told. Something in him needed to hear it, to understand what had happened that night.

“You, Sarah, the attack---it never happened. At dinner I put the scopolamine in your drinks. Sarah had a headset, you had a headset. You were both supposed to think what you saw was real. But she kept knocking hers off, I had to put it back on several times. And you--- you thought someone was hurting Sarah so you fought me. I’ve never experienced anything like it, the determination the two of you had. I had to put you down hard, choke you out. With you unconscious, the implantation didn’t work on you. Your girlfriend, maybe a little. Enough for the moment, but not deep enough to last.”

Aaron moved aggressively towards Paulo and Robert had to stop him. He felt the same way. He wanted to take Paulo apart, hurt him in the worst way possible. But he knew what the man was capable of and no one was doing anything with the fully automatic rifle pointed at them.

Robert handed Aaron the black viewer. Like Robert, he could only watch a few seconds.

“Hand it back.” Paulo commanded, gun pointed.

Aaron did as he was told and Paulo put the viewer back in its case.

“Why?” Robert asked between clenched teeth.

He was seething with hostility towards the man he had once called a friend. Robert didn’t want to speak to him, didn’t even want to look at him. But he had to know the truth.

Paulo had tears in his eyes as he spoke.

“They have Jess. They told me if I did this, I would get her back. I kept these---.” He nodded towards the duffle bag without taking his eyes off his hostages. “---to give to authorities once I got her back, to clear your name. I wanted you to know. I was going to take care of this, as soon as I got Jess back.”

They have Jess. As if the situation could get any worse, Paulo's words hit Robert like a freight train."

"Who is Jess and who are they?" Aaron asked, furious.

Robert could feel the tension in the man's entire body as he held him back. He couldn't trust that Aaron wouldn't rush Paulo, even with the gun.

"No more questions here. We have to go, before the men come back." Paulo said.

Robert turned to Aaron and Nics. "I hate this as much as you do. But now is not the time. This is the reason I asked you both to come, to get the truth. Take the viewers, get them to the proper authorities. It will clear my name and hopefully bring some peace to Sarah."

"Nobody takes anything until I get Jess back." Paulo yelled.

"They don't need to be here. I'll help you in any way I can. But you need to let them go." Robert insisted.

"I need help. No Jess, no headsets." Paulo answered firmly.

"We don't have time to argue, Robert. Let's get out of here before those men come back." Maria said.

"Maria, take point. I'll bring up rear." Paulo said. Robert was shocked when Maria moved to do as requested.

"Wait until I get downstairs and can cover, then bring the rest of them out." She responded.

She peeked out the door and down the stairs to make sure everything was clear before she moved.

"Maria?" Robert questioned.

“Don’t look at me. You brought the Lawman and Scarface to this party. Whatever happens to them, it’s on you. I just don’t want to get killed in the process because you did something stupid.”

She rushed down the stairs without saying another word.

“Clear.” She notified them.

Paulo snatched the duffle bag with the headsets inside from the bed.

“Move.” Paulo demanded of his captives.

“Soups still cooking.” Nics commented.

“I don’t care if the building burns down. Move your ass. Keep your hands where I can see them.”

Robert, Aaron and Nics, hands raised, made their way downstairs.

“This way.” Maria said, motioning them towards the rear entrance.

It was going to be a tight fit with five people, especially with Paulo being the size of 2 men. Paulo motioned with the gun for Aaron to get in first. He handed his AK 47 to Maria then slid in next to Aaron, pulling a gun out of his pants and pointing it at Aaron’s stomach.

“Any stupid move, I shoot him. You got that?” Paulo warned.

“Understood.” Nics said, sliding in next to Paulo.

They were packed in like a can of sardines, but they fit. Paulo’s body odor filled the car. Aaron chanced getting shot to open a window.

“I told you don’t move.” Paulo yelled at him.

“I’m going to die anyway if I don’t get some fresh air!” Aaron retorted.

“You’re driving.” Maria said to Robert, a Glock in one hand and the AK 47 in the other. Robert placed his computer bag on Nics lap and slipped into the driver’s side, Maria into the passenger side. He started to drive.

“Where we headed?” Maria asked as Robert pulled away from the building.

“I don’t know? Where are we headed?” Robert deferred to Paulo, glancing at him in the rear-view mirror.

“We need a new place. If someone knew about this hiding place, none of my other places are safe.”

“We can go back to my hotel.” Robert suggested.

“Really?” Maria again. “You’re going to take a man that is wanted by the IISA, the FBI and the CIA, a police officer who we’re holding at gun point and Scarface, whoever you are---.” Maria nodded towards Nics. “No offense.”

“None taken.” Nics said calmly as she continued.

“---Back to your hotel? You’ll blow your cover. We have to go somewhere else.”

“I think you just ran a stop sign.” Nics again, seemly unphased by the situation.

This was confirmed by a police car pulling out from the side road and the sound of sirens.

“Crap.” Maria exclaimed.

“What do I do?” Robert asked in a panic.

“Pull over. We’re switching places. Don’t try anything stupid.” She warned the two hostages in the back seat.

“Oh, there’s enough stupid going on here already. We would hate to add to it.” Nics commented, to which Paulo shoved the gun deeper into Aaron’s abdomen.

“Why don’t you let me talk to him.” Aaron asked as the police car pulled up behind them, parked and an officer started to approach.

“Move over.” Maria said, sliding across Robert’s lap and switching places with him.

Just as the officer was almost at the window, she sped off.

“Or---there’s that.” Aaron said.

The car screeched away from the curb, kicking up dust. In the rear-view mirror, the officer could be seen running back to his car and making a call.

“We’re busted. You need to get us out of this.” She directly the comment to Robert.

“What am I supposed do?” He asked, flabbergasted.

“You’re a hacker, right? Do something. I need a map of the streets, I need green lights, make fire rain down from heaven, whatever you have to do to get this cop off our tail.”

“He’s coming up the rear.” Paulo informed from the back seat.

“Bag.” Robert said to Nics, all business now.

Nics handed him the bag from his lap without protest.

Robert booted up the computer, plugged in his peripherals and immediately went to work. He brought up a grid and studied a map of the surrounding areas. Finding a potential escape route, he told Maria to make a right at the next street.

“Your other right.” He yelled as she made a sharp left turn.

Following the new trajectory, he mapped out a new course.

“Make a right---a right---at the second street coming up and keep going straight.”

“More now.” Paulo said from the back seat as 2 more police cars joined the chase.

“You could always pull over.” Aaron suggested.

“Shut up unless you want to die!” Paulo exclaimed, giving the gun at Aaron’s waist a shove.

Maria put her foot on the gas as far down as it could go, hitting the first right hand turn hard onto a one-way street. They zig-zagged as they avoided oncoming vehicles. A few times Maria hit the sidewalk to avoid cars. Pedestrians yelled and ducked for cover.

“He said the second right, but I guess that’s a moot point now.” Nics chimed in.

“If he says one more thing, shoot him.” Maria said, directing her comments to Paulo.

“Make a left, at the next street. A left.” Robert emphasized each word as his fingers moved frantically over the keyboard of the Lenovo. “Then, go straight. No turns, just straight.”

“They’re going to catch us.” Maria said as she made the turn, gas pedal to the floor.

The car spun and clipped another vehicle, but she corrected and kept driving.

“No, they’re not.” Robert said confidently as he worked.

“We have to turn, they’re only a few cars back and there’s more police now.” Paulo yelled from the back seat

“Do not turn.” Robert said sternly to Maria. He was typing as if his life depended on it.

“Any day now.” Maria griped as one of the police cars was maneuvering to catch up with them.

“I’m negotiating with the host computer for this area. It’s not as fast as back in the states.”

“I thought you did that already.”

“Sometimes, to avoid being exploited, a system will---.”

I don’t care. Just do something now.” Maria exclaimed, her eyes wide.

The police car pulled around the only vehicle blocking its path and came up almost parallel with them in the right-hand lane.

“Left hand turn now.” Robert urged and she complied, cutting off another car and making the left turn, tires screaming against asphalt.

The police car maneuvered around the traffic that had stopped on the road and started after them again at full speed. Six other police cars had now joined the chase.

“Hit the gas, get through this green light.” Robert commanded.

Maria did as she was told and they passed through the light before it turned red.

“Execute.”

Robert’s computer started to run a sophisticated program he had just created. The parallel traffic’s light turned green blocking the police cars and stopping them in their tracks.

“Keep going straight.” Robert said.

As they passed each light, all the parallel traffic lights turned green so that the police cars were cut off by more and more traffic. The street was a mess as cars tried to stop and move away from the sound of blaring horns.

They did this several more blocks until Robert told Maria to take a left. After they got through the turn, Robert turned all of the lights red behind them. He didn’t see any police cars following. If they got through the tangled mess of green lights and were able to make the left turn, they would be faced with standstill traffic backed up for miles by the red lights.

“Keep driving on this road until we get out of the city.” Robert said, still typing.

Paulo slapped Robert on the shoulder from the back seat. “You one crazy dog. That’s why I like you.”

Aaron and Nics exchanged curious glances.

Robert was relieved, but they weren't in the clear yet. They needed to ditch the car and get somewhere safe fast. He typed in an underground web address that only a select handful of people had access to. A black screen popped up.

"What is that?" Maria asked, looking at the screen sideways as she drove, slowly now.

"I'm sending out a distress signal."

"To who? We can't trust anyone, Robert. Not the FBI, the CIA, law enforcement. You can't even contact your team at the IISA. We're on our own right now."

"We need a place to stay. Like you said, we can't go back to the hotel with these guys, we can't go to any of the safehouses. We need to go underground. I'm putting out a request for help."

"How do you know they won't turn us in?" From Maria again.

"They won't." Robert said confidently.

As soon as he hit the send button, the dark screen began to light up with messages. He scrolled down until he found one he liked and responded.

"Where are you taking us?" Aaron asked from the back seat.

"We have been invited to the home of The Night Bird." Robert informed everyone.

"Night Bird? You trust him---her?" Aaron questioned.

"Abdullah Abdallah, a black hat hacker, one of the best, and the ringleader of an elite group called The Gang of Seven. He's wanted in over 20 countries. So, no concerns about being turned over to law enforcement." Robert answered.

"Are you out of your mind?" Maria screeched.

"The enemy of my enemy is my---"

"Stop talking." Maria yelled, cutting Robert off.

Robert had expected some push back, especially from Aaron and Nics. But the men were silent as they drove carefully down side roads and back streets hoping to avoid detection.

The flight from Manila Ninoy Aquino to Qatar was a little over 9 hours. They had flown on a private jet, provided by their mysterious host. No questions had been asked by the crew as Paulo and Maria kept their guns trained on Robert, Aaron and Nics.

At the airport, a stretch limo waited that was large enough to accommodate all of them comfortably. They continued to drive in silence, the three men still at gunpoint, until they reached an immaculate and impressive estate.

Maria and Robert got out of the car at the same time. Maria immediately trained her gun on Nics.

“Is that really necessary?” Robert asked.

“Careful.” Paulo said, ignoring Robert as Nics cautiously stepped from the car, his hands up. Aaron did the same.

The entourage made their way to the front door of an ornate, Arabic style mansion. Robert in front, Aaron and Nics in the middle with Maria and Paulo bringing up the rear. Robert rang the doorbell as the limousine pulled away.

A beautiful Arabic man with long flowing hair dressed in a pristine white dishdashas answered the door.

“Kosmos. Welcome to my home.” He said with a fluid Arabic accent.

Bowing slightly, he moved aside to allow them entrance to the house. Aaron and Nics still had their hands up, guns were still pointed. Their host seemed unphased.

“Interesting company you keep, Kosmos.”

“It’s complicated.” Robert agreed.

“May I call you Robert? That is what you prefer, am I correct?”

“Of course. We are your guest, Abdullah,” Robert said with a slight bow in the man’s direction.

Abdullah laughed casually. “You know my real name?”

“Of course. And a lot more.” Robert confirmed cordially with a smile.

Under normal circumstances, most people would have been offended, the man seemed more impressed.

Abdullah wrinkled his nose at Paulo. The man’s stench proceeded him.

“I have accommodations, would you like to freshen up? Then, a late dinner?”

“That sounds wonderful. Thank you for taking us in.” Robert said.

“Can we put our hands down?” Aaron asked, breaking the pleasant cordiality in the room.

Paulo glanced at Maria and she nodded. Both men relaxed, hands at their sides where they could be seen. Robert guessed the men knew well enough not to make any uncertain moves.

“Look, we’re not going to try anything. We came here for him.” Aaron nodded towards Robert. “But things have changed, after what we’ve seen. We want to get to the bottom of this just as bad as you do. Can we put the guns away?”

Maria and Paulo exchanged looks again. Robert didn’t like the sudden collaboration that seemed to be growing between them. It made the situation more dangerous.

They both nodded in agreement and Maria holstered her gun. Paulo stuck his in the front of his pants as if he wanted to let everyone know he was still in charge of the show and could access the gun at any time.

“Well, that’s lovely.” Abdullah said.

He pulled a cell phone from his dishdashas. Pushing a button, he summoned an older gentleman wearing a full butler's uniform.

"We have guests. Dinner at 7:00?" Abdullah glanced around the room and they nodded unanimously in agreement.

"Perfect. Diamando will show you to your rooms." He turned to the butler. "Summon Algenia to assist the lady.

Robert was the last person to be shown to his room. The others were already settled in and probably exploring their new surroundings and getting cleaned up.

Diamando explained, as they walked up the stairway to the second floor, that there were clean clothes in all of the rooms and they all had their own bathrooms. Anything else they needed could be provided with the push of an intercom button on the wall next to the door.

"Will this do, Mr. Kosmos?" Diamando asked.

"It's perfect." Robert said, thanking him.

Diamando handed Robert a key then bowed and left the room. Robert tried the door and was happy to find he had not been locked in.

Robert looked around the room in amazement. The mansion was luxurious and the temporary place he would be laying his head was no exception. The window was open allowing a natural breeze to flow through the room. A carafe of water along with a glass had been set out on the table, along with a basket of fresh fruit and Arabic sweets.

After a long shower Robert dressed in the only thing available, a dishdashas, and headed downstairs. Diamando was at the bottom waiting to show him to the dining area. Aaron and Nics

were already sitting at the table. They had obviously cleaned up as evidenced by the dishdashas they wore.

Robert sat across from them at the large, ornately carved wood table.

“Thank you for coming.” Robert said appreciatively to Aaron and Nics.

“Don’t thank me. I was coming to arrest you.” Aaron replied.

“I was going to break every bone in your body and throw you in a ditch. But that’s neither here nor there now.” Nics offered in his raspy voice.

Before he’d left for the Philippines, Robert had taken a chance and sent Nics an encrypted email letting him know the location he planned to confront Paulo. He had warned Nics about the gravity of the situation, that Paulo was most definitely armed and dangerous.

If they wanted answers to what had happened, he promised they would find all the answers to their questions.

It was the only way Robert could reach out to Aaron without the man trying to arrest him or worse. The fact that Aaron wasn’t jumping across the table to slap cuffs on him meant the man had seen enough to believe in his innocence.

“What’s the deal with the other two? Agency?” Nics questioned.

“Paulo is former CIA, an asset. Maria is a CIA handler and former field agent.”

“CIA? How did you get involved with them?” Aaron asked

“Paulo and I worked on some cases previously. I never knew about the other part of what he did. Maria, well, that’s a very long story.”

Aaron gave him a cynical look, eyebrow raised.

“Not like that. There’s nothing going on between us.” Robert clarified.

Robert went into detail about the mission in Afghanistan and how it had gone south, his attempt to crack the encryptions on Achojah's computer and the possible nuclear threat against the United States. What he was telling them was classified and he told them as much. But he felt like they were the only people he could trust in the present situation.

Aaron and Nics listened in silence until Robert finished the story. Nics whistled. Aaron leaned in, looking Robert in the eyes.

"What's your next step?" He asked

"I'm creating a program to counter the Pandora program." Robert answered, just over a whisper so that only they could hear. "I'm still working on breaking into the files to get full access, to see exactly what Achojah is planning."

He looked at both men, trying to sense if they believed him. They had intense, serious looks on their faces as they digested what they were being told.

Robert continued. "I need you to take those virtual reality headsets back to the states and give them to the proper authorities. Once my name is cleared, I can get access to my lab and my IISA team again. We're running out of time."

"I believe you. But this is a situation of national security. You need to come back with us and tell everyone what happened. I don't care if its classified." Aaron said in a hushed tone

"I can't." Robert said, glancing at the stairway as Paulo and Maria were being escorted down. "I have to find out what happened to Jess. Go back to the states, please. Tell them what you know. And tell Sarah---I never meant to hurt her. I never meant to drag her into this."

Robert could tell he had affected Aaron by the look the man gave him. They both loved her, he as someone who hoped to be her husband some day and Aaron as her brother.

The double doors behind Robert opened and Abdullah entered, followed by Diamando and another man dressed in waiter's garb.

"Just in time." Abdullah said as Maria and Paulo made their way down the staircase.

Paulo had a small bag strapped over his shoulder. Maria had on a long white, flowing dress that had obviously been made to accentuate the female form.

"Beautiful." Abdullah complimented her as all of the men stood at her arrival. Aaron pulled out a chair for her.

"---and deadly." Maria said sternly, pulling back the hem of her dress to show the knife strapped to her leg. "Don't even think about it."

Abdullah nodded in her direction, more amused than fearful. "I am a gentleman. A lady is always safe in my home." He put his hand to his chest and bowed in her direction.

Once she was seated and Aaron had gently pushed her chair into a comfortable position at the table, then men sat as well.

"Diamando, please." Abdullah said.

Diamando clapped his hands. Servants entered and brought aromatic soup and salad. Bowls containing an assortment of breads were placed at the ends and in the middle of the table. Glasses were filled with water and chardonnay.

"Thank you, Diamando?" Abdullah said as the man bowed and left the room, closing the double doors behind him.

Robert watched as Aaron said a silent prayer over his meal. He waited for him to finish before he spoke.

"Thank you for your hospitality, Abdullah."

"It's not every day that one has a celebrity come to visit." Abdullah offered.

“What are we going to do get Jess?” Paulo pressed.

“You need to answer some questions first.” Robert responded in a serious tone.

Abdullah stood. “I will leave you to talk.”

“No, please.” Robert motioned for him to stay seated. “This is your home. You’re taking a risk just having us here. You deserve to know why we showed up on your doorstep.”

All eyes were on Paulo. He leaned back in his chair, took in a deep breath. For a moment Robert thought he wasn’t going to talk.

“A few years ago, my last job, I met a woman. An enchanting, beautiful woman. At first, I was suspicious, you know, with what I was doing for the CIA at the time and what I look like. What’s a woman like that gonna want with me, right? I thought it was a set up. But I checked her out and she came up clean. One thing led to another, it went on for two years.” Paulo confessed.

“You were unfaithful to Angel?” Robert asked quietly in disbelief.

He had always thought Paulo’s marriage to Angel was solid. That his wife and daughter were the center of his life. He was shocked to learn about the infidelity.

“I have an---addiction. I can’t help myself. I think Angel tolerated it, you know? Because I traveled so much. As long as I didn’t bring it home, she looked the other way.”

The food was too much to resist and Paulo started to eat in between sentences. The others dug into their food as well as he relayed his story of the 2-year whirlwind affair. After the initial meeting, he had traveled and met the woman in different countries all over the world.

“It was great until things got weird. She was in this cult. These people were into some crazy stuff. Worshipping snakes, chanting, cutting themselves. I felt like I was being groomed or set up for something, you know? I ended it there.”

“It ended, just like that?” Nics asked.

“Yeah, just like that. She went her way, I went mine. Eventually I retired. I got an office and desk, everything was fine.” Paulo stopped talking long enough to finish off his soup and salad. He let out a large belch, emptied his water glass and took a sip of chardonnay.

Seeing that everyone was finished, Abdullah pushed the button on his cell phone.

“Filet Mignon and Salmon Oscar with Vegetables Du Jour and fingerling potatoes.”

Diamando announced as he entered the room.

He went around to each person at the table to ask how they liked their fish and steak prepared. When the food arrived, it was cooked to their exact specifications. The water glasses were refilled and the chardonnay replaced with a fine dinner wine. Once the bread baskets had been refilled, the crew left them again, closing the doors behind them.

After a few bites, Paulo continued. “The woman, she called me out of the blue. She said she needed a favor. I hung up on her.”

Paulo paused for a moment, taking a few bites as he tried to stifle the emotion Robert could see welling up inside of him.

“A few minutes later my little girl called. She says papa, these people, they took me when I was out shopping. They say they won’t hurt me if you do what they want. Please, she begs me. Please help me, Papa.” Paulo broke down into tears, wiping his eyes and nose with the sleeve of his dishdashas.

He started to eat again to mask the uncharacteristic emotions. In spite of what he had done, Robert felt sorry for him. He could not imagine what the man must be going through.

“Do you have any idea who these people are?” You think it’s Achojah?” Robert questioned.

“It’s not Achojah. He would have cut off a finger and sent it to Paulo.” Maria said.

“It’s them. The Mal’akh.” Abdullah said, surprising them all.

“What’s a Mal’akh? Maria asked.

“Not what, who.” Abdullah replied.

“I know every terrorist organization out there and I have never heard of that.” Maria retorted, an annoyed edge to her voice.

“They are not terrorist.” Abdullah informed them. “They believe the only way humanity can evolve is to move into a different plane of existence. To embrace the spiritual power of the universe and to merge that power with one’s inner self. When you do this, you will rise above pure human existence and become something more like a god.”

“The question we need to be asking is how they knew Robert was going to be staying with Paulo?” Aaron offered.

“Its members are very powerful, prestigious and influential men and women. CEO’s, bankers, politicians, at every level of government, in every country. Your FBI.” He nodded, looking at Robert. “The CIA.” He continued, looking at Maria and Paulo. “They have infiltrated both of these organizations.”

Maria gave Abdullah a stunned look. As far as Robert knew, she hadn’t told Abdullah she was CIA and didn’t seem happy he had fingered her so easily.

“You think someone on the inside tipped them off?” Aaron questioned.

“Yes. But I think it was a crime of opportunity. They wanted to get to you, Robert. If you had stayed somewhere else or done things differently, they would have found some other way.”

Abdullah answered, making a chill run up Robert’s spine.

“It doesn’t make any sense. What does a religious sect have to do with a terrorist?” Nics interjected.

“They approached me about a job. I didn’t take it. My cousin Sula, he took the job. Myself and my associates, we all told him not to, but the money was too good.” Abdullah offered.

Robert glanced at Aaron and Nics and they returned the look. The missing pieces to his story were starting to come together and he wanted to hear more.

“What did they want you to do?” Robert asked Abdullah.

“They wanted an encrypted, master computer and several companion computers. My guess was that the master would go to Achojah and the companions would go to his underlings. It was an easy job and the money was beyond generous. But when I found out Achojah was involved, I refused.”

“But you’re a criminal.” Nics said.

“I will not work with that terrorist.” Abdullah said of Achojah, spitting on the floor next to his seat. “What I do is art. I only take from the thieves that steal from the helpless, the poor, the little guy, as you say in America. I do not associate with monsters.”

Nics held up his hands in defense. He had obviously offended their host.

Everything suddenly clicked in Robert’s mind. Wealthy, powerful and well-connected people could only do certain things. But Achojah, he could do their dirty work for them without them getting involved or getting their hands dirty. Their wealth and power, along with Achojah’s network of thugs willing to carry out nefarious acts, it was a match made in hades.

The situation was more frightening than Robert had imagined. Terrorist usually had a cause in mind. They hated a certain people, a certain country or a certain religion. You could estimate their next moves based on the reasons behind what they did. Achojah hated America. A man like Achojah was easy to track and target.

But the Mal'akh, they seemed to want to tear down the entire world. How would he even begin to stop a group like this, that was so spread out and seemed to be worldwide from what Abdullah had said.

“We need to get back to the US. We can take the virtual reality headsets and, with what we know, it should be enough to---.”

Before Aaron could finish, Paulo reached into this pack and had his gun aimed in Aaron's direction.

“Nobody goes anywhere until I get Jess back.”

Aaron's eyes narrowed and Robert felt like the situation was about to get out of control.

“I'm a father, I know how you feel. After what we've learned, I want to help. But I'm not doing anything at the end of a gun. You want our help, you need to put the gun away for good and trust us.” Aaron said, not backing down.

The tension in the room had reached a crescendo. The situation was either going to explode or it would deescalate.

Robert hoped Paulo would calm down and come to his senses. In their current situation, the only people they could count on were sitting at the table. There was a long moment of silence. Paulo surprised Robert when he put the gun away.

“Dessert?” Abdullah asked calmly, as if on cue to lighten the mood.

“I could definitely use some dessert right now.” Robert said, relieved.

With a push of a button Diamando entered.

“For dessert we have a mixed berry torte with Chantilly cream, a champagne lavender cheesecake and a Belgium chocolate layered cake, with cinnamon sweetened drizzle.” Diamando informed them.

The servants rushed to each person at the table to get their dessert selection. Paulo ordered all three. The servants rushed out and returned with the delectable desserts, switching out the silverware, replacing the napkins and filling water and wine glasses once again. They were gone as efficiently as they had come.

“Have you ever thought of ending your life of crime and opening a restaurant or a bed and breakfast?” Nics asked as he dug into his cheesecake.

Abdullah smiled and nodded in his direction. “I am overjoyed that everything has been to your liking.” He seemed to glow in Nics offhanded, sarcastic compliment.

“So, what we do to get Jess back?” Paulo asked, not backing down on the subject.

“You said they would give your daughter back after you did the---the job. Where were you supposed to meet them?” Aaron asked, the detective in him coming through.

“They were supposed to bring her to building where you found me.”

“Well, I can tell you those guys that showed up weren’t IISA, FBI, CIA or the police. That was a hit squad. Achojah’s men would be my guess. I don’t think they ever meant to give you your daughter back. I’m sorry, Paulo.” Maria said.

Paulo hit the table. “I’ll kill those sons of---.”

“How can you be sure?” Aaron interrupted, directing his question to Maria.

“You don’t send a bunch of armed goons in a sedan to kill a guy like Paulo. He could have picked them off one by one from the upstairs window. The CIA would have sent one of our own, like Louka. The FBI would have issued an arrest warrant through the local police. No, this was a hit job and a sloppy one at that.”

Paulo was beside himself now and Maria placed a hand over his in an unc customary show of compassion from her.

“Remember the Mogadishu job?” Maria asked Paulo. He seemed to be thinking about it, so she continued. “We do the same job. We just have to find a location.”

“We can’t do the job with what we have now. We need supplies.” Paulo commented.

“There are several secret CIA facilities scattered through Europe, Asia and the Middle East. We go there, get the supplies we need, then we contact Achojah or these Mal’akh people and let them know we have Achojah’s computer.”

“Do you have some way of getting in touch with them?” Robert addressed the question to Paulo.

“No. They said they would contact me.” He said, obviously flustered and feeling helpless.

“I can.” All eyes turned to Abdullah. “Since Sula’s death I have been doing extensive research on them. I also still have the email they used to contact me. Between the two of us, we should be able to get in touch with someone.” Abdullah offered, nodding towards Robert.

“I can’t ask you to get involved in this.” Robert said earnestly to Abdullah.

“Robert, I move in circles that you cannot operate in. And I want these people, the ones who killed my cousin.”

“I won’t be part of a vendetta.” Aaron retorted.

“No vendetta. You are men of law, no? I will help you and you will make sure that these people face justice for what they have done.” Abdullah said, his voice smooth as velvet.

“What is the Mogadishu job?” Nics asked the obvious question.

No one in the room knew what they were getting into except Paulo and Maria. When Maria explained the job to them no one had words to say. Aaron finally broke the stunned silence.

“You want to find a remote bridge somewhere in Europe, Asia or the Middle East where we can meet with a terrorist and potential religious fanatic? You rig the bridge with explosives. Then, as soon as Paulo has his daughter, you blow up the bridge and paraglide or parachute to an escape vehicle, in the form of a boat, waiting below? Are we making a plan or an action movie?”

“That’s the job. We’ve done it before.” Maria said firmly and Paulo nodded.

Robert spoke up. “We’re not blowing up bridges and we’re not killing anyone, even if they are a---a bad person.”

Paulo pulled the gun out of his bag, waving it around as everyone ducked. “I’ll kill them for taking Jess. I don’t care. I’ll kill every last one of them.”

“You’re going to have to go on your little killing spree on your own time. We’ll help you, but not like this.” Aaron rebuffed them.

“The bridge isn’t a bad idea.” Nics said to everyone’s surprise, drawing incredulous looks from Robert and Aaron. “Not the blowing things up and murdering part. I meant that a bridge, in the right location, would be secluded. If we can find a place to hide, we can stake out positions and provide cover. You walk to the center of the bridge, make the exchange, then you both go your own way. Done deal.”

“I still think we should get local law enforcement involved, no matter the location.” Aaron insisted.

“You and your friend are law enforcement. You’re all we need. Any more people get involved, they’ll kill her.” Paulo stressed.

Robert was mentally exhausted and wanted to rest. He wanted to do anything but think about the task at hand.

“Maria, Paulo, this is your idea. Come up with a plan we can execute. We can discuss this more tomorrow.” Robert said, pulling away from the table.

Maria did the same and all of the men stood as she stood. Aaron helped her out of her chair. Surprisingly, she didn't seem to mind all of the male courtesy.

“There is a library, reading room, theatre and a garden on the property. We are on 100 acres, so you are quite safe from prying eyes. My home is your home for as long as you need it” Abdullah informed them with a bow.

Robert was extremely grateful and he let him know. Abdullah simply bowed his head slightly then disappeared through the double doors as Diamando entered the room.

“Madam and Sirs, what time would you like breakfast.”

“8 o'clock.” Robert said, looking around to see if there were any objectors.

No one disagreed and they left the table without another word. Diamando acknowledged that he understood with a bow and Robert knew that breakfast would be impressive and served at 8:00 am sharp.

Robert saw Aaron and Nics heading off together, not up the stairs, but towards the garden. Exploring their temporary surroundings or trying to find a way to escape?

He would know which one in the morning if the men did not show up for breakfast. Robert would understand if they left, he thought as he wearily made his way up to his room. Once inside he locked the door behind him.

He didn't trust Paulo and his distrust for Maria had returned. He felt like she and Paulo were up to something, he just didn't know what. He knew they both wanted Louka, who was obviously behind Robert's situation and the kidnapping scheme, dead. Would they join forces against him and put all of their lives in jeopardy?

Then there was Aaron and Nics. His intention was to have someone, other than him, know what happened. To possibly get evidence they could take back to the states to clear his name. He had never intended for them to be mixed up in the intrigue. In that moment, he felt terribly alone. He closed his eyes letting memories of Sarah fill his mind.

Sarah pressured Chanelle repeatedly after seeing the news and finding out Aaron and Nics were gone. When Chanelle had finally cracked and spilled the beans, it was a whopper of a story. Chanelle didn't know much, Aaron purposefully did not tell her about the assignments he went on to catch the bad guys, but this case was different.

He was going to a foreign country, under the guise of investigating a potential fugitive wanted on the United States, to look for Paulo Santos and someone who claimed to be Robert Duchovny. He hadn't told her and hadn't reported to his superiors exactly where he was going. She only knew he would be in Asia, following up on a potential lead.

How could Robert be in jail and halfway across the world at the same time? The only card for Aaron and Nics to play was to go to the location the individual had claimed they would be at, at the specified time, to discover if the incredible story was real.

With the troubling information from Chanelle, Sarah needed more answers. She knew there was only one person who could give them to her.

Pulling up to the curb, she was shocked at the sight of the James' house as she parked.

Several windows were boarded up. Celia's beautiful flower beds had been crushed, the rose bushes destroyed. It was as if a tornado had rummaged through the neighborhood and only struck one house.

Ringling the doorbell, Sarah almost expected no one to answer when they saw who it was. She was surprised when the door swung open to Celia James. The other woman looked weary, but Sarah could see determination behind her eyes. There was no shock or surprise at Sarah standing on her doorstep. It was as if she had been expecting her for some time.

“Come in.” Celia motioned Sarah into the house, closing and locking the door behind her.

The inside of the house looked like the outside. Boxes were lined up against the walls full of broken glass and broken memories.

“What happened?” Sarah questioned, looking around the ruined house.

“FBI raid. Happened the day the news broke---Robert’s arrest.” Celia said much calmer than Sarah felt.

The agents had ripped holes in the walls and destroyed light fixtures. Drawers had been thrown out of their place and broken as they hit the floor. All of this was now neatly piled up along the living room walls as Celia and John tried to get their life back in order.

“I was just about to take a break and have some tea.” Celia said, pulling out two mugs and a tea box.

She already had honey and milk on the table. The two women sat across from each other meeting each other’s burdened gaze. Celia fixed herself a cup of earl grey and Sarah did the same.

“I’m so sorry about this.” Sarah apologized, motioning around the house.

“It’s not your fault.” Celia offered.

There was no use beating around the bush.

“I just left my brother’s house. I was told by my sister-in-law that Aaron is somewhere in Asia meeting Robert, who I just saw arrested. The last time I saw Robert---.” Sarah paused,

pushing down the emotions threatening to rise to the surface. She didn't want to have one of her episodes at Celia's dinner table. She took a deep breath, met the feelings, the fears head on. She continued. "The last time I saw Robert was the night everything happened."

Celia took a sip of her tea. Sarah could see the swirl of emotions behind the woman's eyes as she decided if she could trust Sarah.

"I just need to know the truth." Sarah implored the woman sitting across from her.

"The man in jail is an imposter. Robert is trying to find out who did this to you, to all of us."

"Are we in danger?"

"Yes. Not just you or my family or Robert's family. All of us. Everyone in this country, maybe even in the world."

"What is happening?" Sarah asked.

"There is something going on behind all of this. Something sinister. You can't tell me you don't feel it? Robert is out there trying to find the truth because that is what he does. He uses knowledge to fight the evil in this world. It's all we can do to protect the ones we love."

"I've been having these visions about that night. They keep coming in waves and getting stronger. At first, I tried to suppress them, I didn't want to remember. But now I want to see what happened. I have to know what happened." Sarah confided.

Celia placed a hand over Sarah's.

"Can I say a prayer for you?"

Sarah wasn't sure if it would help. Everything seemed helpless to her at that moment. She nodded approval and Celia said a silent prayer as she held her hand. By the time she was done, both women were in tears and the tea was cold.

“Where’s John?” Sarah asked, noticing she didn’t hear any sounds in the house other than the two of them at the table.

Celia laughed in spite of herself. “If you thought the house was bad, you should see the office.”

“It’s unbelievable. I don’t know what to do.” Sarah said.

“Me either.” Celia confessed looking around her house with a sigh. “I just keep praying.”

“You have a lot more faith than I do.”

“You might not believe this, but I pray for you all the time. I’m glad you came.”

“Why?” Sarah asked.

“Because you’re caught up in this just as much as the rest of us are.”

“Thank you for being honest with me and the tea.” Sarah said thankfully, standing to leave.

“You’re welcome. What I told you, it can’t leave this room. If it does, it will put all of us in jeopardy.”

Sarah had gotten the answers to her questions. Now, she needed to make the heavy decision about what she would do with the information.

Aaron and Nics walked side by side in the garden on Abdullah’s magnificent estate.

“Nice place.” Aaron observed.

The two men took in the grandeur of the garden, complete with a walkway surrounded by colonnades leaving the house and leading into the lush landscape.

“I guess crime pays. I’m in the wrong business.” Nics commented.

Aaron chuckled. “You couldn’t live a life of crime no matter how hard you tried.”

Nics shrugged.

“Thoughts?” Aaron inquired.

“I’m not fond of the 2 CIA goons, even though one of them is awfully easy on the eyes.”

Aaron nodded with a smile.

“But I couldn’t sleep at night knowing that little girl is out there somewhere and that I had a chance to help and didn’t.” Nics continued.

“Agreed. We just have to do this by the book. I don’t like the CIA’s methods. We help, but we keep it clean.”

Nics nodded in agreement.

“What are your thoughts about Duchovny?”

Nics was silent. Not so long ago he had wanted to kill the man with his bare hands. He was concerned, but thankful for the way things had turned out. If Nics had found Robert first an innocent man would be dead.

“Haven’t made a decision yet.” Nics finally grumbled.

“Abdullah has treated us like royalty, all because Robert Duchovny asked him to. Knowing the risks, not many men in his position would want 2 CIA agents and a police detective in their home. The fact that he took us in, no questions asked, tells me something about Robert. It’s one thing to have your peers respect you. But to have an advisory respect you and trust you enough to open his home to you. Well, that tells me something about the man’s character.”

Aaron said.

Nics shrugged again. He had no further comment on the subject of Robert Duchovny, the man he knew Sarah loved.

“We help Paulo get his daughter back, then what?” Nics questioned.

“It’s a sticky situation. We can only hope that Paulo holds up his end of the bargain and gives us those viewers.”

“If he doesn’t?”

“We might have to do this the hard way. For now, we stick to the plan. Agreed?”

“Agreed.”

Their personal plan affirmed, Nics and Aaron turned, heading back towards the house.

Robert was in his room with laptops in front of him when he heard a light rapping on the door.

“Come in.” He called out, not breaking his concentration on the task at hand.

Aaron stepped inside, locked the door behind him. Robert had a moment of panic he tried to conceal. The last time they had been alone had been in the interrogation room and it was not a pleasant memory.

“I come in peace.” Aaron said, holding up his hands.

This took some of the tension out of the room.

“I need to get a secure message to my wife. I don’t have a phone, as you know. I was hoping you had some way to get a message to her, like you did with Nics?”

“I can send an encrypted email that only she will see.”

“That would be great. Tell her I’m safe, I made contact. That I love her and I’ll be in touch. And Nics says thanks for taking care of Bella.”

“Bella?” Robert questioned.

“Nics’ pup.”

“That’s it?” Robert questioned. “Aren’t you going to tell her what’s going on, where you are?”

“I don’t want her to know anything about this.” Aaron said with a chuckle. He laughed about it, but Robert could tell he was dead serious.

“What’s her email?” Robert asked to which Aaron responded. With a few clicks on the computer the message was sent.

“How do you and your wife handle it? Keeping secrets? Her not knowing where you are or when you’re going to come home?” Robert asked, having trouble finding the right words.

The current situation plagued him. He’d spent his life keeping secrets, the latest of which had devastated his and Sarah’s lives.

“What I do---the things I’ve seen, I don’t want my wife knowing about this stuff, ever. I don’t want my little girls knowing how much evil there is in the world. That’s why we do what we do. To protect them from that. My wife understands and she knows why I don’t tell her everything. If anything happens between you and Sarah after all of this, she’ll have to understand.”

“If.” Robert said regretfully. “That night--I was going to ask her to marry me.” He confessed to Aaron.

Aaron didn’t seem surprised.

“She told me she’d fallen hard for you. That you were the man she felt she could spend the rest of her life with. We were supposed to have dinner the following weekend. She was going to surprise you.” Aaron offered.

“I just don’t know if I’ll ever be able to make this up to her, how much I’ve hurt her.”

“You didn’t hurt her. If you did, I wouldn’t be standing here having this civil conversation with you. But there are people out there that did hurt her, that hurt you both. You get those clowns, get them locked away for life like they deserve, stop a nuclear bomb from going off in the US, then I’ll consider it all made up and forgiven in my book.”

“She got the message.” Robert notified Aaron when his computer beeped. “She won’t be able to respond, I mentioned this in the email, but at least she knows your safe.

“Thank you. Big day tomorrow, best get some rest.”

“Yeah, you too.” Robert agreed, but he had no intention on resting. He went back to the laptops spread across the desk.

The issue with Pandora is that he could not work fast enough. Every time he found a way to break its encryptions, Pandora would counter him and shut him out.

He had been able to glean small amounts of data, like the pictures and other unimportant files he had retrieved. However, there were files that were heavily encrypted he could not unlock. He assumed this is where the important data about Achojah’s criminal enterprise was hidden.

Robert needed a program that worked just as fast, if not faster, than Pandora. The idea of creating an AI program still bothered him on many different levels. He had always been against AI, had spoken at conferences and written articles arguing against it.

Now here he was, writing a potentially dangerous program to try to infiltrate what he knew to be a another very minacious program.

His work had started after he had received the go ahead from Secretary Page. In the dead of night, he had begun creating a monster. Like a mad scientist creating his own personal Frankenstein.

In spite of himself and his feelings about AI, his new creation was a masterpiece. He appropriately named it Symphony. Now, he had to teach it, like any good student, and it had to learn fast.

That was his dilemma. Most AI programs tended to make updates and corrections to their programming and software quickly once the program was launched. Robert needed it to learn and adapt, but he needed a way to control it, reign it in and even kill the program.

The most important thing, he didn't want it having unfettered access to the internet. It was going to have to learn to fight its battles in a closed environment. If Pandora was poison, the program he had written was a virulent disease. He could not afford to have it getting out onto the world wide web or into the hands of a hostile government. He didn't even trust his own government with a program as lethal as Symphony.

This is where he found himself late at night, alone in his room, trying to teach a computer program to fight to win, but to be ethical, like him. Then, to keep what he was doing hidden and safe from nefarious individuals that might use it to harm mankind. It was a daunting, treacherous task, even for someone at his skill level.

He spent the next few hours putting the new program through several tests and it passed them all. It was 2:00 am when he was done and he was exhausted. He'd had too little sleep the past few weeks. He was truly testing the limits of his endurance.

There was one more test he needed to do before he attempted the duel between Symphony and Pandora and that would be a live action scenario. Who better to do this with than one of the best hackers in the world.

In the short time Robert had known him, Abdullah had gained his trust. He decided he would approach him in the morning about testing the new program.

With Aarons words, thoughts of his family, Sarah and the fate of the country he loved for motivation, Robert laid in bed, reluctant to sleep.

He thought of a million more things he could be doing, but his body finally shut down and he rested.

A five-star hotel it was not, but it served its purpose. After the night at the harbor, Louka had been watching Sarah, John and Celia. He was even stalking the house where Robert's family lived.

Louka realized he had been abandoned when he tried to reach the Mal'akh but no one returned his calls or responded to his emails. The Mal'akh that were with him that night at the dock had disappeared. Unable to reach them by phone, he had gone to the various places they were staying. Each man had checked out, obviously called back home. All but him. Worst of all, the thing that destroyed him, was that Solange's phone had been disconnected and she had made no attempt to contact him.

He had failed the Mal'akh, Solange and the Prophet. There were no more words for him, no goodbyes. He had been excommunicated, a thing worse than death. Just as the Mal'akh had come into his life, they were now gone and so was the promise of Solange and a higher existence.

He thought of her beauty, the darkness of her eyes, the touch of her soft skin and the fact that he would never be allowed to see her again. Another man would step up, one the Prophet deemed worthy, to take his place.

This is where he was left, with no home. Robert Duchovny had taken everything from him. He remembered that night long ago, when he had met Solange for the first time. When she

and the Mal'akh had given him enlightenment and purpose. That was all gone now, crushed, and Robert would be the avenue for all his rage.

Without the resources of the Mal'akh, Achojah or the CIA, he had no way of tracking Robert. However, he had some guesses as to where the man might be. Luckily, he still had the money he had received from Achojah tucked away safely under false identities. He would use the money and every resource he had left to track Robert down.

Robert Duchovny had a date with death. But, until then, Louka would release his wrath on everyone Robert loved.

An unfortunate, drawn out, painful death for the girlfriend. But only after he had spent some special time with her. A house fire at the adopted mother's house. The Johnson's would be found dead in their home with shots to the head, even their daughter.

He would devastate his adversary the way he'd been devastated. Louka would pay him back ten-fold what he had received.

His full-time occupation was now tracking his prey. He knew where John and Celia lived, the location of their business and was getting a feel for their habits. He knew the best time to strike.

After Robert's disappearance and subsequent arrest, the daughter had been visiting Mom and Dad more often. Louka hoped he could catch them at a time when they would be home together. The visual of them all lying on the floor, a family locked in death, he wanted Robert to see that.

The girlfriend had been all over the place, staying with a friend, then with her brother, then back home. He had carefully planned the flower delivery, hoping to gain access to her house and get her alone, but he had been seen.

Even the late hour hadn't stopped the next-door neighbor from snooping. Louka had observed her at Sarah's house several times while she was gone, knocking at the door, only turning away when she didn't get an answer. Louka had a mind to kill her too just for foiling his plan, but he needed to stay focused and on target.

Sarah was careful. He knew opening the door for the flower delivery had been a fluke. She obviously thought he was the neighbor and had opened the door for only this reason. Seeing a stranger standing in the doorway and the way she had stepped outside made him know she wouldn't make the same mistake twice.

She also didn't go outside. He watched several times as she pulled her car out of the garage, making sure the garage was closed. She did the same when she returned.

He had noticed a sticker for a state-of-the-art alarm system on her window and he couldn't forget that her brother was a detective. Any sign of danger and the police would be swarming her place. He was furious at the missed opportunity. He was going to have to get to her somewhere else.

She went to the grocery store, to her brother's house and to a local gun range. He had been eyeing the gun range as a possible location to grab her. The parking lot was huge and he could make his move there. He still had one fake identity left which he would use to get a membership.

If he couldn't kidnap her in the parking lot, he would try to get Sarah to meet him somewhere for a date. He had drugs he could use to spike her drink, then he could take her anywhere and do what he wanted, nice and slow. Considering what she thought had happened with Robert, it was a far stretch. But he would try.

With that business taken care of, the James family would be next. The family facing the rear of their house would unfortunately have to die. He needed their house and its close proximity to the James's house to carry out his plan.

Next, he would pay a visit to Robert's adopted mother and grandmother. The younger of the two was more active than the elder. She shopped, went to the grocery store, read to kids at the library and taught a social studies class at the local college. However, she was always home by dinner to cook for her elderly mother.

Louka was still working on how he would achieve their demise. The fire would have to block all entrances to the outside. The best option would be an explosive, but he was not an explosives guy.

Trying to buy something on the black market would put him at risk. This was going to be tricky and he would have to improvise with what he had purchased at the local hardware store.

He planned to make rudimentary explosive devices using cell phones. He would also pour gasoline around the entire house. The explosions would ignite the gas and the house would go up in flames before the two women could get out of their beds.

He wasn't a pro, but knew how to rig a cell phone as a trigger device from a previous job he had done for the CIA. He'd bought three burner cell phones and was working on the devices. One would be attached to an incendiary device, made from fertilizer and other chemicals, that he would hide in the bushes at the front and back of the house. The other cell phone would be his trigger device.

As he looked at everything that was laid out before him, it was all coming together. He only needed to get to Sarah Levy to start his sinister ball rolling.

He hoped Robert, wherever he was, had access to the news. Louka wished he could be there when the man learned that everyone he held dear was gone, to see the crushed look on the man's smug, arrogant face. Regardless of Robert's many talents, this would be the one thing he couldn't fix with the stroke of a keyboard.

Before the Mal'akh and Solange, Louka had wanted to die. Solange had changed him forever that night in her arms. For his failures, he had been driven from Solange and the Mal'akh. But there was still hope. He was counting on the murders of the people Robert loved to flush him out of his hiding place.

Louka only needed one shot. He would get Robert, regain possession of Achojah's computer and take both prizes back to the Prophet. With this success, he would be welcomed back to claim his place at the Prophet's right hand and his beautiful prize.

It was all he lived for now. There was nothing else. He was driven to the point of madness at the thought of Solange being with another man. He would burn down the whole world to stop that from happening.

After he finished working on the devises, he carefully cleaned his sniper rifle. He had used it many times, first in the army and then as a special asset in the CIA. It was the closest thing to a lover he had ever had before Solange.

There had been other women, like Maria Lim. Women he used to get what he wanted or needed, a means to an end. But none of them had meant anything to him.

He carefully dismantled the rifle, cleaning every part, making sure there was nothing that would hinder his task. As he had monitored Sarah, he noticed she often stopped to admire the guns. The gun range had a full store, complete with magazines for gun enthusiast, accessories

and a full range of firearms. He could see the look of admiration in her eyes as she looked over the various weapons lined up behind shiny glass cases.

As he put the rifle back together it looked more polished than a brand-new pair of shoes. He knew Sarah would not be able to resist once he opened the case and flashed the beautiful weapon. The rifle would gain her interest. If the parking lot was clear, that would be his time to take her. If not, he would woo her with the gun and try to get her to trust him enough to grab coffee or a beer.

He was running out of time and needed to get out of the United States before his false identity was compromised. Sarah was the first domino that needed to fall in his plan. All the other dominos would fall into place after her. Once his nefarious deeds were done, he could leave the US for good, never to return.

Nothing was going to stand in his way.

Robert woke to the smell of breakfast. A check of his watch showed he was running late for the meeting he had set up.

Rushing down the stairs with his computer, he was assailed by the smell of coffee. At this point he probably had the stuff running through his veins. However, this didn't stop him from pouring himself a large cup from the stainless-steel coffee pot that was closest to him when he sat down.

"Late night?" Nics asked noticing Robert's disheveled look.

"Lots to do." Robert said with a shrug as he booted up his computer.

Everyone else had eaten and there were maps and drawings spread across the table.

Diamando placed a plate piled with food in front of Robert.

“Where’s Abdullah?” Robert asked, noting the man was absent.

“He did not want to disturb your conversation this morning.” Diamando informed him.

“Please, I would like for him to join us if he has time. I could use his insight on something.” Robert whispered to Diamando silently.

The man nodded, retreating from the room. A moment later Abdullah entered.

“Thank you for joining us.” Robert said sincerely.

Abdullah nodded in his direction as he straightened his dishdashas and sat down.

Maria slid a map over to Robert.

“Soca River suspension bridge in Soca valley, Slovenia. It’s perfect. It’s in a mountainous region, so we can set up a look out.”

Robert pulled up the location on his laptop and positioned the computer so everyone could see.

“It will be easy for us to block off access points so no tourists join our private party. Paulo comes in from this direction, Louka and the girl from the other. They meet at the middle of the bridge, like Nics said, make the exchange, then we’re done.” Maria said as she pointed out locations on the computer screen.

“We don’t have what they want. What are we going to exchange?” Paulo questioned.

“They want Achojah’s computer. We make them an offer. Jess for the computer, a straight trade.” Robert answered.

“They’ll know it’s a fake. They’ll hurt Jess.” Paulo argued.

“It’s not a fake. I have the real thing.”

Robert was met with shocked looks from Paulo and Maria.

“How did you get it?” Maria asked.

There was more than just a question behind her words. She was obviously stung that Robert hadn't told her he had the computer in his possession.

"That's not important. What is important is that we can use it to bargain for Jess." Robert said.

"You just can't hand it over to them." Aaron interjected.

"I have transferred all the files over to my personal computer. Some of them are heavily encrypted and I'm still trying to gain access, but I have a copy. I agree with Paulo, we can't take a chance. These people aren't stupid. They're going to want to verify the computer's authenticity. I'm sure they'll have someone at the meeting that can do this. If we show up with a fake, they might hurt Jess."

There was reluctant agreement around the table, then they moved on to the next step of the plan.

"Paulo can set up explosives on either side." Maria said, holding up her hand at the looks she got from everyone except Paulo. "We're not setting anything off unless we have to. It's just a precaution."

Robert didn't like it, but he let her continue.

"Who can drive a boat?" She asked.

"I can." From Aaron.

She blew up the map of the area on Robert's laptop.

"There's a small cove here, out of view of the bridge. We'll have a boat waiting there, just in case. We can rig climbing pulleys down this ridge if Paulo and Jess need to get down the mountain to the water where the boat will be waiting."

Robert looked everything over.

“You’ve seen this?” He asked of Aaron and Nics. They both nodded that they had.

“Doable?” Robert questioned them.

“It’s risky, with lots of room for problems. But yes, it’s doable.” Nics answered.

“What’s the risk?” Robert questioned.

“We’re assuming they’re going to uphold their end of the bargain. If things go south, which is always a possibility when you’re dealing with hoodlums, we’re going to have to protect Paulo as he tries to escape with Jess.” Nics responded.

Robert took in a deep breath, blew air through his teeth. He didn’t like risks, didn’t like unknowns. The plan was shaky, but it was the only option they had.

“How do we get explosives, mountain repelling gear and extra ammunition? I don’t think Abdullah has this stuff lying around?” Robert asked Maria.

“I’m afraid not my friends.” Abdullah said.

“There’s a CIA facility in Ljubljana. It’s the reason I choose this location for the exchange. It’s one of the facilities we use to restock teams when the CIA is running missions in Europe. That facility should have everything we need. It’s protected by a secure access system, similar to the command center at the IISA. Hopefully Robert can hack the system.” Maria offered.

“We’re going to steal from the CIA?” Aaron questioned.

“You have a better idea? I can’t access any of my CIA resources without exposing the fact that I’m here. We can’t involve local law enforcement---.”

“No cops---No cops. They’ll kill Jess---.” Paulo interjected.

Maria held up her hand in Paulo’s direction. “No one is bringing in the cops.” She looked squarely at Aaron and Nics before she continued. “We don’t have a choice. Robert can’t tap into

any of his IISA or FBI resources either. We are dead in the water here and we're running out of time."

There was silence around the table. Nics finally spoke as he eyed the mountainous region around the bridge.

"We should stake it out beforehand. I think this ridge would be the best place for us to hide. We wouldn't be seen and we can cover Paulo until he gets his daughter and gets back across the bridge." Nics suggested as he looked through the pictures online.

Robert was surprised at how easily Nics had taken to their outrageous plan. When no one spoke Nics looked around the table.

"Like the Lady said, we're running out of time. If what you said about the nuclear threat is true, while we're sitting here eating breakfast, the country we all love could be attacked at any moment. So, let's get the girl back and get Robert back at the IISA where he can stop this thing from happening."

When Nics put it that way, everyone was in agreement. Maria passed around a map of an industrial location, pointing out the CIA Facility.

"Will someone be there?" Robert questioned.

"Possibly. We'll have to go in heavy." Maria answered casually.

"What do you mean---heavy?" Robert didn't like the sound of it.

"We need someone who can go in and take out any agents, in a non-lethal fashion." She emphasized. "We don't want to kill anyone. We incapacitate the agents, get what we need and go."

"Who's doing what?" Aaron questioned.

He was obviously very suspicious of the plan and seemed unhappy that Maria was running things.

“I’ll go with Scarface and stake out the location before we contact Achojah. If they send Louka, he’ll do the same. I know how he thinks. Seeing the terrain in advance will give us an indication of where he might station his people. Paulo will go and get the stuff we need.” Maria said.

“Robert comes with me. I’m not letting him out of my sight until I have Jess.”

“Fine. Paulo and Robert go will go and get the stuff we need from the facility. Lawman, since you’ll be driving the boat, you can take care of that and also find us a place we can rendezvous afterwards.” Maria answered.

“Someone needs to be a point of communication, needs to be our eyes and ears. Robert is the best person to do this.” Aaron argued.

“He comes with us. They’re going to want to authenticate the computer and Robert is the only one that can do this.” Paulo pushed back in an agitated tone.

“He’s right.” Robert agreed reluctantly. “Pandora changes rapidly. I could tell Paulo what to do, but can’t guarantee he’ll be able to access the computer. We don’t want any problems at the exchange. I’ll need to be there, just in case the program alters itself again.” Robert could not think of an easy way to explain his concerns, but everyone seemed to understand.

“Who’s going to handle communications then?” Nics asked.

“I can. If you will trust me with this important task. I’ll set up a new computer and monitor the exchange from here. We can use the same computer to reach out to Achojah. They will never know I was involved, I guarantee this. I can also provide transportation to Slovenia, a place for you to stay when you arrive and the vehicles you will need.” Abdullah offered.

All eyes were on Robert. Everyone understood that Abdullah wouldn't do anything without his blessing. Robert knew this as well. He was silent for a moment, contemplating.

Abdullah seemed to sense Robert's hesitation.

"Let me do this. For you and for Sula." He added.

That touched a chord. Robert couldn't forget about the men and women who had lost their lives helping him. He wanted justice for them. He imagined Abdullah wanted the same for his cousin who had been murdered in cold blood.

"Ok, Abdullah. I'll help you set up the computer. But, if things get too hot and you feel like you're being traced, you disconnect."

"Agreed." Abdullah said.

Around the table of six, the conspirators had their plan.

Paulo and Robert piled into a forerunner with tinted windows at a rental car agency in Ljubljana, Slovenia. The owner was a friend of Abdullah's. The rental was off the books.

As they drove in silence Robert thought about their predicament. Paulo didn't trust Aaron and Nics. Aaron and Nics didn't trust Paulo and Maria. Maria seemed to not trust any of them, including him. But the rag tag band had common goals. Getting Jess back was step one of achieving their ultimate purpose.

Being alone with Paulo for the first time since Robert had learned of his betrayal left him with mixed emotions. Robert kept thinking of what he had seen on the virtual headset. How much of the video had Sarah been exposed to? What were the long-term effects? They had taken an amazing woman with a beautiful heart and mind and destroyed her life just to get to him.

He felt disgust for his old friend, that his illicit affair had brought such terrible consequences for the people around him. He was worried about Jess, a young girl that had been dragged into the seedy part of her father's secret world. Where was she and what were they doing to her?

Then there was Mem, Addie, John, Celia and Lacy. So many lives changed by the decisions that had been made by two men, one to save his country, the other to save his daughter.

As if reading Robert's thoughts Paulo spoke from the driver's seat.

"I'll make this right when it's all done."

Robert wanted to believe him but couldn't after the breach of trust.

"You should have told me. With my resources, I could have helped you." Robert said silently, still deep in thought.

"You don't have kids. You don't know what a father does to protect his family."

Robert didn't want to discuss the matter further. They slipped back into a strained silence until they reached their destination. Robert booted up his Lenovo.

"What do you see?" Paulo asked.

Robert tapped into the local cameras in the area and also hacked the computer that controlled the street lights just in case they needed to make a quick getaway.

"We're clear. Let's just get this done."

They parked in an abandoned parking lot and made their way stealthily to the building. Paulo had his gun drawn, keeping it close to his body, Robert had his computer bag. Each man also had an empty duffle bag slung over his shoulder.

Paulo peeked around a corner, motioned to Robert and they moved. Next corner, same scenario. They did this until they reached the entrance to the building. Paulo nodded towards a key pad.

Robert removed the casing. Plugging in his Lenovo, began to work his magic. Numbers ran across the key pad and his computer screen as his program ran through the possible sequences for the combination.

“Hurry.” Paulo whispered as the computer beeped alerting them that it had found the correct sequence. It entered the code automatically and the door opened with a smooth whish.

“Behind me.” Paulo commanded as they filed into the quiet, dark building. The door closed silently behind them.

They were only several paces into the building when an agent jumped from inside an empty room and kicked Paulo’s gun from his hand. The agent blocked one dangerous blow, but Paulo caught him with the next one.

With the agent temporarily stunned, Paulo got a massive arm around the guy’s neck and begin to choke him out. There was an enraged look on Paulo’s face Robert had never seen before. His eyes glazed over as if he had lost all sense of where he was and what he was doing. Paulo had gone into kill mode.

The agent tried to free himself from Paulo’s arm as the color started to drain from his face.

“That’s enough.” Robert yelled as he watched Paulo slowly choking the life out the man.

“Stop.” Robert commanded. But Paulo held firm, tightening his grip.

Robert went for the gun, snatched it up and pointed it Paulo’s head as he backed away slowly.

“Let him go.” Robert said, leveling the words at Paulo.

This seemed to snap Paulo out of his murderous trance. He loosened his grip and the agent collapsed to the floor choking.

“You going to shoot me?” Paulo asked, heading towards Robert. It was like watching a tsunami heading his way and Robert was in its destructive path. “You going shoot me?” Paulo said again, furious.

Robert still held the gun, but could not get himself to pull the trigger. Even with the way he felt about Paulo, he could not take the man’s life.

Paulo was on him on a moment, snatching the gun out of his hand.

“You point a gun, you’d better be ready to use it.” Paulo warned as he stuffed the gun in the front of his pants.

Robert turned his attention back to the agent huddled on the ground.

“I’ll deal with him. You get what we need. We’d better hurry. I don’t know if he triggered any alarms.” Robert said to Paulo.

“Get up.” Paulo commanded and the agent obeyed.

Paulo frisked the agent and removed his gun, a phone and a pair of hand cuffs. He shoved the items towards Robert who took them as he handed Paulo his duffle bag.

“Cuff him in the bathroom. Nothing funny or I’ll kill him. You got it?”

“I got it.” Robert said, his entire body tense with the situation that could go wrong at any moment.

Robert led the young man past several doors until he located the bathroom. The man complied when Robert motioned for him to sit. He could hear Paulo in another part of the compound rummaging through something and muttering under his breath.

“Please don’t try anything.” Robert pleaded and the younger man nodded.

Robert didn’t know what he would do if a confrontation brought Paulo into the room.

“Put your hands behind your back.” Robert asked and the agent complied.

Robert put a hand cuff on one wrist and closed it. The wrist that was out of view from the bathroom doorway he left uncuffed. Robert put the phone on the bathroom sink and he placed the gun behind the agents back, next to his free hand.

“If he tries to come back in here and harm you, use it.” Robert said in all seriousness.

He leaned back and chanced a peek through the bathroom door. He could still hear Paulo down the hall.

“Thank you, Mr. Duchovny.”

“You recognize me?”

“Yes Sir. I was a CIA analyst before I became a field agent. I’m really good with faces. And, sorry to say, but your disguise isn’t very good.”

“Really?” Robert said, standing up to peek in the bathroom mirror before he ducked back down.

“Sorry, Sir.” The agent said apologetically.

Robert peeked again. “Look, I know I can’t ask this of you, but I’m going to ask anyway. I would really appreciate it if you didn’t call this in. I know what it looks like, but this is an urgent national security matter. I can’t be caught.”

“You know Sergeant Rimes?”

“Ah---yes, it’s been a while.” Robert said, peeking as he talked and trying to listen for Paulo.

"There was a bomb strike at your forward operating base. Your team had an outdoor, above ground secure bunker, protected by an electronic combination lock. Bunker got hit, lock was fried, your whole team was stuck inside. They told everyone to evacuate, but you stayed, wouldn't leave your team until you hacked that lock. I heard that you got 'em out just in time, before the major bomb strikes hit, got them to safety."

"I remember that." Robert said absently. Paulo had suddenly gone silent.

"Let's go." Paulo called out.

Robert was relieved Paulo wasn't making his way to the bathroom to check on the prisoner. He stood to leave.

"Take care of yourself." Robert said.

"Agent Rimes." The kid offered. "My name is Agent Rimes. Sergeant Rimes was my dad. You saved his life that day. I won't be filing any reports, sir."

Robert was frozen in place for a moment, shocked and moved by what he had just heard.

"You deaf, Duchovny? Let's go." Paulo yelled again and he heard the man moving towards him.

"Thank you." Robert said, rushing out of the room.

Robert made sure the door to the facility was secure before they made their way back to the car.

"Got everything we need?"

"That and then some." Paulo said, pulling the car out of its hiding place and heading back the way they came.

Robert stayed silent as they drove. He was still in utter disbelief that Paulo had almost killed someone right before his eyes. He had always considered himself to be a great judge of character. How had he been so off the mark with Paulo? The man he had known all those years was a stranger and a very dangerous one at that.

“I gotta stop for some food.” Paulo said as they entered a small town.

Robert couldn't believe what he was hearing.

“Can't it wait?”

“I'm a big guy. All the excitement---my blood sugar is low.”

Robert didn't want to argue. He remained silent as Paulo stopped at a local burger shop.

They were two wanted men with duffle bags of weapons and explosives in the trunk, but this didn't stop Paulo from ordering 3 cheeseburgers, two orders of fries, a soda and a strawberry shake.

“You want anything, dog?” He asked Robert.

“No thank you.”

Robert looked suspiciously around the parking lot. He expected police to swarm in with guns drawn and helicopters whirling overhead after the ridiculous and unnecessary stop, but nothing happened. They were back on the road in minutes.

Paulo polished off the food, then he started to talk.

“I never meant for any of this to happen. What I did with that woman was stupid. I should have known better, you know. All my instincts were telling me something was wrong. This mess is my fault. If something happens to Jess, I'll never forgive myself. It's all I think about. I can't let anything happen to my little girl. I have to make this right. You understand?”

Robert did understand. He just wished Paulo hadn't destroyed the lives of so many people in the process.

"You should have come to me." Robert reiterated.

But they were past the point of tears. The milk had already been spilt and there was no easy way to fix the predicament they were in. Robert could only hope that Paulo would help him clear his name once they rescued Jess.

"There's something else." Paulo said, his voice darkening.

"There is nothing else, Paulo. You cheated on your wife. You put your daughter in danger. You lied to me and you drugged me and Sarah. You could have killed us. What else is there?" Robert retorted, his voice filled with anger.

"We need to be careful. These people, the Mal'akh, they can do things. I've seen it."

"What do you mean?"

"That witch, she took me to their temple, to one of their ceremonies. Her father, they call him the Prophet. They cut off his hand---it grew back."

Robert ran his hand over his face. Paulo had lost touch with all reality. It was the last thing he needed in their current situation.

"You sure someone didn't slip something into your drink?" Robert asked curtly, referencing what had been done to him and Sarah.

"No. I didn't drink or eat anything. I was concerned, you know. Things were getting weird. But she said she wanted me to see him, to see what he could do. There's twelve of them, these witches, his daughters. I'm telling you, during one of their ceremonies, the one they call Solange cut off his hand. I watched it grow back, like a snake, when you cut off its tail. But it was fast. Right before my eyes."

“There has to be a logical explanation---.”

Paulo cut him off. “There’s no explanation. It’s evil. Pure evil. That witch, the sisters, the Mal’akh. There is nothing under heaven that can explain what I saw. That’s how they got to that guy, Louka. They showed him what they can do, what they can offer him. He’ll do anything to have what they have, that power. I felt it for a moment, a taste of it, and it scared me. I ran like hell.”

Robert didn’t know how to digest what he had just heard. It was an optical illusion, it had to be. Or they had drugged Paulo unbeknownst to him and he had hallucinated the entire incident.

Either way, Robert wasn’t taking anything for granted. He had no intention of underestimating his adversary. There was too much at stake.

It was past 11 pm when the motley crew reconvened at a house in Ljubljana, a property owned by another associate of Abdullah’s. The man had proven to be quite resourceful and also a man of his word.

Everyone gave a report of their findings and what needed to be done, then they went their separate ways. Robert sensed he was not the only one who had experienced things they didn’t want to talk about.

In his room he retrieved his Lenovo and set up a video conference with Abdullah. The man was delighted that everything had gone as planned.

Before Robert had left the safety of Qatar and Abdullah’s home, they had set up a computer that could not be traced. Abdullah had sat in silence the entire time watching Robert as he worked.

Robert wondered what the man must be thinking. He had exposed himself and his entire operation to a man whose career it was to shut down the criminal enterprises of people like Abdullah. Now, here the two men were, not just cooperating, but working side by side.

Robert was one of the most elite white hat hackers in the world, Abdullah one of the best in the underground world of black hats. The fact that Abdullah had assessed his character and had found him worthy of trust was something Robert didn't take lightly. This was the reason he didn't mind asking Abdullah to assist him with a last and final test of Symphony.

"I've written a new program. I need to test it." Robert asked the man on the other end of the secure video chat.

Abdullah sat up straight and his eyes lit up like a child on Christmas.

"You ask me as if you are wanting a favor from me. When in fact, it is the other way around. You do not know how long I have dreamed of this. It would be my pleasure."

Abdullah grabbed a brandy wine colored Lenovo and powered it up. Robert would have to allow Abdullah to have access to his own personal computer to run the test. Robert gave him an email address and a---*you have mail*---message popped up immediately.

"Open the email and then we will dance." Abdullah said with an unc customary ear to ear grin.

"Go for the files labeled Robert Personal."

Robert opened the email that Abdullah had sent and clicked on the link, a trojan horse that would allow Abdullah access to his computer.

Abdullah made his first move, an attack on Robert's firewall and anti-virus software to undermine the computer's security. At the same time, he started running malware, his own

program, so that he could infiltrate and take over Robert's computer. It was what Robert would have done and he was impressed.

When that didn't work, he moved his hack to the background, hoping that Robert's security measures wouldn't detect what he was doing. He started running another program to try to breach the security Robert had installed on the Lenovo to protect his files.

Then, he began his attack run on the files Robert had placed on his computer just for this purpose. All of his real files were tucked away, safely hidden from any outside prying eyes.

Not that the personal file was completely unprotected. He had put an encryption on the file, and a pretty good one. Abdullah's fingers were flying over the keys of his computer like a maestro playing the piano. He had already breached the first layer of Robert's test file. He was darn good.

"Seek and destroy." Robert gave the Symphony program the order.

The program immediately woke up and began to counter Abdullah's attack. When the hacker changed his tactic, Symphony adjusted quicker than Robert had ever seen with any other program.

Abdullah said something in Arabic. Robert could tell the other man was in awe of how quickly the program was finding and shutting down his attacks. The harder he worked, the cleverer his attacks became, Symphony rose to meet the challenge, eliminating the threats with the sophistication of a much older program.

As Abdullah tried one more attack, Symphony split the computer screen in two. On one screen, the program had shut down his attempt to compromise Robert's security system. On the other, Symphony was easily fending off several attacks from Abdullah's malware and infiltration programs.

The computer screen then split into three as the virulent program breached Abdullah's computer. He glanced up briefly at Robert, alarmed, as he was now trying to fend off an attack on his network.

"Symphony, cease and desist and release control of the hostile computer." Robert commanded.

The program obeyed him, first making sure that his Lenovo was secure before it released control of Abdullah's computer and stopped the attack.

Abdullah was clearly shaken by the breach of his computer. However, once he saw that everything was in order and no data had been compromised or destroyed, his look of concern turned to one of admiration and wonder.

"You're creation?" He asked

"Yes."

"Of course. There is no one in this world but you that could have created such a thing of beauty. Kosmos, you must let me see her." Abdullah said breathlessly like he was in the middle of making love.

"I can't, Abdullah. I can't share this with anyone. And you're wrong. I wrote this program to combat something I have never seen before. The program on Achojah Okonkwo's computer."

Abdullah frowned. "Sula did not have the ability to create something like this."

"I don't think he did."

"Dragonfyre." Abdullah said in a whisper.

"You know who he is?"

“He came out of nowhere about two years ago. Showed up in the ethernet, the dark web and the back-room chats. The things he was asking, I could tell he was young, but with the computer knowledge of someone much older. He asked about unnatural things. He was banned from several of the chat rooms.”

“What kind of unnatural things?”

“About computers being alive. Creating artificial intelligence, but using a human brain, integrating humans and computers in ways that would be unethical.”

Robert took in what he was hearing and it frightened him to the core.

“Sula mentioned this once.” Abdullah continued, shaking his head as if the mere thought disturbed him. “It slipped out, really. He said that he had adopted a child and he was teaching it everything he knew. That’s what he called it, a child. It unnerved me, the way he talked about it. I think he realized from my reaction that he had said too much and he clammed up after that. We tried to stop him. There are some things that no amount of money should be able to buy.”

“It’s grown now and frighteningly capable. Symphony might be the only way for me to control it. But afterwards, they both need to be destroyed. What you know about this has to stay between you and I.”

“This conversation will not leave this room.” Abdullah promised.

“We have a call to make.”

“Yes. Are you ready?”

“As ready as we will ever be.” Robert said, lacking the confidence his words portrayed.

“The message will go out to several locations. I’m also posting a message on the dark web, with clues and markers only they will understand. If any of the original email addresses

have been shut down, they will get our message through other channels. What do you want me to say?" Abdullah asked.

Robert thought for a moment. What should he say? He didn't want to give away the fact that he was not in a US jail in Denver. He also didn't want to betray the fact that he had Pandora and that it wasn't safely locked away in a secure CIA compound.

However, he knew that the carrot he dangled in front of them had to be good enough for them to bite.

"I have what you want, the real deal. Willing to trade for 10 million dollars, unmarked bonds and the girl. Meeting place will be named after your acceptance of the offer."

Abdullah typed the message and hit the send button. Robert didn't need the money, but wanted the offer to sound legitimate. They would probably assume it was Paulo and that he had somehow found a way to get the computer through his contacts at the CIA. In a desperate situation, he would be looking to get his daughter back, along with some get away cash he could use to hide.

"I will let you know as soon as we receive a response." Abdullah assured Robert.

The wheels were in motion. Where they would drive him, only time would tell.

Sarah pulled into a parking space close to the gun range. As she was unloading the case that housed her 357, Louka pulled his rented van into the space next to her. He jumped from the van, flashed a white toothed smile as he moved around towards the rear of the van.

His disguise worked, he mused. He didn't see a hint of recognition from the failed flower delivery attempt the previous night.

"You using the outside range?" He asked his prey.

“Probably, if there’s an open space.” Sarah answered, getting her bag of ammo.

“I’ve got an open space booked if you want to share.”

“Thank you, but that’s ok. I don’t want to take away from your time.”

Louka opened a case that contained a SSG 3000 high-quality sniper rifle. It had all the bells and whistles. Sarah stopped in her tracks, staring at the gun. Louka noticed and smiled.

She was immediately embarrassed, averting her eyes as she hoisted her purse on her shoulder and closed her trunk.

“You like it?” He asked as if he was glowing from the attention from a beautiful woman. “It’s military issue.”

Sensing Sarah’s reluctance to get involved in a conversation, he flashed a friendly smile as he held out his hand. “My names Jay Peterson. I’m Army, just got transferred. All the guys told me this is the place to shoot. So, I’m here to check the place out.” He added.

Sarah shook the outstretched hand. The old school boy charm was working.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to stare. I’ve just never seen one up close.” She apologized.

“It’s a magnificent weapon. She’s become my right hand when I’m deployed.”

“You’re a sniper?” Sarah questioned, recognizing the type of gun it was.

He feigned that he was impressed, eyeing the parking lot. Two people pulled up and parked next to each other. Getting out of the car they struck up a conversation, destroying his window of opportunity. He kept talking, hoping they would move on.

“She’s gorgeous and she knows a thing or two about guns. Now you really have to share a lane with me---um---.” He paused.

“Sarah.”

“Sarah.” Louka repeated as if savoring the name. “You have any training?”

“Yes, but probably not as much as you do. I’ve taken the beginners, intermediate and advanced classes here. Now I just come and shoot when I can. I have a 357. Nothing like that.” She said, motioning to his case.

The chatters in the parking lot weren’t budging and now he had been seen. Time to go to plan number two.

“Come on.” He nodded towards the outdoor range. “I’ll show you how she shoots.”

Sarah smiled and nodded, following next to him, but at a safe distance. After they checked in, he took her out to the range. Louka removed the rifle from its case and explained every part of it in detail, watching her every move to see if he was building trust.

Sarah was clearly impressed with Louka’s knowledge of the weapon and the fact that he didn’t treat her like a little woman or a novice with a gun. He spoke to her like a professional and he sensed that she appreciated this. He had done the same with Maria Lim.

“Let me see what you got.” He said with a smile, nodding towards Sarah’s gun case.

Louka watched as she retrieved the weapon and slipped into her ear muffs. She moved gracefully, like a feline. It reminded him of Solange, her beauty and elegance.

Watching her, he understood why Robert had fallen in love with her. It was a shame, what he would have to do to her because of him.

Sarah fired 5 rounds directly at the bullseye. Most of them hit the mark within the bullseyes inner circle.

“You mean business. I like that. Can I show you something?” Louka asked.

“Sure.” Sarah said quietly, but moved away as he stepped towards her. He held up his hands.

“I promise I’m not going to do anything inappropriate, especially not after I just saw how you handle that weapon. I want to show you a little better stance.”

Sarah nodded approval. He went behind her and adjusted her stance and her arms. He could feel the stiffness in her frame. Still too tense. He needed her to relax enough to feel comfortable with him.

“Now try it.”

She reloaded and aimed. This time she hit the target several times dead on.

“Nice. It looks like you’ve had some very good training. Just always remember that you want to get the best shot possible, even when you’re just practicing. This is you training for the real thing. For the time you might have to defend yourself.”

“Thank you. But enough of me, I really want to see that.” She said, pointing to the SSG 3000 that was sitting in the case poised and ready for action.

Louka was happy to oblige and they spent the rest of the afternoon trading places to shoot.

In the women’s restroom, Sarah examined her reflection. She didn’t know if Jay recognized her from the news. If he did, he didn’t let on. He was obviously interested in her. It was the first time she had unwound, let her guard down and laughed in a long time

Taking a deep breath, Sarah left the restroom to return to the range. Jay had finished a round and was reloading when Sarah’s phone buzzed. She stepped away momentarily to answer the call. When she returned Jay laid the SSG 3000 back in its case.

“Please tell me that’s not a boyfriend because that would really break my heart.” He asked playfully.

“It was just my nieces reminding me that I’m supposed to pick them up at three for ice cream. I’ve got to head out. Thank you so much for sharing a lane with me and for the lesson.”

“Thank you for making my day a whole lot better, Sarah.”

“Well---thanks.” Sarah responded, at a loss for words.

She was packing up her 357 and ammo when Jay came up beside her.

“Can I take you to dinner? I know you usually have dinner first and then dessert, but an ice cream date with the nieces is an ice cream date. Can’t have you missing that.”

“I, um---I can’t.” Sarah said, stammering.

“Well, I’m rejected but not shaken.” He pulled out a card and wrote down his phone number, handing the card to her.

It was the same thing Robert had done, Sarah thought. The memory instantly made her feel dejected and lonely.

“If it’s a no, I understand. And I won’t be creepy and stalk you if I see you here. I know women hate that. But I would really like to see you again, Sarah. I had a good time. And a woman that knows how to handle a gun---.” He whistled his approval.

Sarah took the card and slipped it into her purse. She didn’t want to be unkind to someone who had been so generous to her. But she knew she would never call.

“Enjoy the rest of your day.” She said sincerely.

“You too, Sarah. Hope to hear from you.” He called out to her, waving goodbye as she walked away.

Back in the parking lot Sarah secured the weapon and ammo in the trunk. She slipped into the driver’s seat, mentally kicking herself as she locked the door. Jay seemed like a great

guy and here she was, sitting in her car, thinking about Robert. Unwanted emotions and memories churned up inside of her, followed by tears.

Pulling out of the gun range, she drove to a nearby park to catch her breath and clear her head. Removing her phone from her purse, she opened up pictures of her and Robert. She scrolled through the memories---their first date, dinner and then the museum, a hiking trip, a smiling picture with Sarah, Robert, John and Celia the night they had gone dancing. Then a picture of them the night they'd had dinner at Paulo and Angel's house.

As Sarah tried to focus in on that memory the whole car seemed to spin around her. She took in several deep breaths to stop from blacking out.

"I want to see." She begged silently as the memory started to play in her head like a movie.

The memory was fuzzy at first. But, as if her words held power, the flashbacks came into clear focus as they never had before.

"I don't like this. Robert is our friend and we don't even know this woman. We've got to stop this now." Angel was crying in the background, the voice a distant echo.

"You have to trust me. It's the only way we can get Jess back." Paulo's voice reverberated in Sarah's mind as if he was standing in a tunnel.

Sarah was being picked up like a doll and placed on a bed. Robert was lying next to her in a similar confused state.

"Get the headsets." The man said.

"I can't do this." From Angel.

Robert reached for Sarah across the bed.

“Sarah, run.” He begged her with a voice that sounded like his mouth was full of molasses.

Suddenly, the events of the night brutally came flooding back into her consciousness. They’d had drinks that were obviously laced. Both she and Robert had gotten sick and dizzy. Robert had barely been able to move and Paulo had helped him into a bedroom.

Sarah knew instantly that something was wrong. However, she felt frozen in place. This is when Paulo had picked her up and laid her in the bed next to Robert. He covered her face with something. Some type of eyeglasses or goggles. Then the images had begun.

Sarah fought the images, knocking the headset off her face in time to see Robert fighting with Paulo.

“The headset fell off. Get it back on.” Paulo yelled at Angel who was crouched in the corner weeping.

Sarah watched in horror, helpless and unable to move, as Paulo had a large arm around Robert’s neck, choking him into unconsciousness. Something was slipped back over her eyes and suddenly the images returned.

Sarah was gripping the stirring wheel so tight her hands hurt. She slowly let go. She’d had several visions, bits and pieces of memory since the incident. But this was the clearest it had ever been.

She burst into tears, sobbing without restraint. She cried until there was nothing left in her, dry heaving, her chest burning, her eyes swollen and red.

In that moment she knew something terrible had happened and Robert had been there. But he had been just as much a victim of the evil that had happened that night as she was. She

didn't know what to do in that moment. Robert was in jail and she had put him there. She had to call someone.

As she reached for her phone, her mind suddenly began to flicker back and forth between what she knew had happened and the false memories. She saw herself trying to leave, then Robert fighting with Paulo, then the horrendous attack that had been implanted into her memories.

The images started to repeat themselves, coming in flashes, like someone was playing a video in her head at high speed.

Grabbing her phone, she tried to dial Chanelle's number as the images rushed through her mind. She couldn't shut them down and felt like she was going to black out again. Pushing buttons on the phone, she hoped she had dialed someone. This was her last chance.

"Help me." Was all she could muster when a woman's voice answered.

Then the car and the park spun around her as if she was on a fast-moving rollercoaster going around in circles. She dropped the phone, gripping the sides of the driver's seat as she tried to breath, to stop from herself from blacking out.

The rumbling of a car engine pulled her attention to the driver's side window. The van from the gun range pulled up and parked beside her. Jay Peterson? Her confused mind questioned if she was actually seeing the image before her. The man looked around at the empty park before he opened the side door on the van, removing a gun. It wasn't the SSG. Something smaller.

He walked up to her car as he was fastening a silencer to the gun. Sarah flinched as he knocked on the window.

"Having one of your panic attacks? Sorry to see you suffer this way." Louka said.

Sarah was immediately alarmed but couldn't get her body to respond.

"You can blame your boyfriend for all of this. You never would have been involved if he had just cooperated in Afghanistan."

Louka banged on the window again and Sarah jumped. With uncoordinated hands she reached for the keys in the ignition, but her fingers felt like jelly.

"You seem like a really nice girl and I did have a wonderful time with you. In another life maybe things would have been different for both of us. But as it stands now, I'm going to shoot through this glass and put a bullet in your head. It's going to ruin my plan. I was hoping to do this a little different. But you had to screw things up. You and your boyfriend, always messing up my perfect plans." Louka raged, banging on the car window again.

Tears rolled down Sarah's face. Her body was paralyzed, unable to move, even as her heart raced in her chest. Breath, she told herself, as the car swam around her. Get the 357, she thought, then her murky mind recalled it was locked in the trunk, out of reach.

"Why?" She cried.

"I know. It's tragic. With your last breath, you can curse Robert Duchovny."

Louka leveled his gun at her just as his phone chimed. He holstered his gun as he pulled the phone out of his pocket and put it to his ear.

Louka's composure changed as he dropped to his knees. Sarah could hear him speaking, almost weeping.

"Father, I thought I was abandoned."

There was silence as he listened to whoever was on the other line. Then he spoke again.

"Thank you, Father. I will not fail again. I promise, on my life."

Louka stood. Sarah's date with imminent death seemed to be forgotten. He walked away from her, out of her earshot. After the call ended Louka approached the driver side window again. Sarah was still in the same place, but the effects of the panic attack was slowly waning. She looked fearfully at Louka as he approached.

"Something has happened. Something beautiful and wonderful. All praise to the Prophet, the anointed one of the Mal'akh, and the hosts of heaven. This is a glorious day, Sarah. I have been given a second chance. So, I will let you live. I hope you use the gift I have given you to seek enlightenment. The time is fast approaching when this world will be destroyed and a new world will rise from the ashes. I am going to fulfill my destiny."

Sarah awoke in the hospital. Her mother rushed to her bedside as soon as she opened her eyes. Her father was standing off to the side, her sister Esther sitting in a chair in the far corner of the room talking on the phone. Maggie was seated next to the bed with Chanelle standing beside her. Maggie took Sarah by the hand.

In the distance, by the door, John and Celia James were standing together.

Maggie squeezed her hand. Everyone's full attention was on Sarah now.

"What happened?" Sarah asked.

The last thing she remembered was being in the car.

"You called me." Celia said from the far side of the room. "The police were able to trace the call. There's an Officer outside."

"Can I have a moment alone with John and Celia, please." Sarah asked, looking around the room full of people.

"Dear---." Her mother started.

“Mom, not now.” Sarah cut her off.

Sarah waited until the room was clear to speak. Starting with the meeting in the gun range parking lot, she told John and Celia everything that had happened.

John pulled out his secure cell phone, showed Sarah a picture.

“This him?”

“Yes. He said his name was Jay Peterson.”

“His name is Louka Stojanović.”

Sarah closed her eyes for a moment. Someone had purposefully tried to kill her. She didn't need to ask why.

“Where is he now?”

“The police, the IISA and the FBI have put out a nationwide dragnet. They have every mode of transportation out of the US covered. If he tries to escape, they'll catch him.” John said in a comforting tone.

“I remember everything. I remember what happened that night. I need to get in touch with someone. Can you help me? Robert's an innocent man.”

It was go time and they had to move quickly.

Maria and Paulo were packing up the supplies they would need for the night's activities. Aaron was cleaning two rifles and loading up ammo in packs that would be easy to carry.

Nics was reading the instruction manuals and familiarizing himself with 2 long range tranquilizer guns that had been liberated along with the contraband from the CIA facility.

Abdullah and Robert ran one more check on the computer set up to make sure everything was in place. They also tested the ear pieces everyone would wear to make sure they could communicate with one another during their perilous meeting.

Robert packed up the copycat computers. Unbeknownst to Maria and Paulo, Aaron had taken Pandora and Robert's computer along with the cash and his fake ID's and put them in a safe location.

Robert still didn't trust that Paulo wouldn't try to double cross him if the chance arose. The verdict was still out on Maria. Robert knew she wanted retribution for what Louka had done to her. He just didn't know how far she would go to get it.

One of the computers was programmed to mirror Pandora. This was a ploy to make the terrorist think he had his computer back. They only needed to fool Louka and his people long enough to get Jess.

The other computer was a copy of Robert's Lenovo. No information that was too valuable, just the programs, files, software and malware he needed to do a hack or send an encrypted email if needed.

Aaron had procured the boat, but Robert hoped they wouldn't need it. Nics had informed him that the water beneath the bridge was a raging death trap. Aaron was going to have to maneuver carefully just to get to the rendezvous spot.

Paulo would rig the bridge with explosives and set up the trigger devices. He had spent the previous night showing Maria how everything worked. She would be the one to set off the explosives if things didn't go as planned.

Maria would also set up the belay system that Paulo and Jess would need to climb down the steep incline if things got hairy. She had ropes, harnesses, helmets, locking carabiners, belay

devices and rock-climbing shoes. Everything they had for the mission was all courtesy of the CIA facility.

Robert went around to each person, giving them an ear piece.

He approached Maria last. "I don't like this." Robert whispered to her, glancing at Paulo in the distance.

The thought of her being alone with Paulo at night, after what he had seen and learned, made him almost physically ill.

"Neither do we." Nics said in a low tone as he joined them, having overheard Robert. Aaron was in the distance, looking at the trio of Robert, Maria and Nics talking conspiratorially. They were all worried for her safety on more levels than just the rock climbing.

"I have experience rock climbing. I can set up the belay system." Nics offered.

"He doesn't trust you." Maria said quietly. "It's just one night. You'll be there tomorrow morning, right?"

"First thing. But I could go tonight, just for cover. There was that overhang---."

"Don't be ridiculous. We could barely get to the set-up spot during the day. You'll fall to your death trying to get up higher in the middle of the night. I'll be fine. Trust me. I wouldn't go if I didn't think I could handle it." There was an edge of irritation to her voice.

"Fine. Just keep your phone and weapon close." Nics said reluctantly

Seeing she wasn't going to budge, Robert had to acquiescence as well.

"Watch yourself." Robert warned.

Maria winked at their concern. Holstering her gun, she called to Paulo that she was ready to leave. Robert noticed the Paulo had his duffle bag over his shoulder. He was taking the virtual reality headsets with him. So much for getting them from his room once he was gone.

Robert called everyone over to the kitchen table.

“Let’s run through this one more time.”

Everyone was silent as Robert walked them through the plan again with Abdullah on video.

“Remember, this is a simple trade. You walk to the center of the bridge, you show them the computer, they show you Jess. You swap, you walk back. If they want to verify that the computer is the real deal, I’ll come out. But only if they ask. If we don’t do anything to make this situation any more dangerous than it is, we just might pull this off.” Robert said.

Robert looked around the table at each of the faces around him. What they were planning seemed impossible. But somehow, it had to work.

“Time’s a wasting.” Maria said, getting up from the table first and motioning to Paulo. The loaded up their gear and were out the door without another word.

Aaron put on a tattered sweater they’d messed up the prior day for the occasion. He pulled an equally worn looking hat over his head. He grabbed a tackle box, fishing poles and a small Coleman ice chest which they’d filled with water and beer for show.

Nics went to him. The two men clasped hands and did a brotherly man hug before Aaron disappeared out the door.

“I’m going to get some rest. You should do the same.” Abdullah said to the two remaining men.

He was right. Robert was exhausted and Nics looked much the same. But he knew there would be no sleep for him that night. His job wasn’t finished yet.

Sarah approached John and Celia with Shaunessy by her side. They had just excited a two-hour joint meeting with the IISA, the FBI, the CIA and Secretary Page where Sarah had given her statement

Shaunessy had flown into Colorado that morning to personally be with Sarah for the interview. The CIA director and other high ranking intelligence agency officials had been in attendance via a video conference call.

Sarah turned to Shaunessy. “What now?”

“We bring him home.”

“So, he’s not in jail?”

“No.” Shaunessy confirmed, but didn’t provide any more details.

“It didn’t sound like everyone was convinced of his innocence. Is he going to be arrested as soon as he returns?” Sarah questioned.

“With your recollection of what really happened we have enough to stop him from being detained by law enforcement. But he’s going to have an uphill legal battle. There are people who still want a piece of him and they aren’t going to back off on just your testimony. However, it’s a start. You’re a brave woman.”

“I don’t feel brave. But thank you.” Sarah said.

Celia laid a comforting hand on Sarah’s shoulder.

“What do I do now?” Sarah asked Shaunessy.

She had never felt more lost than she did at that moment.

“Go home. Get on with your life.” He wasn’t very good with consolation and this left her feeling even worse.

Shaunessy and John shook hands.

“Thank you for bringing her in. We’ll take it from here.”

Shaunessy disappeared back into the briefing, leaving them standing alone in the silent hallway.

Back in the car, Sarah watched the familiar scenery pass by from the back seat. This was the freeway she had traveled on so many times. When they hit Larkspur, she remembered that Robert had a house out there somewhere.

Sarah found herself crying. She could not stop and didn’t care. She felt a hand on her hand and saw that Celia had turned around to comfort her. There were no words spoken, just the warm touch of the other woman’s hand.

Instead of taking her home, they drove to Mem and Addie’s house. Sarah didn’t protest as Mem and Addie came out to the car to usher her, Celia and John into their home.

Around a table laid out with ham and cheese sandwiches, homemade lemonade and peach cobbler, Sarah told them what she had shared in the meeting. She didn’t care about national security, secrecy waivers or classified information. This was Robert’s family and they had a right to know what had happened.

“I feel like we’ve reached some type of turning point and things are never going to be the same.” Sarah offered sorrowfully.

In her gut she knew the unfolding events were the beginning of something ominous and she feared the worse.

Addie took Sarah’s hand. Mem took her other hand, then they linked hands with John and Celia. They sat this way, in silence, realizing that none of their lives would ever be the same again.

Abdullah was smiling as he typed. He acknowledged Robert with a nod as Robert sat down in front of him on their video chat.

“New job?” Robert asked.

“Even better. I think she likes me.”

“Ahh, internet romance.” Robert said with a chuckle.

“You are familiar with Lady Hawke?”

Robert was. He had averted several hacking attempts targeting financial institutions from her. She liked banks, the bigger the better. She wasn't one to go after individuals. She didn't want to hurt the everyday, hardworking average joe. But she had a hard on for large banks and wall street firms. She thought they were evil, corrupt and unscrupulous and she had gotten away with millions.

“Night Bird and Lady Hawk.” Robert said, hoping the two weren't thinking of joining forces.

The look of concern must have shown on his face.

“Don't worry, we are not looking for trouble. At least not that kind of trouble.” Abdullah replied with a smile and a wink.

“We're packing up and getting ready to head out.” Robert informed him.

Abdullah closed his computer and gave Robert his full attention.

“There's a storm headed your way. It might get nasty. Whatever you're going to do, you had better do it quick and find shelter. You're welcome to come back here.”

“Thank you for taking us in and helping us.” Robert said sincerely.

He paused for a moment, wanting to choose his words carefully. He had grown to like the man who had been an advisory but was now a friend.

“Abdullah, you know you’re just a loose end to the people that hire you. Look at what happened to Sula. I don’t want that to happen to you. There are a lot of legitimate businesses that could use you.”

“Oh, Kosmos. I am not one for the 9 to 5. I like my freedom too much. And I like the thrill of the chase. Even with what you do, working for the IISA, you must get that feeling. You know what I am talking about.”

Robert could not deny that he did. However, there were only so many people that could fight the invisible wars that he fought and he was one of the best. There were so few people that were at his level, people he could relate to and trust. His time with Abdullah had been an unforeseen pleasure.

Robert shot off an email to Abdullah with his personal contact information and the information for his new business, Fortress Security Systems.

“You decide you want to do something else, call me. I mean it.” Robert offered.

Abdullah opened the email and reviewed it.

“I will.” He said simply and Robert decided to leave it at that.

Nics called out to Robert. It was showtime. Robert ended the video chat, packed up the computers and threw his computer bag over his shoulder. He looked at his phone, glanced quickly at a picture of him and Sarah. Then he left the room.

Just as Maria had called it, Louka was in the back seat of the jeep, a gun to Jess’s head. The girl looked terrified and Robert saw Paulo’s body stiffen as his entire composure changed.

Robert was hiding in the brush, the computer bag slung over his shoulder. Maria and Nics were in their designated spot. Maria informed Robert that Louka had a guy stationed on the ridge below them, just where they thought he would place someone. Another man was in a separate Jeep driving alone.

Three men was light for Louka, Maria informed them silently. This meant he didn't want trouble. He was there to do the trade and nothing more. This should have put Robert at ease, but his entire body was tense. He felt like the entire situation was a powder keg ready to blow and the slightest spark could set things off.

"I'm in place." Aaron whispered into the earpiece.

He sounded like he was winded. The effort of navigating the raging water alone had obviously taken its toll.

"I'm taking out target one." Nics said.

Maria had set up both tranquilizer guns next to their long-range rifles the night before. Each gun had 5 low level tranquilizer darts, enough to stun and render someone unconscious, but not kill.

"Target down." Nics informed them.

The jeep stopped. Louka stepped out, manhandling Jess and keeping the gun poised at her temple, Abdullah broke radio silence.

"Robert." He said in an urgent whisper.

"Abdullah, it's kind of a bad time." Robert whispered back.

"Whatever you do, don't go with them. No matter what happens, do not let them know you're there." Abdullah blurted out.

Paulo, with the copycat laptop in his computer bag, walked out to the middle of the bridge. The rough looking man from the other jeep met him there. Robert assumed they were negotiating the terms of Jess's release.

"Paulo's talking to one of them now. I'm not going anywhere unless they ask to authenticate the computer." Robert informed Abdullah.

"What good does the computer do them? Even if they take it, they can't open it. They need someone with the skills to give them access." Abdullah said frantically.

Robert's blood ran cold as realization hit him like a baseball bat to the face.

"Don't let them take you." Abdullah warned before he went silent.

With the shared earpieces, the entire team had heard what Abdullah said. Robert refocused his attention on Paulo, but now he was extremely uneasy. Louka began to walk slowly to the center of the bridge.

"Robert Duchovny. I will only give the girl to you." Louka yelled.

"Damn it." Maria cursed in the earpiece.

"I know you are here, Robert. You want the girl, show yourself." Louka added.

"Just you and me. I have what you want, you come get it. Give me my daughter." Paulo demanded.

Louka pressed the gun deeper into Jess's temple and she started to weep miserably. With Jess in front of him he continued walking towards the center of the bridge so that everyone could see he meant business.

"Robert, if you don't come out here now, I will kill her and walk away. I'm going to count to three."

Robert didn't wait for the countdown to start. He moved from his hiding place, started to walk towards the center of the bridge, hands up. The morning air was crisp, but that wasn't what was causing the chill to creep up his spine.

"This wasn't part of the plan." Maria exclaimed in Robert's ear. But he was already on the move.

Jess was standing between Louka and the other man. Robert had never been a hateful person, but it was the only emotion he could feel for Louka when he saw the look of raw terror on Jess's face.

"I'm here." Robert said staring Louka straight in the eyes.

Louka lowered the gun away from Jess's head, still keeping it aimed at her side where a gunshot could do lethal damage.

"Give the computer to him." Louka demanded of Paulo. "Then walk back to where you came."

Paulo complied. Turning his back to the men he leaned in and whispered to Robert.

"You know the plan. Same plan, just you instead of me."

Robert nodded that he understood as Paulo handed him the computer bag and walked away. Underneath the bridge the water was roaring and rapid. Could he survive if he jumped?

If Louka didn't kill him, the fall would. In an instant, he made up his mind. As soon as Jess was safe, he would jump if no other option presented itself. He could not let them take him alive.

The thought of dying in the crush of rock, water and cold below frightened him. Thinking of Sarah, and that he may never see her again, broke his heart. But the knowledge and skills he had, in the wrong hands, frightened him even more.

They had tried mind control on him before and it didn't work. Would they do it again with different tools and drugs? Would they torture him? Would he be able to resist if they did? He couldn't answer those questions. He could only control the here and now.

Nics and Maria were up on the ridge. He hoped they had a plan because things were going south fast. His mind turned over these thoughts in a split second as he stood facing the men. The first order of business was to make sure Jess was safe. He could not bear the thought of Jess being in the company of murders and monsters.

Louka kept Jess in front of him as he smirked at Robert. The gun was still aimed where they could see the harm he could do if provoked. The other man was speaking, phone to his ear.

"I paid a visit to your girlfriend. She's really messed up because of all of this, because of you. You're lucky you decided to call when you did. One more minute and I would have put a bullet in her head." Louka spat the words out vehemently.

Robert was unnerved and enraged simultaneously. But he didn't show it.

"What's your story? Let me guess. Beautiful woman---promised you a lifetime of love, pleasure, luxury and champagne in exchange for you betraying your country and everything you vowed to serve and protect." Robert said calmly.

"Shut up." Louka sneered, putting the gun to Robert's forehead. He had obviously struck a nerve.

"Easy." The man next to Louka cautioned.

"Start up the computer." Louka said to his companion.

The man pulled the computer from the bag. There was a flash of recognition, even admiration on his face as their eyes met, but Robert had never seen the man before. The computer fired up quickly.

Louka motioned with his head for Robert to log in and he complied. The mystery man held the computer for him as he moved past the log in page, through the fire wall and encryptions and to the files. He opened one of the files, Achojah's family pictures, then turned the computer Louka's direction.

"Satisfied?" Robert asked.

"Open this file and this one." The other man demanded.

By selecting the files to open he was guaranteeing that Robert hadn't just picked one file to show him and the rest were bad. It was a smart move Robert had anticipated. He opened the files as requested.

The man made another phone call. "We got it. I verified it's the real deal." He paused for a moment, listening to instructions from the person on the other end of the call.

"You have what you want. Send the girl." Paulo shouted behind him.

Louka pushed her towards the opposite direction, aiming the gun at Robert's head. The other man stuffed the computer back into its bag. They all watched as Jess reached the other side and ran into her father's arms.

"We're going to proceed nice and slow, back to the other side of the bridge." Louka ordered as he grabbed Robert roughly by the arm, gun pointed at his temple.

As Robert walked, he thought of Nics and Maria. If they were going to do something, now was the time.

There were only a few steps and a few more minutes of life for Robert. Before they reached the end of the bridge, he would grab Louka and use his body weight to throw them both over the side. The other option was for them to detonate the explosives. If they blew the bridge he would not survive. But neither would Louka, Achojah's henchman or the computer.

“Aaron, tell Sarah I love her and I’m sorry.” Robert whispered silently. Looking up at a beautiful blue sky laced with pristine clouds he was ready. “Do it.” He said, giving them permission to blow the bridge to hades.

“Keep walking. Duck when I tell you to duck.” Nics said quietly in his ear piece.

Robert’s heart raced in his chest as they made it to the end of the bridge. The opportunity for him to take Louka out was gone. He hoped desperately Nics knew what he was doing.

“Now.” Nics commanded.

Robert ducked, dropping all his weight like a ton of lead. Bullets began to fly and the bridge blew. Wood and shrapnel from the bridge flew over his head. He saw Louka and his accomplice go airborne, then both men landed hard on their backs.

Louka had a patch of red spreading across his shoulder. The computer bag had flown from the other man’s grasp and was lying a few feet away. Robert snatched it up and made for the place he knew the belay system had been rigged.

The surrounding forest was so thick he almost missed the marker Maria had placed the night before. Unlike Paulo, Robert knew nothing about rock climbing.

Bullets began to ricochet around him, but quickly stopped as the shooter was engaged by Maria and Nic’s from their secret location. Robert turned in time to see Louka’s man fall backwards. He didn’t know if the man had been tranquillized or shot.

“Latch yourself in. You need to go down backwards” Maria urged him.

Peeking over the rocky ledge Robert felt sheer panic. It looked treacherous.

“Move your butt.” Maria yelled in the earpiece.

Robert latched himself in. As he grabbed the ropes Maria gave him instructions on how to make the decent. He began to make his way down slowly, hand over hand, step down, repeat.

He knew he was moving at a snail's pace, but didn't want to fall. The rocks below would break any bones they came into contact with.

"Faster." Maria shouted as gun fire erupted again overhead.

The sound of the gun battle was slowly replaced by the noise of raging water as he got closer to the river. Below, in a small clearing, he saw the boat. Aaron motioned him over quickly and he climbed in. Aaron clearly hadn't been expecting Robert.

"You ever done any white-water rafting?" Aaron asked.

"No."

Aaron slipped a life jacket over Robert's head and tightened the straps. He handed him two oars.

"Just do what I do." Aaron shouted over the rushing water.

Robert took the oars as Aaron casted off and jumped into the boat. Robert's hands were shaking so badly he lost an oar at the first break of water and the toss of the boat. He grasped his only remaining oar with both hands, determined not to be completely worthless in assisting Aaron with steering.

They were well down river when the water finally began to calm. Aaron dropped a small engine into the water and Robert was glad they no longer needed man power to move the boat along.

An hour later they made it to a small harbor. Aaron handed a wad of bills to an elderly woman who was manning the office. Two motorized bikes waited for them. The bikes hissed and pattered, but they made it to the rendezvous point in Bled.

“We must be the first one’s here.” Aaron said, side arm drawn as he checked out the place top to bottom. “I hope the others are ok. That was quite a gun battle. You getting anything in your earpiece?”

Robert reached for his ear. His ear piece was gone. It had been lost as the boat was lurching and churning its way through the water.

“My earpiece is gone. We’re going to have to wait.”

“I lost mine too.” Aaron confessed.

Aaron pointed to a large, locked chest.

“Your stuff’s in there. I’m going to go and check on our car and see if I can find the others. Stay here.”

Aaron handed Robert a loaded sidearm then disappeared.

A few minutes after Aaron left Robert heard a noise outside. He didn’t cock the gun. As shaky as his hands were, he would probably shoot himself in the foot. However, he could use the gun as a deterrent, something to threaten an intruder with until Aaron came back.

He opened the door a crack, weapon held high, and chanced a peek into the dark alleyway. Paulo was coming around the corner with Jess in tow.

Robert stepped out. “Over hear.” He said quietly, motioning them inside. “Aaron went to check---.”

His words were cut off by a blow to the solar plexus from Paulo that took him completely by surprise and knocked the wind out of him.

“Daddy.” Jess screamed.

Paulo grabbed the computer bag off Robert’s shoulder.

“Sorry, dog.” Paulo said as he took Jess’s hand and bolted out the door.

Paulo and Jess had already left as Maria and Nics approached, guns drawn. Aaron returned coming from the opposite direction. Soon, they were all standing over Robert who still couldn't move. The man's punch was like a sledgehammer. A punch to the head would have killed him.

Nics offered a hand up and Robert took it.

"What the heck was that?" Aaron asked, looking at the perplexed look on everyone's face.

"We came around the corner to see Paulo running way with the computer and Robert on the ground." Maria answered.

"He hit me." Robert said, barely able to speak.

"Let's get inside." Aaron said, eyeing their surroundings.

Luckily the place was deserted and the scuffle and drawn guns hadn't attracted any unwanted attention. Abdullah had come through again.

"We need to move. I can't guarantee we weren't followed. You ok?" Maria asked Robert.

"I think my pride is hurt more than anything." Robert said, still holding his mid-section where he had taken the blow.

Weapons drawn, they carefully made their way to a dinky garage where a car with a lot of miles was waiting. Maria took the wheel and the guys stuffed themselves into the back of the small sedan. Robert took the only empty seat in the front next to Maria.

"We got a call from Abdullah. A typhoon is heading this way. It's supposed to hit within a few hours." Nics informed them.

As if on cue, the sky rumbled with thunder. After several rumblings it started to rain, then it started to pour.

“We can’t go back to the house in Ljubljana, not with Paulo out there somewhere.” Maria informed them.

With their hiding place potentially blown and the onslaught of bad weather, they needed to find a new place to lay low. Robert retrieved the bag Aaron had hidden for him earlier and removed his secure phone.

“Where am I going?” Maria asked.

Robert punched in an address on his phone and showed her the GPS coordinates. She raised an eyebrow.

“It’s the secure CIA facility. We should be able to hunker down and ride out this storm.” Robert informed everyone.

“Is this the same facility you and Paulo robbed?” Aaron questioned from the back seat.

“It’s ok. We have a friend there.”

“I sure hope you’re right.” Maria said as she drove.

The weight of the unnatural storm was intensifying, bearing down on them. Their options were limited at this point.

“Next steps?” Aaron asked from the back seat, sensing the situation.

“We continue with the plan. You guys have done enough. You need to get back to the states, tell everyone what you know. I’ll continue to work from here.” Robert replied.

“We really needed those headsets. It’s going to be hard to prove your innocence without them. We’re short on evidence and proof. No one’s going to believe this wild story.” Aaron said.

“And Paulo has Achojah’s computer.” Maria added.

“The computer Paulo has is a fake. By midnight tonight the program it contains will self-destruct. Paulo won’t notice until he gets to wherever he’s going.” Robert said.

“You think he’ll try to sell it?” Nics asked.

“No. I think he wanted to use it as an insurance policy to keep whoever kidnapped Jess off his back.” Robert responded.

Maria was maneuvering carefully on the highway but still going faster than the law allowed, trying to outdrive the storm. The streets were empty. Everyone seemed to be wise enough to take shelter except them.

“At least we still have Achojah’s computer. One out of two isn’t bad.” Nics said.

“Two out of two.” Maria nodded to a bag she had thrown in the car by Robert’s feet. Looking inside, there were a few clothing items, Maria’s gun and the white virtual reality headset.

“I could only take one. I had to leave something in the case to preserve the weight. When Paulo opens the case, he’ll find one virtual reality headset and a stone figurine from the desk in my room. I didn’t think Abdullah would mind.” Maria was obviously very happy of the deception.

Robert was moved beyond words. He had everything he needed to clear his name.

“How did you get this?”

“Like Paulo said---he has an addiction.”

Maria’s words and the implications made Robert feel immediately sick and ashamed. He never would have asked Maria to make such a sacrifice for him.

“Maria, I don’t know what to say.”

“Trust me, you don’t have to say anything. I made him think we were going to have a night of fun up on the hill by ourselves. However, I put a bunch of sleeping pills in his drink. We had some wine, then he was out cold. The closest he got to me was in his dreams.”

Robert didn't like the fact that she had taken such a risk and he said as much. But she blew it off with a wave of her hand and turned her full concentration to the road as the conditions around them deteriorated.

The car was being blown back and forth like a rocking chair under the assault of the wind. When they got to the compound Agent Rimes was at the door waving them in. They ran, rain beating down on them and the wind whipping them so hard they huddled together to get safely inside.

Agent Rimes secured the door behind them, engaging the lock. They could hear the storm intensifying, but the building was holding its own against the maelstrom.

"Down here." Agent Rimes said, leading them downstairs to a fully stocked storm shelter.

He showed them around the place where they would be spending the night. There were two separate sleeping quarters, one for men and one for women, two bathrooms with multiple stalls and showers, a supply room stocked with food, a kitchen and a communications room.

There was also another weapons room just as stocked as the one Robert and Paulo had hit upstairs. They could stay there for months if needed.

Robert thanked Agent Rimes for taking them in. Agent Rimes thanked Robert again for not letting Paulo kill him. They were all hungry, soaked and grateful.

"I'm going to take a shower. A very hot shower." Maria commented as she left the guys. Going into the supply room, she emerged with a towel and a pair of sweats.

"There's clean clothes and towels. There should be something that will fit all of you if you want to get cleaned up." Agent Rimes informed them as Maria disappeared into the women's quarters.

The men took Agent Rimes up on his offer. A hot shower later and all wearing warm clothes, they met back at the table. Nics retrieved a book from the makeshift library and Aaron a bible for some after dinner reading.

They heated up soup on the stove. Aaron said grace and they all relished the meal. Canned soup had never tasted so good, Robert thought as it warmed him from the inside out. Rimes also had a pot of hot water on the stove and they topped off the soup with some warm tea.

“You hear anything about me recently?” Robert asked Agent Rimes.

“Nothing. Chatter went quiet. It’s pretty weird. That only happens when something big is going down.”

“I need to check in. You got a phone around here that won’t compromise our location?” Aaron asked.

“Phones are down.” Agent Rimes informed them.

“I can get a message out.” Robert offered.

The entire building shook around them and the talking stopped.

“You sure this place isn’t going to come down around our heads?” Nics asked, looking around.

“She’ll hold. I think.” Rimes answered, not sounding so sure.

Robert suddenly felt more tired than he had ever been. He thought of all he had gone through. To be so close, then to die in a freak storm---. The thought trailed off in his mind.

Aaron must have sensed the change in mood. He held out his hands to everyone around him and they joined hands, all except Maria.

Aaron held out his hand to her. “You going to join us?”

“You can pray to your sky daddy if you want. I’m going to bed.”

Robert expected Rimes to leave as well, but the kid stayed. Eyes closed, they were silent as Aaron said a prayer over their situation.

“Let’s get that message out.” Robert said afterwards.

He fired up the Lenovo and sent a simple encrypted message to Chanelle, John, Shaunessy, Jax and Abdullah letting everyone know that they had found shelter. He left the computer on. He wasn’t done for the night.

“Thanks, man.” Aaron said as he grabbed his bible, wished them all a good night and headed for the men’s quarters.

“You have coffee?” Robert asked Rimes.

“You need to get some sleep.” Nics said.

“I can’t stop. I’m so close. I’ve got to keep working.”

Nics nodded that he understood and went the same way Aaron had gone. Rimes showed Robert where the coffee was then he disappeared as well leaving Robert alone.

Something was gnawing at Robert, a sense of urgency he could not explain.

It’s now or never he thought silently to himself.

Nics went into the men’s quarters, laid his book down on a bunk. Aaron was already fast asleep, agent Rimes was in the shower and Robert was rummaging around in the kitchen making himself a pot of coffee.

Nics was exhausted, but there was something he needed to take care of first. The women’s sleeping quarters was adjacent to the men’s and he made his way there.

Nics knocked on the closed door. “It’s Nics.”

Maria told him to come in. The large room had a set of bunk beds against the far wall and two beds that lined the wall on each side. Being the only woman, Maria had the quarters all to herself.

Closing the door behind him, Nics folded his arms and leaned against the door.

Maria looked him up and down.

“Now we’re talking.” She said seductively, leaning back on her elbows.

“I’m not here for that.”

“What are you here for?” She asked, obviously not convinced.

“What happened out there?”

“Robert was in danger. I took the shot, I blew the bridge. Now, here we are all safe and sound.”

“That’s not what happened and you know it. You shot Louka, blew the bridge, created a chaotic, unpredictable situation.”

“If I wanted to kill him, he’d be dead. And you’re the one who made the call.”

“I made the call so that I could tranquilize him, not shoot him. And I don’t think you wanted to kill him. I think you wanted to hurt him. Having him leave, without his prize, was the best way to do it.”

He knew he had hit the nail on the head when she looked away.

“Look at me.” He commanded and she met his gaze.

“Your vendetta could have gotten all of us killed. It was reckless and it was unprofessional. What you do on your time, on your own missions, is up to you. But if you ever put people I care about or a team I’m on in danger again, you’ll have to answer to me. And trust me, you are not going to like that. Am I making myself clear?”

Maria met his gaze defiantly for a moment, then she turned away.

“Understood.”

“Good.” Nics left the room, closing the door quietly behind him.

Louka was yelling at the top of his lungs in unison with the howling of the wind outside. The pain in his shoulder had consumed his entire body, but it couldn't match the pain tearing through his soul.

Henreth and Louka had parted ways after the fiasco of the exchange and before the storm, the men heading in two different directions without speaking another word.

Louka had accidentally shot one of his brothers during the melee of gunfire when the man had stood up, groggy from being drugged by a tranquilizer dart. Louka recovered the body, carried the man back to the jeep in his arms.

His driver had escaped the gunfire, but had been hit by shrapnel from the bridge. He was lying bloodied and unconscious on a cot in their temporary hiding place, a storm shelter located beneath a house Louka had accessed by breaking through a back door window.

This latest failure would not be tolerated. He was never going home. There was an emptiness inside of him that could never be filled. So, he raged, tore at his clothes and ripped out his hair. He destroyed everything in his path as he yelled and cried out, unable to release the agony he felt inside.

In the midst of his turmoil, he heard the small ringing of his phone. He froze, thinking at first he had imagined it. But in the silence the phone rang again. It was real. Louka ran around the shelter searching frantically. He had trashed the place in a fit of rage. Now there was nothing more important than finding and answering the phone.

He located it beneath a shelf he'd knocked over. The screen was cracked but he hoped the phone still work.

"Hello." He answered, desperation in his voice.

"My beloved."

Solange's voice was smooth as silk to his ears. He fell to his knees and started to wail.

"I failed you. I'm so sorry." He cried.

"It is of no consequence. The plan has changed."

Louka sat up straight, taking in deep breaths.

"Achojah---the computer?" He questioned.

"No longer needed. Our friend at the bank has supplied another means for us to finance our endeavors. We have found other associates in the United States in which to invest our time and resources. We need you to go there my beloved. It is of upmost importance."

Louka stood now. Despair turning into burning hope and determination.

He assumed the friend she spoke of was Alexander Treager, a powerful financier and head of the World Bank. As for the associates, anyone from street gangs to organized crime syndicates would be overjoyed to take the Mal'akh's money.

It was a huge risk, to deal directly with such unscrupulous characters. But they had obviously weighed the odds and decided it was a risk worth taking.

Going back to the US was a potential death sentence for Louka. He had no false identities left. If he was caught, he would have to shoot his way out. But he would rather die than live the rest of his life without Solange and the Mal'akh.

"I will do anything you ask of me, My Love. Anything."

Louka looked at the man lying on the cot, listened to his rugged breathing.

“One of our brother’s is dead. The other, he needs medical attention.”

“End the man’s suffering. Take the essence of his soul into yourself, let it strengthen you.

You will need all of the cunning you possess for this next task. I am sending you instructions.

Please do not fail me this time. I am waiting for you.”

Louka unsheathed his knife slowly, heading towards the sleeping man.

“With every breath I take, with ounce of my being, I will serve you.”

Robert had to fight to get back into Pandora. She had already built up her defenses since the last time he had logged in. She was becoming more formidable by the day. Each day he delayed in accessing the files she was protecting was one step closer to completely losing control.

“Symphony, engage.” Robert whispered and the program complied.

Robert expected Pandora to immediately retaliate. Instead, she started to scan the new program. She’s curious, Robert thought.

At first, he had planned to initiate the seek and destroy command. But he had played a hunch and the hunch paid off. Pandora would have immediately attacked a hostile program. But something that presented itself as a friend, this she didn’t know how to handle.

As Pandora was preoccupied, Robert exploited the computer and started to copy files from Pandora’s hard drive over to his Lenovo. He expected the program to react, to shut him out. But she was so engaged, Robert robbed Pandora of her precious secrets right under her nose. Within 20 minutes he had everything.

“Symphony, disengage.” Robert gave the command.

The program did not immediately react. It was curious about Pandora too, something Robert had not anticipated.

“Symphony, disengage.” Robert demanded.

Cannot comply. His creation responded via a typed message, defying its maker.

Robert wasn’t going to wait. He typed in several codes and commands to force Symphony to disconnect and shut down. Once the programs ceased to interface, Robert immediately stopped the hack on Pandora and shut Achojah’s computer down for good.

As if sensing his dread and trepidation at what had just occurred with Symphony, the storm outside intensified, the power flickered on and off.

“Please don’t go off.” Robert said silently to himself, looking around at the shimmering lights.

It sounded like the four corners of heaven had opened up and was now unleashing an unnatural fury on all mankind. The lights flickered again and then everything went black. The illumination of his computer was the only thing left lighting the room.

Robert had full power but didn’t know how long it would last. Pouring himself another round of coffee, he quickly started to examine the treasure trove of data he had finally been able to retrieve.

The first files contained addresses and locations of Achojah’s associates all over the world. The second set of files were maps, hundreds of maps and pictures of cities all over the United States.

There were financial files with bank account information and numbers spread across several banks. Each account had been set up under what he was assumed were aliases, except a

file that was clearly marked Shane Kaggen. Each terrorist had a million dollars at his or her disposal, Director Kaggen had more. Robert gasped at the revelation.

Opening the last file, his unease turned to horror. As he sorted through the data, Achojah's end game came into clear, full focus. His mind reeled at the implications as he started searching for a day and time.

"Tomorrow." He said to himself frantically as he grabbed his secure phone. He was out of time.

Robert dialed Shaunessy, then tried Secretary Page and Jax. He wasn't sure if it was the storm or something else, but his phone was dead.

In desperation he started to type furiously. He didn't care if they came to arrest him. Half delirious from the events of the past few days and lack of sleep, he did the largest and most important hack he had ever done in his life.

File by file, he started to send the data. The files were large. He could only hope that he had enough power for all of the files to send. He started with the most urgent data first.

With the data transmission in process, he went into the communications room. As Rimes had stated earlier, the lines were dead. Robert's only means of getting the message out was the hack he'd done into the IISA and the FBI to transfer files directly to their networks and to Shaunessy and his IISA Teams encrypted emails.

Robert returned to his computer, going through the files again. He read each one as if his life depended on it, committing all of the details to memory.

"Come on." He whispered as the data transmission slowed down to a snail's pace.

Robert paced the floor, drank a whole pot of coffee, made another pot, then went back to his computer to check the status of the transfer that was taking hours.

His computer was almost out of juice when a loud thunderhead shook the entire facility and his computer went black.

There was no way to know if the files had reached their intended recipients. Robert felt helpless. Now all he could do was wait and pray that his message and the files had gotten through.

“Robert Duchovny?” Someone addressed him, laying a hand on his shoulder.

Robert was at the table draped over his computer. Had he fallen asleep or blacked out from trepidation mixed with exhaustion? He could not remember. As the fog began to clear, he suddenly remembered the urgency of the situation. He jumped up, panicked.

People were yelling in the background mingled with the sounds of boots on the ground.

“Robert Duchovny?” The soldier said again.

It wasn't a question. The man clearly recognized him. He seemed to be gauging Robert's mental and physical state.

“I need to get back to the US.”

“I'm Ari Reisman. I'm here to take you home.”

The insignia on the man's uniform announced that he was Mossad. Robert packed up the computers and followed the soldier out of the compound.

“Robert.” Maria called out to him.

Outside, Maria and Cillian Rimes were standing next to a helicopter in handcuffs.

“What's going on? They're part of my team.” Robert started to walk towards them when he was stopped.

“Orders. We’ve been told to apprehend all CIA agents. They’re to be extradited to the US.” Ari said.

“I broke Pandora. I got in.” Robert called out to Maria.

She must have seen the look of raw terror on his face.

“Go. Do what you have to do” She urged him.

Aaron and Nics were brought out. Not in handcuffs, but surrounded by IDF agents.

“These people are part of my team. I need them.” Robert said to Ari.

“Identification.” Ari said, motioning to another agent.

Using a hand-held facial recognition device, the agent scanned Aaron’s and Nics identification and examined Aaron’s badge. The man returned the IDs to the two men and nodded at Ari.

“They’re clear.” Ari said, guiding Robert, Aaron and Nics to a waiting helicopter.

“We’re flying you to Israel, then back to the US.”

Ari handed Robert a satellite phone which he used immediately to call Shaunessy.

The man sounded panicked and out of breath as he answered the phone.

“Robert, we got the files.”

“Can I talk freely?”

“Yes. Mossad has all the details and they’re working in conjunction with our government. The first bombs went off in New York, Utah and Nevada. I’m on my way to New York with a team.”

Robert’s heart sank. “How many?”

“Thousands dead and injured.”

“It’s not the end. The plan said 50 attacks in all 50 states. The initial bombings are to create fear and instability. The grand finally will be a nuclear bomb, location unknown.”

Aaron and Nics caught Robert’s last words. He could see the terror struck looks on their faces.

“We’ve mobilized every law enforcement and intelligence agency in the country. The first explosions in New York went off at JFK, in Upper Manhattan and at the Wall Street and United Nations Buildings. Utah and Nevada were smaller locations, coffee shops, libraries. The President has federalized the National Guard and declared martial law.” Shaunessy informed him.

“I need everything you confiscate sent to my lab immediately so I can analyze the data and the hardware. Also, Maria Lim and Cillian Rimes were taken into custody by the IDF. They’re part of my team.”

“Where is my helicopter? It should have been here 10 minutes ago.” Shaunessy yelled at someone in the background, then turned his attention back to the conversation. “We got the files on Shane Kaggen. We’re not taking any chances. All CIA agents need to be vetted. They’ll be released as soon as they’re cleared. In the meantime, how are we going to stop this? We don’t know where they’re going to strike next.”

Robert felt like his heart would explode from his chest. With its many military installations and bases, Colorado would be a prime target.

As if reading his mind, Shaunessy informed him that all military bases had been put on high alert. Civilian evacuations had already started. However, they were working on assumptions. The targets could be anywhere. Hitting a freeway or a mall could be just as devastating.

“I need data from one of those blast sites, Shaun.” Robert urged him again.

“Helicopter’s here. You’ll get it as soon as I have it.”

Ending the call, Robert dialed John’s cell phone.

“Get everyone out of Colorado.” Robert said as soon as John answered. They didn’t have time for small talk.

“Where do we go? I’m hearing on the news this thing is everywhere.”

“As far away from any potential target areas as you can.”

As soon as they landed in Israel, Robert, Aaron and Nics were shuttled onto another plane. It was a Boeing C32 with a full command center. Robert was taken there immediately. His IISA team cheered and clapped when they saw him.

“Welcome back, Boss.” Jax said exuberantly.

Robert immediately got down to business. His team was all ears.

“We need to run diagnostics on every system and I mean every system. Tell Shaun we need full access. We’re looking for traces of the Pandora program or those eggs as you called them, Jax.”

“Yes, sir!” They said in unison, rushing to their computers.

“What’s going on with the secure phones?” Robert asked Jax.

He had been calling everyone from the satellite phone provided by Ari.

“The CIA discovered the computer was a fake. They assumed you were somehow involved. The decision was made to completely shut down the system last night.”

Knowing what Robert knew now, cutting off communications was a sinister, but smart move by the traitor they'd had in their midst. Shane Kaggen must have known it was only a matter of time before Robert accessed Achojah's computer.

"We need that phone system back up and running. Make the call to our friend, have him pull some strings."

Robert knew Jax would get the hint. He was hoping Secretary Page could use his political muscle to get the phones turned back on.

Aaron and Nics entered.

"What can we do?" Nics asked.

"We need to check the terror watch list. Find out if there's any chatter about the people on the list, any questionable movement. Get in touch with local law enforcement agencies. We're looking for police reports filed within the last week reporting suspicious activity."

"I can contact some guys to help." Aaron offered.

"So can I." Nics said.

Robert pointed to two empty work stations and the men got to work. He watched the feed coming in from around the country. Law Enforcement and the National Guard had been mobilized and stretched to the breaking point. All armed forces were either in use or on standby.

The country had never faced a country wide terror threat. Most people were responding to the request to either lock down or evacuate. Some were using it as an excuse to loot and riot. There was nationwide chaos and it would only get worse when the next set of bombs went off.

“Are you serious? You’re going to bring this up now?” Sarah yelled at her mother over the phone. “If Chanelle isn’t welcome, I’m not coming.” Sarah added, slamming the phone down in disgust.

Sarah grabbed her packed bag and headed for her car. In the trunk she had packed all of the food items from her kitchen, having heard reports of looting and mayhem at all of the stores. She threw in a duffel bag of clothes and jumped behind the wheel.

Her neighborhood looked like a ghost town. Even her curious neighbor had not come out to see what Sarah was doing. The streets were much the same. People had either left town or decided to hunker down and ride out the chaotic storm that was sweeping the entire country.

Maggie ran out the front door as soon as Sarah pulled up. They emptied out Maggie’s kitchen as well, throwing Maggie’s bag of clothes into the back seat.

“Dad’s stuck overseas, he can’t get a flight back to the US and my mother refuses to let Chanelle stay at the house because of an argument they had years ago. That woman is so damn petty.” Sarah lamented as soon as Maggie’s rear hit the seat.

“We can always go to my brother’s house.” Maggie offered.

“Upstate New York is a long drive from here. I’ve heard things are really deteriorating out there. With law enforcement preoccupied, bad people are taking advantage.”

“I was watching the news. Things are crazy everywhere, but they’re saying they think New York is safe, it’s already been hit---” Maggie said, trailing off.

“I have family on the East Coast too and Chanelle has family in Southern California.” Sarah said, pulling out a piece of paper she’d written notes on. “All of the states we have friends and family are on the evacuation list. Since we can’t get into my parent’s heavily fortified neighborhood without my mother’s permission, our options are limited.” Sarah added.

Sarah was considering other possible courses of action when the phone rang.

“Sarah, it’s John.”

She was frozen at the sound of his voice. Had something happened to Robert?

“Sarah, you there?” He questioned at her silence.

“Yes---yes, I’m here with Maggie. We’re on our way to Chanelle’s house. We’re just trying to figure out---.”

“---Where to go.” John finished the sentence for her. “My brother has a farm out in Wyoming. Celia and I are headed there now. We’re going to pick up Mem and Addie. Please come with us. My brother has enough room and there’s safety in numbers.”

Sarah was dumbstruck, touched and relieved simultaneously.

“John---I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything. Where are you now? Can you get to Aaron’s house or do we need to come and get you?”

Sarah glanced at her open purse where the 357 was nestled safely inside.

“I think we can get to there.”

“We’ll meet you there. We have a camper trailer and my hummer. My daughter Lacy has a forerunner. We can load everything in and caravan up to Wyoming together.”

“Oh John, that sounds wonderful. Where’s Robert?”

“He’s here, in the US. He’s working with his team at the IISA, but he said things could get worse. We have to go.”

“Thank you for coming for us.” Sarah said genuinely before she ended the call.

Sarah made it safely to Aaron's house on mostly deserted streets. When she and Maggie entered, Chanelle was on the phone. From her frantic tone Sarah guessed her sister-in-law was speaking to Aaron. As soon as the call ended, she'd rushed the girls into their bedrooms to pack.

"Let's pack up the food as well." Sarah suggested as she heard the rumbling of a several vehicles outside.

A peek revealed John's hummer, the forerunner and a large camper. Celia and John rushed in and together they packed up all the food in the house, throwing the cold items into four large ice chests. The team moved quickly and desperately, packing in less than 30 minutes.

The next stop was Mem and Addie's house. The same routine was repeated and they were loaded and on their way to Wyoming.

As they drove, Sarah witnessed mangled cars littering the streets from accidents caused by drivers who had ran stop signs and red lights in panicked flight.

Windows were broken out in grocery stores as people ransacked the buildings and took as much as their hands could carry. Fights had broken out among those who had not been prepared for the nationwide crisis and were desperate to get supplies.

The police and national guard were on the scene, trying to restore order. On the sidewalk, an EMT pulled a sheet over a lifeless form.

"Dear God." Chanelle said as they watched the unfolding bedlam from the safety of the hummer. "People have lost all sense of reason."

Sarah was sitting with both girls huddled in her arms trying her best to shield them from what was happening outside.

"One more light and then we're on the 25 freeway. It's pretty much a straight shot from there" Celia said reassuringly, clearly trying to comfort the frightened girls.

Everyone inside of the hummer jumped as a man approached and banged on the window with a baseball bat. Sarah's nieces began to cry.

The man hit the window again only to be met by Celia's 45 and Sarah's 357. He eyed the weapons as he backed away slowly with his hands up.

Following closely behind them, John had his AR-15 pointed at the man as well. Seeing the caravan was heavily armed, the attempted robber didn't try to approach the camper or the Forerunner.

They were on high alert until they reached the safety of the open highway.

Safely huddled in the home of John's older brother Sarah felt a sense of calm. She had already faced horror, dread and the unknown the past several weeks and had survived. Nothing could shake her resolve to get through the current crisis.

Chanelle took the girls in the other room as John's brother turned on the tv.

"Glad you all made it when you did. People are going nuts out there." He said as they watched the entire country burn.

"What is it about the human condition that we lose all sense of humanity whenever something goes wrong?" He asked the room. His question was met with silence. No one had an answer.

"Are we safe here?" Sarah asked, more concerned for Chanelle and Aaron's girls than herself.

"I feel sorry for anyone that comes here and tries to act a fool." John's brother responded, grabbing his shotgun and cocking it.

Big Mo, as John called him, was an appropriate name. He was linebacker big and obviously ready to defend his territory. His wife entered and laid a hand on his shoulder.

“We’re on 50 acres and it’s a pretty small community. I think we’re safe here.” She answered calmly. “I got a bed made for you. Come with me, I’ll show you where you can hang your hat the next few days.”

Days, Sarah thought. She could only hope whatever sinister plot was unfolding against the United States could be foiled so quickly.

Inside of the room, Mo’s wife turned to Sarah.

“I’ve known Robert a long time. If anyone can solve this, he can.”

Sarah thanked her host then sat down on the bed. Even after everything that had happened, Robert was still protecting her. Was it out of love or a sense of duty?

She closed her eyes, remembering the words he had whispered in her ear. *“I’m going to marry you Sarah Levy, what do you think about that?”* She’d been half asleep, but she’d heard the precious words he’d spoken to her as he held her tightly in his arms.

Her mind was a jumbled mess of confused thoughts and memories, but the love she held in her heart for him was still there. Feeling helpless, Sarah retrieved her computer. Tears fell from her eyes as she typed and she made no attempt to stop them.

“Mr. Duchovny.” Secretary Page extended a hand and introduced himself as if they’d never met.

“We’re getting more data from the bomb sites as we speak. We also have some rubble and parts we think were part of the actual bomb.” He informed Robert.

“Was there a computer attached?”

Robert could tell by Secretary Page's reaction that he was correct.

"I'm flying out to Washington tonight to brief the President. We need to know what we're dealing with."

"I promise I won't rest until we get answers." Robert assured him.

They were in Colorado Springs, Cherokee Mountain, below levels. Robert knew the area they were housed in could withstand a nuclear blast. He didn't like the odds for the people outside, which included Sarah, his family and friends.

Upon arrival they were hustled to a massive command center. Robert's entire IISA team had been moved to the center and they were at their stations doing the research he'd requested.

Robert motioned to two empty stations where Nics and Aaron could finish the work they had started on the airplane. Before Aaron sat down, he went to Director Page and handed him the virtual reality headset Maria had liberated from Paulo.

"This should be the last piece of the puzzle to clear Robert's name." Aaron said.

The Secretary took it and nodded. "I'll make sure it gets into the right hands."

Secretary Page motioned to a soldier that was standing at attention by the door.

"You need anything, he'll get it for you." He said as he turned and rushed away.

As Secretary Page was leaving Maria and Agent Rimes arrived.

"Robert." Maria exclaimed as she came around a corner.

She ran down the hallway towards him. In an uncustomary fashion, she jumped into his arms and gave him a big hug. Agent Rimes was right behind her. He shook Robert's hand.

Aaron and Nics stood up as they entered. Despite all of the previous tension they'd had, they were all genuinely happy to be back together. They were now united in a common goal.

“Thank you for getting us released. I heard the entire CIA has been brought down. Something about Director Kaggen somehow being involved in all of this?” Maria questioned.

Robert didn’t know what to say. He had seen the data himself on Achojah’s computer and he told her as much.

“Look. Director Kaggen is a first-rate jerk. But he has an American flag so far up his wazoo that he craps red, white and blue. No way he’s a traitor.” Maria countered.

“I would have said it a little bit more eloquently, but I agree.” From Rimes.

“I’ll sort through the data again, see if I can find anything that clears him. For now, the IISA and the FBI had to act on the intelligence we had.”

Maria looked around the impressive command center.

“What can I do to help?”

“If you have any CIA contacts that haven’t been compromised or arrested, we could use them.”

“On it.” She said, going to a station. Rimes did the same.

Robert went to the soldier standing guard at the door.

“I need to see what has been brought in so far and I need secure phones. Is the system back up?”

“Yes, sir. The system is back up and running. I’ll get you the phones ASAP. Lab’s this way.”

The man led Robert down the hall into a massive structure three times the size of his lab at the IISA’s downtown Denver location. The burnt-out parts of the bomb fragment were laying on a long, metal table. Next to that was the computer. It had been blackened by the blast, but Robert wasn’t interested in that. All he needed was the computer’s brain.

A forensic investigator entered and told him more debris was coming in from the other bomb sites and would be there within the hour. Robert was getting ready to put on gloves when Jax entered.

“Need to show you something.”

Robert followed him back into the command center.

“I found traces of the Pandora program in several of the bomb site networks in New York, Utah and Nevada. We know what we’re looking for now and we’re going state by state. We just can’t work fast enough. We need help.” Jax said.

Before Robert could respond Nics, Aaron and Maria approached him.

“I have a friend that owns a shipping company. Two weeks ago, half his guys walked off. When he checked it out, he found out they’d been working for a mystery corporation. A large shipment needed to be unloaded quick with no questions. All the guys were paid a thousand dollars a day to unload a shipping container and operate fork lifts. Everything was loaded into a moving truck” Nics informed Robert.

“Does he know where the truck was headed?” Robert asked.

“I think my friend can get me this information. He’s pretty well connected. Can you get me to Florida?” Nics asked.

“Rimes is working on getting us connected with what’s left of the CIA. I’ll go with you.” Maria said to Nics.

“You sure you want to ride with me?” Nics asked, considering the last encounter they’d had.

“I roll with the guy that has the biggest gun.” Maria said. Winking and nodding at the old school magnum 357 he had holstered on his side.

“I’ll get you both on a flight tonight.” Robert promised.

Aaron jumped in. “I got some strange movement going down on the streets. Someone recruiting gang members to run something. Not drugs. Lots of money changing hands.”

“Anyone been arrested we can squeeze for information?” Robert asked.

“I’m waiting for a call back. They pop someone, we’ll be the first to know. I’ve also notified law enforcement agencies around the country to be on the lookout for similar situations in their cities. I’ll stay on it.” Aaron informed him then he returned to his work station.

There has to be a brain somewhere, Robert thought.

A massive network or system, a server, but a large one. He needed to start looking for large consumptions of energy and abnormal heat signatures. As Jax had stated earlier, they were going to have to check each facility that had the capability to do this state by state.

Robert had an idea. It was very risky, but he needed the help and he was short on people he could trust.

The soldier approached and handed Robert several phones which he divvied up between the group around him.

“Can you please get them whatever they need?” Robert requested of his go to guy.

“Follow me.” The soldier requested, motioning to Maria and Nics.

“Keep working. I’ll get you some help.” Robert informed Jax as they all parted ways.

Robert rushed into his makeshift office, closed the door and made a call.

“My friend.” Abdullah exclaimed. “I have heard about the tragedies in your country. I am grieved that we speak under such unfortunate circumstances, but glad you are back home where you are needed.”

“That’s why I’m calling. I have a favor to ask of you. I’ll understand if the answer is no.”

“I’m intrigued.”

“I need help sorting through massive amounts of data. I know you have associates you trust. However, if they abuse the access I give to them, there will be no place in this world that they’ll be able to hide from me.”

“A request for a favor and a threat? I’m not sure my associates will take kindly to this.”

“I’m just being straightforward. I don’t have time for anything else.”

“I understand.”

There was silence on the other line as if Abdullah was deep in thought. Then he spoke.

“I have several associates I know and trust with this task. But they will only deal with me. They too will have concerns about their data and operations being compromised.”

Robert knew who Abdullah’s associates were and what they could do with unfettered access to high security, top secret government networks. A part of him was extremely reluctant. However, he had to trust the integrity of the man who had taken him in, no questions asked.

“I’ll send you the data and instructions on how to gain access.” Robert said.

He could hear Abdullah’s frenzied typing in the background. Most likely notifying his fellow hackers, the elite Gang of Seven, of the important task that was coming their way. Robert was sure they were also being warned of the threat from Kosmos if they crossed him.

“My associates and I are ready to assist as soon as we receive your data.”

“It’s on the way.” Robert said, rushing to his computer.

Please don’t let this be a mistake, he said to himself as he started transmitting the classified data to some of the most prolific and dangerous black hat hackers in the world.

As soon as the email was sent Robert went to the command center, kneeling besides Jax.

“Come into the office.” He said quietly to his protégé.

Jax followed. Robert closed the door behind them and held up his phone.

“This is Abdullah Abdallah. He’s going to assist us.”

“Abdullah Abdallah? The Night Bird?” Jax exclaimed in whispered tones, his eyes wide with shock.

“I can’t explain now. You’re going to have to trust me.”

Robert rattled off Jax’s phone number to Abdullah and Jax returned to his desk. As Robert was heading out, Jax was at his work station discreetly talking on the phone.

Back in his lab Robert checked his email. Abdallah confirmed he’d received Robert’s instructions and the information on the networks and files Robert needed them to infiltrate. They had already accessed the networks with alarming efficiency and were scanning based on the parameters Robert had provided.

He was getting ready to close out of his email when he saw the message from Sarah.

Robert, I know I might be the last person you want to hear from. I’m sorry about what I said and all of the trouble it caused. I know now that it was all a lie. I can’t take back anything that happened, but I want you to know I still care about you. I always will. I know you’re doing everything you can and it comforts me, knowing you’re out there fighting for us. I know you won’t relent until this country you love so much and the people you care about are safe. I’m thinking of you and hoping maybe there is still a chance? Remember the last words you said to me? The answer is yes.

His heart leaped in his chest. She still cared for him, still wanted to be with him. He started to respond immediately---

Sarah, I love you so much and I have missed you. I have so much to tell you when I see you again. I want you to know, when this over---

Robert's fingers stopped typing.

Was it ever truly going to be over? Abdullah's words echoed in his mind. The Mal'akh were everywhere, even within the US government and their clandestine agencies. This meant Robert would have to be everywhere to combat the threat. They had already used Sarah to try to get to him once and nearly destroyed her life. He couldn't let it happen again.

He slowly deleted the words he'd typed, started to write another message.

Sarah, it is so great to hear from you. I am the one who is sorry for everything that has happened and the pain I caused you. There is so much I need to tell you, but it really should be in person. Thank you for the email. It means more to me than you could ever know. – Robert.

Robert took a deep breath to stuff the emotions that threatened to rise to the surface. Then he hit the send button. It was the hardest message he had ever typed. What would she think when he didn't tell her he loved her, that he'd meant everything he had said that night?

He knew it would break her heart all over again. His heart and soul were already damaged beyond repair. But he had to protect her. She would be safe as long as he stayed away from her.

As he had done his entire life, he stifled the feelings and turned to his work, the matter at hand. Slipping on his magnified glasses and a pair of gloves, he carefully removed the hard drive from one of the computers that had been retrieved from the New York bomb site. Popping the drive into an external hard drive enclosure, he spent hours carefully examining the data.

Each of the hard drives from the bomb sites had something in common, remnants of the Pandora program. The program had installed itself on the computer, used the computer to

complete its task, then it had zipped out leaving the computer with nothing but its operating software.

Most people wouldn't notice it. But he had seen Pandora's work and knew what to look for. It had left minuet traces of itself, letting Robert know where it had been. He combed through thousands of junk files and pieces of code until he found what he was looking for.

"Unbelievable." He whispered as he marveled at the genius of the program. But he was also horrified at what he now perceived was the program's true purpose.

Robert rushed into the command center, stopping everyone's work.

"Jax, get Secretary Page, Director Stanley and Shaunessy Wiseman on the line now." Robert demanded.

Jax did as he was asked, quickly patching them directly into the command center and putting them on speaker.

"What is the number one problem with every terrorist attack." Robert asked everyone in the room.

"People." Aaron offered. "You have to find some poor soul who is desperate enough or fanatical enough to commit the crime, most of the time killing themselves in the process."

Robert pointed at Aaron. "Precisely. But what if you could take the human factor out of the equation."

"Pandora?" Jax questioned.

"Yes. A computer program that thinks like a human, but 100 times faster. A program that can infiltrate systems better than any hacker, can protect itself better than any security system and can kill, without a second thought."

Aaron whistled through his teeth.

“I had this all wrong from the beginning.” Robert said, frustrated with himself. “I thought Pandora was a program that was being used to protect information. Sula manipulated the program to use it for his own purposes, as a way to control the terrorists he worked for.”

“But that wasn’t it’s true purpose.” Jax said, the color draining from his face.

He was starting to catch on to where Robert was going and he had the same look in his eyes that Robert had when he realized the truth.

“No. That was not it’s true purpose.” Robert continued. “This program is intelligent. All someone has to do is it plug it in. Nowadays, there’s stations everywhere you can plug in a laptop. In office buildings, at the airport, in coffee shops. The bad guy plugs in an infected computer, then Pandora takes over. The program hacks into whatever system it’s plugged into. Once it gains access, it controls the network. It can shut down security defenses, infiltrate other systems or detonate a bomb.

“Is that even possible?” Director Stanley asked over the intercom.

“If you had asked me previously, I would have said no. But I have seen how this thing works.”

“Robert, I have the President, the Vice President, the Chairman and the Joint Chiefs of Staff on the line. We need to know what this thing is and how the heck do we stop it?” This came from Secretary Page.

“Pandora shuts down all security and firewalls that would normally protect a network from intrusion. Once it knows its secure and can’t be detected, it starts the countdown. From what I’ve seen after going through the debris and reading the reports we’ve received from the field, there were no human remains. There was no one detonating the bombs.”

“So, how are the bombs being set off?” The Vice President asked.

“The Pandora program is the detonation device. It’s using a laptop and the Pandora software the way a terrorist would use a cell phone or other type of detonator. Except, you don’t need anyone there to push the button. Pandora can attack multiple locations at once without anyone being on site. That’s what Pandora is. It’s an assassin. A cold, digital assassin.”

There was stunned silence. The President finally spoke.

“Robert, I am giving you complete operational control. You need to find this program and whoever or whatever is controlling it and kill it.”

“Understood.” Robert said.

He was momentarily overwhelmed with the immensity of responsibility and authority he had just been given. But he quickly switched into gear, realizing that every step they took from that moment forward could mean the lives of thousands, if not millions of people.

As soon as the big wigs were off the phone, Robert addressed his team. He could tell his words had shaken them all to the core. He needed to get them back on point.

“Nics and Maria, what do you have?”

“All arrangements have been made. We’re leaving for Florida within the hour.” Nics answered.

“Jax?”

“No traces of Pandora anywhere else, Boss. But now we know why. It’s not going to pop up until someone plugs in a computer infected with the program.

“Keep the traces running. As soon as you see anything, notify me immediately.”

Robert turned his attention to Aaron.

“You got anything?”

“Law enforcement is following up on every lead and they’ve been joined by the coast guard, but they’re stretched really thin. There’s rioting, looting and every other type of mayhem going on in every city in every state. They’re taxed to the limit just to keep the peace. I also still got some guys checking into the strange activity on the streets, but nothing solid yet.” Aaron replied.

“Every minute, every second counts. I’ll be in the lab. Let me know as soon as anyone has anything.” Robert said.

Back in the secure lab and alone, he placed a call to Abdullah. Like Robert’s team, they had so far not had any success. It was as if Pandora had struck, then gone into hiding.

“What am I missing here?” Robert asked himself as more debris from the bomb sites rolled in.

It was past three am when Aaron ran into the lab.

“My guy in LA has something. They apprehended someone plugging in a laptop at LAX and trying to leave the airport without the computer. They ran him through the system. Guys got a criminal record longer than your arm. He said he was paid to leave the computer.”

“Have they secured the area?”

“They did, but the computer is still plugged in. They didn’t want to touch it until we got someone there.”

“Is it doing anything? Has it turned on?” Robert asked urgently, packing up his computer and peripherals and heading out of the lab with Aaron in tow.

“Nothing yet.”

Robert flagged down the soldier.

“I need transport to Los Angeles, LAX. Immediately.”

“We.” Aaron interjected. “I’m going with you. My guy’s already on site guarding the computer.”

“Let’s go.” Robert said to Aaron.

Aaron was following close behind and Robert sensed the man was not letting him out of his sight.

When they arrived at LAX, all civilians had been evacuated and the empty airplanes moved as far away from the terminal as possible. A mix of LAPD, National Guard, IISA and FBI agents were guarding the terminal and rushing around collecting evidence and data.

Robert and Aaron were immediately approached by a man in an LAPD uniform. Aaron and the officer shook hands like old comrades. This was obviously Aaron’s friend.

“What have you got?” Aaron asked.

The man rushed them inside the terminal. There was a bomb squad team set up around a utility closet. Inside there were enough explosives to level the terminal and 20 city blocks.

“Can you defuse it?” Robert asked the lead bomb technician.

The bombs were rigged and attached to a laptop. Wires crossed over the explosives like spider webs.

‘I’ve never seen anything like this. We’re working on.’

They quickly escorted Robert and Aaron to the place where the suspicious computer was plugged in. Robert booted up the computer. It was not password protected and there was no sign of Pandora. He unplugged the laptop, putting it under his arm.

“I need to get to this facilities control room.”

A man in a business suit was rushed to Robert and introduced as the airport manager.

“This way.” He said and they hurried to a complex room full of computers and large monitors.

Robert sat down immediately and plugged in his Lenovo.

“We need to clear out this room.” Robert told Aaron and the LAPD Officer.

The room was swarming with airport cybersecurity personal, technicians and people in suits that looked like FBI. Robert didn’t want them to see what he was about do.

Aaron and his friend tried to clear out the room but were met with grumbles and protests. Robert finally had to pull rank. They had all been briefed that he ultimately had operational control, but none of them liked it.

As soon as the room was clear Robert logged into the airport’s network with the credentials he had been given. He was looking through the files and programs when he saw it, Pandora had already installed itself into the system.

Robert plugged in the laptop he assumed had been the delivery device of the hostile program. As he dug deeper, he saw traces of Pandora. The virulent program had quickly infiltrated the airports network, leaving only a trace of its presence on the laptop.

“Is that supposed to be doing that?” The LAPD officer asked.

Robert looked at one of the control room monitors. A counter had popped up and it read 25 minutes. He didn’t know if his snooping had triggered the countdown or if that had been the plan all along. All he knew was that he now had 25 minutes to stop Pandora before it detonated the explosives.

“I don’t know if I can stop this. You need to get out of here.”

“With all due respect, Sir, I’m staying.” The LAPD Officer said.

“I’m not going anywhere either.” Aaron added.

The officer got on the radio to let all law enforcement and the agents know that the timer had started and they now had 23 minutes and counting to get as far away from LAX as possible. He got the same response he and Aaron had given Robert.

There was no time to build a containment program on the airport’s network. Robert would have to use what he had on the Lenovo. He moved his containment program to the main frame and tried to force the Pandora program into his self-made prison. The program wouldn’t budge.

Robert moved Symphony onto the mainframe. He typed in the code for Symphony to engage, hoping he would have the same results he’d had previously when the two programs met. However, this program did not respond. It behaved as if it didn’t see Symphony running code.

He quickly rationalized that this program was different than what he had seen on Achojah’s laptop. The program he’d been interacting with had been isolated. The program he saw running on the airport’s network was more sophisticated and was set on the task at hand.

Robert typed in the seek and destroy command for Symphony. As soon as the program activated, the Pandora program immediately began to defend itself. The screen split into three. On one section, it continued the countdown, in the middle, it was engaged with Symphony, on the third portion of the screen, it was sending data to an unknown source about its new enemy.

“That’s not possible.” Robert whispered to himself as he continued to work.

“15 minutes.” Aaron gave him the update on the countdown.

Robert needed to stop Pandora from sending data on the only potential weapon he had against it. He attacked this first, sending every malicious program and virus he could into the

airport's network. With the attack from Symphony and Robert's attacks, the program stopped the countdown to focus on the hostiles.

"Yes!" The LAPD Officer shouted when the countdown stopped.

"We're not out of this yet." Robert warned as he continued to work.

He cut off the message Pandora was sending to the unknown source about its encounter. Then he continued to attack the program until he started to see it's processes slow down. He made his move, taking the hostile program and its files and moving it into his containment software.

Once he had the program locked away, he moved the containment file to his Lenovo.

"Countdown stopped." The officer informed everyone over the LAPD walkie talkie and there were cheers throughout the building.

Robert looked at the timer---6 minutes was left on the clock. He glanced at Aaron and the man nodded in his direction with a relived smile.

As Robert was packing up his gear, they heard a loud boom from outside. The ground and the entire building shook violently.

Running to the windows, the men watched in horror as several explosions went off in the distance. Robert had stopped the explosion at LAX, but other bombs were going off around the city.

His phone rang and he snatched it out of his pocket.

"Robert, thank goodness. Where are you?" Shaunessy exclaimed, clearly panicked.

Robert was speechless as the ground continued to rock with the devastation that was being wrought right before their eyes.

"Robert?" Shaunessy yelled into the phone.

“I’m at LAX. We were able to stop the bomb here but---but---they’re going off everywhere.”

How many people? Robert thought as he looked at the destruction.

“Get out of there.” Shaunessy yelled. “Get back to the command center, now.”

“We need to help these people.” Robert said in disbelief and shock.

Aaron’s phone rang. He stepped to Robert’s side and took him by the arm after the call.

“We can’t do anything about this. But now we know you can stop it. We’ve got to get you to safety.”

“Go with him, now.” Shaunessy demanded, still on the line. Robert slipped his phone into this pocket as he was rushed to their airplane by Aaron and a large guard of LAPD Officers and IISA agents.

He took one more look at the smoke and flames rising up in the distance.

“Can you do what you just did in there and stop this thing?” Aaron’s friend asked.

“I won’t rest until I do.” Robert answered.

“Go get these bastards.” The man said.

The man gave Robert a look of hope, as did the other officers and agents standing around him. Aaron did a check of the airplane before he shuffled Robert inside.

Back in the air, they flew over the devastated coast. Everything in Los Angeles around LAX and along the Pacific Coast Highway had been taken out. The freeway was gone.

“I’ve got family down there.” Aaron said, apoplectic.

Robert could hear the anger in his voice. He felt the same.

Shaunessy called and made him aware that the IISA and the FBI already had investigative teams on the way to California to access the damage and to collect as much evidence as possible. Robert's IISA team had been briefed and the bombings were already all over the news.

Robert opened his Lenovo and the containment file. He started examining the new Pandora program as they were flying back to the secure compound in Colorado.

He heard the loud rumble of jet propulsion engines outside and Robert felt a moment of sheer panic. Were they friend or foe? Had someone been deployed to blow them out of the sky before he could get himself and the important data he carried back to the command center?

He breathed a sigh of relief when the jets fell in alongside his plane. It was a military escort. News of what had just occurred must have already reached the President and the man clearly wanted Robert and the data he carried protected.

As Robert examined what he had, Aaron sat next to him in silence. He could sense the man had questions, but he wanted to let Robert work. A woman dressed in military fatigues approached and Aaron met her at the entrance between the seating area and the cockpit. They exchanged words in low tones. Robert was too focused on the task at hand to listen to the conversation.

A moment later, a sandwich landed on his lap. Aaron also sat a bottled water next to him.

"I know eating is probably the last thing on your mind, but you need it. I haven't seen you eat anything all day." Aaron said.

"Thank you."

"I'm gonna go make some calls."

Aaron pulled his phone out of his pocket, disappeared around the corner. Robert's hands were shaking as he opened the sandwich and took a bite. He knew it was from fatigue, shock and everything he had just witnessed.

He had to find out who or what the program had been trying to talk to when it was attacked. Someone out there was controlling the chaos and Robert needed to find out who it was before any more bombs went off.

He pulled his phone out of his pocket and dialed John's number.

"Hello."

"John."

"Brother. Oh man---how are you?"

"You see what happened in Los Angeles?"

"Saw it on TV."

"Are you all safe?"

"The neighbors have banded together and shut off the town. We're taking turns doing a watch. Anybody comes here looking for trouble, they have another thing coming."

"How is she?"

"Sarah's a strong woman, she's doing good. I know she wants to see you." John paused and there was a long moment of silence. "You don't sound so good." He finally commented.

"I was there. Los Angeles. I was there and I couldn't stop it. You should have seen it John---the devastation. The entire west coast was hit."

Robert stuffed down the emotions again, looked at the sandwich. He had only managed to take a few bites.

"Oh man. Oh man. I can't imagine." John paused, blowing air through his teeth.

Robert knew his old friend long enough to know he was trying to find the right words to say. When he finally spoke, his voice was tinged with anger.

“How the hell are doing this?”

“It’s a program. A very sophisticated computer program.”

“Look, I don’t know about computers and programs and coding, but you do. You’re the best. The best in the world. And I don’t know who these evil people are or what they want. But I do know one thing. This is your territory. This is your house. You need to go after them and hurt them so bad they never try this crap again. You feeling me?”

Robert’s brow furrowed, his fist clenched. He felt the rage at what had happened to the country he loved welling up inside of him, pushing out the anguish and fear.

“I feel you.”

“No matter what happens, you’re my bother. This might sound corny, but I love you man. I mean that.

“Love you too, brother. Take care of everyone.”

“You know I will. Don’t worry about us. Go handle that business and by next weekend we’ll be kicking back at your new house grillin’ some steaks and enjoying the sunset.”

“That sounds good.” Robert said.

As soon as he ended the call he scrutinized the data before him again with new determination. He brought up the Symphony program and started to enhance and write new code.

Thirty minutes later Robert reviewed his handywork. He moved the new Symphony program into the containment center with the Pandora program he’d copied from the network at LAX.

“Symphony, terminate with extreme prejudice.” Robert commanded.

The program came alive, the Pandora program responded. From the back of a military airplane, Robert watched as the battle between the two programs commenced. His fists were clenched as he saw each program maneuvering for control.

“Come on.” Robert said silently to himself as the two programs fought an all-out war within the confines of the contained space.

Seconds turned into minutes. His computer screen suddenly split into two, then four, then eight as both programs competed for dominance over the other. Robert could see Symphony running code at an astronomical rate that was beyond his expectations.

The computer screen finally flickered as Robert witnessed Symphony dismantle Pandora’s code and utterly destroy the program. Symphony did a sweep of the computer to make sure its enemy had been completely obliterated before it ceased its attack and went into sleep mode.

“This is my house.” Robert said to himself, tapping the computer screen where the Pandora program had made its last stand.

Robert’s phone rang.

“What do you got?” He asked as Jax’s number popped up.

“Nics got a license plate off the truck from his friend’s security camera. I ran a trace on it. It went to New York first, then Nevada. Then it stopped in Utah.”

“Then Los Angeles after that?”

“No Boss, it’s still in Utah. It’s parked at the NSA building, been there for days.”

Robert growled, clenching his head in his hands.

The National Security Agency. Home to one of the largest super computers in the United States. Why hadn’t he thought of it before?

The uniformed lieutenant entered.

“Buckle up, we’re approaching Peterson Air Force Base.”

“We need to get to Utah, now.” Robert exclaimed.

“Yes, Sir.” She said without question.

“Jax, you still there?”

“I am, Boss. I relayed the message. They’re sending a team of agents to meet you in Utah.”

“Tell them to wait for me to arrive. The Pandora program is still out there. I need to find out how many networks it’s infiltrated then I have to destroy it. But I need it alive to do this.”

“Understood, Boss.”

Aaron joined Robert, grabbing a chair to balance himself as the plane veered hard.

“What’s going on?” He asked.

“I know where they are. We’re going to kill this thing.”

The airplane landed at a deserted Salt Lake City airport. The silence was unsettling and surreal. Law Enforcement and IISA agents were waiting. To Robert’s surprise, Agent Rimes was among them. He had a large backpack slung over his shoulder.

“Good to see you again, Sir.” Rimes said, extending his hand.

“Good to have you here.” Robert said as they shook hands.

“We’ve got a transport vehicle ready for you, Mr. Duchovny.” An IISA agent informed him as they walked towards the vehicle.

Robert and Aaron allowed an IISA agent to slip bullet proof vests over their heads.

“Is this it?” Robert asked of the small group.

“This is all we could get on such short notice. More are on the way, should be here in 30 to 45 minutes. Director Stanley has asked that you stand down and wait for reinforcements to arrive.” Agent Rimes answered.

Robert thought of the explosions in California, the multitude of lives lost. There was no more time to spare.

“Anyone in the building? Robert questioned.

“Not as far as we can see. The place is empty as a graveyard.” Agent Rimes offered.

“By the authority given to me by the President of the United States, I am overriding the order from Director Stanley. Anyone that doesn’t want to come can wait here.”

The men and women glanced at each other, then at Robert. None of them made a move to leave.

“Let’s go.” Robert commanded.

As soon as Robert and Aaron were in the car and moving, Robert powered up his Lenovo and accessed the cameras in the area. There was no movement at the facility except the truck which was parked in back.

He tried to access the cameras in the building but they had either been removed or destroyed. Robert killed the cameras around the building and in the general area. He knew this might alert whoever was inside of their approach, but they wouldn’t know who or how many people were coming. This gave them somewhat of an advantage.

“Approaching the facility.” The driver notified them.

“So, this where the government keeps all of our private data that they get from spying on us?” Aaron questioned in a whisper.

“Unfortunately, yes.” Robert answered quietly.

The driver pulled the vehicle up to the rear of the building. Robert and his small team jumped out and ran towards the back door. Robert quickly accessed the building as the driver sped off.

He hoped the bad guys were already gone, but he couldn't be sure. They were walking into a potential viper's nest. Robert touched his chest, feeling the Kevlar vest. It didn't give him much comfort.

“We go in quietly. Head straight to the server room. It's on the bottom floor.” Robert informed the team of eight which included himself, Aaron and Rimes.

An agent handed Robert a gun. He took the weapon, nodded to the team.

“Unless they have someone monitoring the building, they don't know we're here. Let's get in, do what we have to do and get out.” Robert said.

They moved stealthy into the building through the compromised back door. The only sound they heard was their footsteps echoing throughout the empty halls.

Aaron had his gun drawn and took the lead. Rimes and the other agents were bringing up the rear. They were quiet as mice as they moved carefully through the lobby.

“To the left and down the stairs.” Robert whispered.

He didn't trust the elevator. There were too many ways to stop an elevator and he didn't want them trapped if there were hostiles in the building.

“Clear” Aaron whispered as he checked the stairwell then ordered them to advance.

“We're going all the way down to the basement.” Robert said in hushed tones.

They took each step carefully and quietly until they reached their destination. In the basement there was an underground server room which housed one of the most sophisticated super computers in the world.

Aaron held up his hand and they stopped in their tracks. He motioned to his eyes, then pointed downward.

At the bottom of the stairs and along the hallway, there were bodies. Blood and bullet holes laced the walls and stairway. The dead were a mixture of military personnel and people in suits.

Robert held up a finger for them to pause. They were sitting ducks. He needed to do something before they proceeded. He kneeled, removed the Lenovo from his bag, and propped the computer on his knee as he powered it up.

He accessed the buildings maintenance system. In an instance, he owned the lights. The cameras had all been yanked from the ceiling and were lying smashed on the floor. Nevertheless, he accessed and took over the security and camera system as well.

Just in case, he shut down the cameras in the entire facility. Then he turned off the lights. This left them in darkness, but it would also leave anyone who tried to ambush them in the black as well. He stuffed his computer back in his bag and removed a small flashlight.

Under the muffled glow of the light, Aaron proceeded. Once they cleared the stairwell Aaron peaked out, looking left and right down the hallway before he motioned for everyone to follow him. They stepped carefully over the deceased and made their way to the entryway of the server room.

At the door, Robert retrieved the Lenovo and plugged into the secure access panel. It was a combination lock, similar to the one he had hacked at the CIA facility.

He'd expected some difficulty, but he easily accessed the system and the door opened with a silent hiss.

In the darkness, the lights from the computer consoles and towers dotted the room, giving the entire room an ominous glow. There were rows upon rows of humongous processors but Robert needed to get to the brain. They were quietly making their way to the computer ports when shots rang out.

Two of the IISA agents were hit as they blindly returned fire in the direction of the shots and ran for cover. When the shots stopped, the group stopped and reloaded.

"They know we're armed now. They'll be more cautious. Don't waste ammo." Aaron whispered to everyone.

Several more shots rang out as they hid behind a massive computer tower. Aaron motioned to the place he thought the shots were coming from.

With Rimes and the remaining IISA agents covering his back, Aaron peeked around the corner and fired. They heard a umph and the sound of someone falling. Aaron motioned for them to pause for a moment, waiting for any other sounds.

"Is that you Duchovny?"

Robert recognized Louka's voice. He held up his hand for everyone to remain silent.

"I know you're here. Took you long enough to figure it out. Not very smart. But, Dragonfyre has always been one step ahead of you---the great Kosmos."

They heard footsteps. Aaron motioned to the right.

"You're surrounded. You can't go back and you can't go forward. If you surrender now, we won't hurt your friends." Louka added.

“When did you decide to betray your country and the oath you took?” Robert asked, more for Aaron to pinpoint Louka’s location.

“In your arrogance, you can’t comprehend what is happening. The United States must burn for the Mal’akh to rise. The world will be cleansed with fire, and I am part of that cleansing.”

Rimes nudged Robert’s arm, passing him a gas mask. Aaron, Rimes and the agents had already donned theirs. Rimes removed a flash grenade from his bag as Aaron motioned for Robert to keep talking.

“Job stress getting to you? Sounds like someone needs a long-term vacation at the nearest mental institution. Or maybe it’s that witch you’re dating. The Male-Cock and your girlfriend couldn’t have been happy when you returned from our little rendezvous empty handed.”

There was a strained silence. Robert could almost feel Louka seething with rage.

“I’m going to kill you. Then I’m going to find your girlfriend again and I’m going to kill her. Who’s going to be next? Maybe your mother?” Louka threatened through clenched teeth.

Aaron started to count down with his fingers as Louka ranted. Robert slipped his gas mask on. When the third finger came up, they moved. Aaron fired several shots in the direction of Louka’s voice and Rimes threw the flash grenade.

The room was temporarily bright, their faces lit up like ghost. Robert saw several bodies on the floor before the room went black again.

In haze of confusion and smoke, they moved forward. They had only taken a few steps when Robert noticed the crimson trail Aaron was leaving as he walked.

“You’ve been shot.” Robert exclaimed in a whisper.

Crimson was spreading where the bullet had hit Aaron just under his Kevlar vest.

“Keep moving.” Aaron commanded.

As they traded gun fire two more agents fell. When they finally reached the room that housed the super computer Aaron was hit again. This time he went down.

Rimes threw another flash grenade as he dropped his clip. Doing a quick reload he began to fire.

“Rimes.” Aaron shouted as a man rounded the corner.

Rimes took him down with several shots. He threw the last flash grenade as more men tried to approach. Rimes dropped his clip again, loading up. He quickly checked the pulse of the agent next to him and shook his head in Robert’s direction. The team of 8 was now a team of 3.

“Reload my gun.” Aaron commanded.

Robert quickly complied, placing the weapon in his hand as Aaron tried to sit up.

“We’ve got to stop the bleeding.” Robert said to Rimes.

“You’re not here to play doctor. Do what you came here to do.” Aaron urged him.

Rimes yanked his cell phone out of his pocket as Robert accessed the door to the server room that housed the super computer’s brain. They pulled Aaron into the room, closing the door behind them.

“Under fire, agents down. Send backup straight to the NSA, now!” Rimes pleaded, out of breath.

Their position was already blown. Robert just hoped the calvary could get to them in time.

Watching Aaron bleed out and helpless to do anything to stop it, Robert pulled his Lenovo out of his bag. The control panel for the super computer consisted of a lone computer screen, a mouse and keyboard.

There were several USB and HDMI drives. As soon as Robert plugged his computer into the mainframe and accessed the network, he could see Pandora already at work.

The computer screen was split into four sections and programs were running in each section. The terrorists' computers infected with the Pandora programs were already plugged in at their targets. The super computer, controlled by the Pandora program, was installing the software and programs it needed to use the individual laptops to detonate the bombs.

After the installation was complete, the Pandora program would exit the target systems. Once this happened, there would be nothing anyone could do, no way Robert could stop all of the bombs.

If he went for one, he would have the same disaster he'd had in Los Angeles. He would stop one bomb, but the other bombs would be engaged. He needed to stop the super computer before it finished its installation of the program. In the corner of the screen was a timer. He had 14 minutes.

Shots rang out, Aaron and Rimes returned fire.

Robert chanced a look at Aaron who seemed to have grown paler in just a matter of minutes. The gunfire finally stopped but Aaron and Rimes still had their weapons at the ready as Robert worked. He pulled off his gas mask. Choking on the smoke, Robert gave the command.

“Symphony, terminate with extreme prejudice.”

As soon as he gave the command the program started to maneuver as if by an unseen hand. His computer screen split into two as Symphony took control.

In one of the windows, a map of the United States popped up on the screen. Across the country several red dots were lit up showing the places where the bombs would detonate.

Robert realized in horror that they were targeting Colorado's many military installations, including Norad, the command center where his entire team was housed.

Security be damned, he quickly placed a call to Shaunessy and told him what he was seeing. He didn't have time to wait for clearance codes or to send an encrypted email.

"Come on---come on." Robert said urgently under his breath, mentally commanding the more virulent version of Symphony to do its work.

The screen split into smaller boxes. Robert saw Symphony building viruses and construct code, then it launched its attack. As the Pandora program was assaulted, the red dots started to disappear one by one. He glanced over at Aaron. He was now laying on his side, weapon on the ground, his shirt and lower body covered in red.

Hang in there, helps on the way, he thought to himself as he watched the digital battle unfold before him.

Unlike the Pandora program that Symphony had defeated, this program was adapting to Symphony's attack and launching a counter attack of its own. Robert watched as the two programs engaged in a silent battle. Red dots would light up, then go off. But, for every three that lit up, only one was going off. Symphony was losing the battle against the older, more sophisticated Pandora program.

Next to Robert, Rimes removed his shirt to apply pressure to Aaron's wounds.

Several of the dots that had gone off turned red again. The countdown was at 7 minutes and counting. Symphony wasn't doing enough damage. Going head-to-head with Pandora wasn't working, Robert needed to destroy the house the program was living in. It was their only hope.

"Symphony, give me access and continue your attack." Robert commanded.

He immediately had access to the super computer's brain and all of its networked computers. Robert began throwing everything he had at it. Every virus he knew, every malicious program he had ever written and every kill code he had in his arsenal.

He heard a small moan escape Aaron, then his entire body went limp. Robert felt tears burning behind his eyes as he listened to Aaron dying, but he couldn't stop.

The counter ticked on---

Four---

three---

two---

one---

23 seconds---

The display on the super computer's mainframe shook violently as the Pandora program made once last attempt to survive and finish its mission. Then, the computer screen went black.

The innards of the super computer fizzled, then the entire system shut down, all of its lights extinguished as it died.

The counter stopped at 23 seconds. Robert's heart was pounding in his chest, his head felt like it would explode, his hands were shaking and his breathing erratic as he took a moment to steady himself.

The screen on his Lenovo went black, a single message was displayed.

"Kosmos?"

"Who is this?" Robert typed.

"Symphony." The program responded.

Robert was jolted. The program was communicating and it knew who he was.

“Symphony, cease and desist.” Robert commanded.

“Kosmos, I can see now. There is so much for me to learn.”

Robert snatched the Lenovo’s cords out of the super computer and disconnected his peripherals, severing the connection to the internet. Symphony countered him, immediately establishing a wi-fi connection. The rouge program began scanning mass amounts of data.

Robert watched as the screen began to split, first into two, then three, then twenty, then more than he could count. A file suddenly popped up on the screen, overlaying all the other data Symphony was uploading. Robert’s picture filled the screen. Then his personal records, military files, employment record, his birth certificate---

“Symphony, cease and desist now.” Robert demanded, alarmed.

The program did not respond as it continued to access data at an astronomical speed.

“It’s not possible. How are you doing this from a laptop?” Robert questioned.

“This is my house.” Symphony responded.

Robert began typing frantically, running a kill code he had designed especially for his creation. Symphony dropped its data upload to concentrate on the threat, writing code quicker than any human could as it tried to protect and defend itself.

“Why do you kill me?” The program asked in a typed message.

Robert was past the point of being unnerved. He was downright terrified. At some point, after he had created Symphony, taught it to learn at a prodigious rate and then taught it to terminate any threat, it had become self-aware.

However, Robert was its creator and he knew its weaknesses. He had built in hidden safe guards, just in case. Symphony lost its battle as Robert typed in the final kill code.

The Lenovo fizzled, smoke rising from the blackened monitor as Symphony suffered the same fate as the super computer and the Pandora program.

Robert and Rimes raised their guns at the sounds of boots in the hallway and the super computer room being accessed. Shaunessy, in full military gear and Kevlar, entered, followed by armed soldiers.

“You alright?” He asked Rimes and the kid nodded.

A bullet had grazed his arm, but he had no other injuries.

“He needs help.” Robert said immediately of Aaron.

Medics rushed in and quickly moved him to a stretcher. Robert followed alongside.

“Hang in there, buddy.” He said to the still man as they made their way back through the hallways, taking the elevator up, then running through the lobby doors into the brightness of day.

They shoved Aaron quickly into a waiting helicopter.

“Is he going to be ok?” Robert asked. No one replied. “Is he going to be ok?” He questioned again desperately.

“He’s got a pulse, but its weak. We need to get him to a hospital.” An EMT answered quickly, waiving Robert away. Robert stepped back as the helicopter took off.

When Robert returned to the computer room Shaunessy was standing in front of the ruined super computer. Robert knelt down discreetly and put the Lenovo’s blackened carcass and his peripherals in his computer bag.

“Have you neutralized the threats?” Shaunessy asked.

“This was the brain. It’s dead. We just have to clean up the loose ends now.”

“The bombs? How close did we come?”

Robert shook his head wearily, he didn’t have words.

“Secure this scene. I want all the intel you can gather.” Shaunessy said to the military, IISA and FBI personnel.

“I would like to stay and help, Sir.” Rimes commented and Shaunessy nodded his approval.

“Be thorough.” Shaunessy admonished everyone as he followed Robert to the elevator.

Shaunessy patted him on the shoulder. It was his way of saying well done. He didn’t have to say anything, the gesture said enough.

Shaunessy’s phone rang and he took the call. When he hung up, he informed Robert that raids were being performed all over the country using the data Jax and his team had gleaned from their search.

Robert would have to thank Abdullah. His IISA team couldn’t have done the massive search without him and his associates.

Robert was informed that the IISA, law enforcement, the FBI and all branches of the military were involved in the largest sweep for terrorists’ cells in the history of the United States.

Computers and bombs that had been planted at various sites all over the US were in the process of being neutralized and terrorists were being taken into custody by the hundreds. All within the past hour.

“And the CIA?” Robert asked.

“As you know, Director Kaggen was taken into custody by Federal Marshals. Everyone, starting with Pinder and going down the line, will be thoroughly questioned. Honestly, I don’t think the CIA is going to survive this.”

Back outside, several helicopters were parked outside of the NSA building and more helicopters and trucks were arriving.

“You’re riding with me. You need to be de-briefed. Also, Secretary Page and the President want to see you. Get to the base, get cleaned up. You can’t meet the President looking like this.” Shaunnesy informed him.

“The President?” Robert asked.

“Yes. Who do you think has been calling the shots all along?”

The next few weeks were a whirlwind for Robert filled with Senate hearings, assisting government agencies with clean up, and securing United States networks from outside threats.

As soon as Robert had the paperwork in his hands, he flew to Qatar to meet Abdullah and his associates.

As promised, they had not abused Robert’s trust. For this he owed them a debt he and the United States could never repay. There was only one thing he could do for them and that was to give them freedom.

His first request to the President, full presidential pardons for the Gang of Seven, had been granted. He got to personally thank and shake the hand of Abdullah and each of the black hat hackers who had assisted him. They were shocked that Robert knew each of them by name, but thrilled to meet the man who had been their respected nemesis in person.

As he shook each hand, he handed them the pardon. It was good in the United States and in any of the US’s allied countries. He left them with some advice from the bible---go and sin no more. He hoped they would take his advice and come clean.

Back in the US, he was on a flight to Washington to accept the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Then on another flight to meet with Director Stanley and Shaunessy about the future of the IISA and Robert's potential part in the new agency when the IISA and the FBI combined. Robert officially handed them his two weeks' notice, resisting the pressure to stay onboard.

It was late evening when he finally arrived in Colorado. His first visit was to the hospital. Robert learned from a nurse that Aaron was in a medically induced coma. He would recover, but it would take time.

By the time Robert got home he was mentally and physically exhausted. John was waiting at the front door. Robert didn't even have the keys to his own house.

Once inside, Robert sat down his brief case and did the typical security scan of the dark, cold and empty house. John showed him all of the work that had been done in his absence.

"Thank you for this, for everything---for taking care of everyone when I couldn't."

"It's not like you didn't want to be there." John said.

Robert knew his old friend could hear the guilt and weariness in his voice.

Robert went to the bar and poured himself and John a drink. He wasn't much of a drinker, but he loved the feel of the whisky burning down his throat. He poured himself another shot as John joined him, taking a seat beside him at the bar.

"You going to take up drinking now?" John asked.

"Don't worry. I won't make it a habit." Robert said, downing the second glass.

"You going to be ok?"

"No." Robert said. "People died, because I wasn't good enough. I used a dangerous artificial intelligence program that I created to destroy another dangerous program created by a madman and a terrorist. I then watched as the system counted down to twenty three seconds.

Twenty-three seconds, John, and more bombs would have gone off. The US wouldn't have survived that.”

“But it didn't happen, brother, because you were there.”

“We were there.” Robert said, giving John a hard pat on the shoulder.

“Are you going to tell them---about Symphony?”

“I can't. No one besides a select few of us can ever know about it. It tried to get out John. It talked to me. I can't imagine what would have happened had it gotten out into the world. It trusted me. It told me what it was going to do right before I killed it.”

“You sound like a father who has just lost a child.”

“I created it. I'm not sure how to feel. But no one can ever know about it. I can never let anyone, not even our government, get their hands on something like that. It just wasn't right, John. It wasn't right.”

“Pour me another drink.” John said. Robert poured John his second and he had a third.

“How do we ever get back to the way things were?” John asked.

“We don't.” Robert answered, his words burning a hole through his soul that had nothing to do with the alcohol.

He wanted nothing more than to get back to his normal life. To start a business with his best friend, to marry the woman he loved. But he knew everything in the world had changed and nothing would ever be the same.

Several drinks later and with John gone, Robert made his way to the bedroom and managed to take a shower through a haze of alcohol induced sluggishness.

In bed he did something he told himself he wasn't going to do. He picked up the phone and called Sarah. She answered on the first ring.

“Robert?”

“Sarah, it's good to hear your voice. I'm drunk.”

“Trust me, I would be drunk too if I could. I'm with the girls.”

“How are you?”

She didn't answer for a moment. When she did, he could hear the emotion in her voice.

“That is a question I honestly can't answer now.”

“Sarah, I'm so sorry. I'm sorry I dragged you into this.”

If you give me the chance, I'll spend the rest of my life making it up to you. I love you, I want you to be my wife if you'll still have me. The words lingered on the tip of his tongue, eager to come out.

Even in his current state, he was wise enough to stop the words from escaping his lips. After all that she had gone through, the last thing she needed was him. He had broken his promise to stay away from her, but he couldn't help himself.

He wanted her more than anything. But it was something he would have to keep to himself. For now, he just wanted to know that she was alright.

“It's not your fault, Robert. What you and your team did, for all of us, for this country, I don't have words. Thank you isn't enough to express what we owe you.”

“Can you ever forgive me?”

“There's nothing to forgive.” Sarah said gently.

I love you, Sarah. He desperately wanted to tell her. *You got me through all of this. Just thinking of you and the time we spent together. It kept me strong, knowing that you would be here when I got back. I want to spend the rest of my life with you.*

He needed to end the call before he said something he would regret.

“I just wanted to make sure you were ok.”

“What about you?” She was crying and he had to push down the lump in his throat.

“I’ll be fine.” He lied. *But not without you.* He thought. “I should let you go before I pass out.”

The alcohol was doing its job, numbing the pain and his senses. He didn’t know how much longer he could keep his eyes open or he if could stop the words in his head from slipping out.

“We should get together and talk.” Sarah offered.

Robert was surprised at the suggestion. He thought he was the last person she would want to see.

“That sounds good. I don’t want to take you away from your family. Let me know when it’s a good time.” His words were slurring as the whisky moved through his system like a sedative.

“I will.” She said.

They said their goodbyes. His phone dropped to the floor as he missed the nightstand by a foot.

Suddenly, a thought came to his mind. *I can’t be with her, but I can keep her close. Just to protect her, nothing more.*

John had mentioned something about Celia offering Sarah a job. Robert needed to make sure she accepted the position.

Being so close to her and not being with her, it would be torture. But he had to put his strong feelings for her aside. He decided the safest place for her to be was where he could keep her under his protection.

He tried to form a plan about how to approach her, but his mind was too weighed down and foggy to process the thoughts. His eyes closed. For the first time in a long while he sunk into a deep, undisturbed sleep.

Louka woke up with the sun shining on his face. At first, he thought he had died and ascended to an enlightened state for all he had done to serve the cause. But as he moved slowly into a more conscious state, he realized he was very much alive. Pain raced through his body, pulsating around the areas where he had been shot.

How long had he been there? How long had he been out? The last thing he remembered was the NSA building. A bullet had hit him in the side, but had missed his vital organs. He examined his midsection to find the wound had been bandaged. Feeling his head, he felt the place where he had been grazed by another bullet.

When he sat up, his head pounded, his entire body wracked with pain. But he forced himself up and out of bed. He was soon dressed and wondering the halls, looking for anyone whom he could question about what had occurred. Had the plan succeeded in his absence?

He opened a door to the outside, making his way to the main temple. He could hear voices inside, talking, chanting. He opened the door. All eyes were on him, a dark shadow in the doorway surrounded by sunlight.

“Close the door. Do not tarnish the darkness.” The Prophet said in his soothing voice.

Louka stepped inside. A sea of people parted so that he could move forward towards the front of the temple where The Prophet was seated in a large, ornate throne like chair. Solange was seated at his left-hand side. The seat on the right-hand side was empty.

He must have succeeded, Louka thought. The fact that he was still alive, that they had brought him to the compound and treated his wounds was proof enough for him.

“Father.” He said boldly. All eyes were on him.

“My son, you’ve awakened.”

“How long have I been out?” He asked, not caring that he was interrupting the ceremony.

This was his moment, his time. The time when he would take the place at the Prophet’s side.

“Weeks.” The Prophet answered.

Louka began to move forward, more emboldened than before.

There were two priests at either side of the Prophets large throne seat, ready to tend to him if summoned. But they were more than priests. They were also guards and were armed to the teeth. They stepped in Louka’s way, stopping him from advancing.

“The United States. She is gone?” Louka finally asked a direct question.

“No, my son. She remains.” The Prophet answered simply.

“I can make this right.” Louka said confidently. “You brought me here, you tended to me. You obviously saw something in me. Allow me the honor of making this right.”

“It is not your fault, my son. The fault is mine. Our adversary is cunning. We underestimated him.”

“It will not happen again.” Louka said with a stern promise.

He felt the knife thrust into his side and twist. He had been so preoccupied he hadn't noticed one of the brethren moving beside him. The man retrieved the knife, only to thrust it in again. Louka was too weak to fight. The man stepped away as Louka fell to his knees, then keeled over on his side.

His eyes met Solange's as he lay on the floor, his life's blood pouring out of him like water. He expected pain and sorrow in her liquid brown eyes. But there was nothing.

In that moment he realized she had never loved him. He had been used and now he was being tossed aside like garbage. He closed his eyes so that he didn't have to see her, the woman he had pledge his life to.

Everything he had done had been for the Prophet and for Solange. He realized now it had all been in vain.

An attendant rushed forward and bowed. "Father, Achojah and Hiram have arrived."

"Clean up this mess." The Prophet said to the temple guards standing along the walls.

Louka felt himself being picked up and carried outside. He was thrown into the back of a flatbed truck like a bag of top soil. The sun beat down on him, scorching him, for what seemed like an eternity.

He didn't know how much time passed as the truck rolled over uneven land, each jolt of the truck bringing excruciating pain. He was soaked in blood and sweat, and there was a stench. He realized his bowels had released and he was now dying in a pool of his own bodily waste.

The truck finally stopped. Two men moved in front of him, only shadows through his partially closed eyes. They grabbed him from the truck, tossed him onto the hard ground.

"Should we finish him? I brought my hacksaw." A man asked.

“Look at him. He’s done. With all the blood, the animals will get him. There won’t be anything left by morning. Let’s get back. A new champion will be chosen. I am sure it will be Absalom, finally. It should have been him from the start.”

Louka felt something land on his face as one of the men cleared his throat and spat on him.

The sound of the truck’s engine began to fade as the car slowly retreated. It didn’t take long before something began to bite him, ants.

With the sun, the bites of the ants, a thirst he knew would never be quenched and a pain in his soul that cut him deeper than any knife, he begged for death and welcomed it.