

Her smile was uncomfortably radiant. Her silky brunette hair tilted and draped down her flawless forehead and it lightly brushed across her thin right eyebrow. Her cheeks hung high and her lipstick was a subtle rosy pink. A tiny dimple near her left mouth corner rounded a rare face which men would love to kill and die for. Forward-facing eyes squinted as if she knew worldly wonderful secrets she would gladly spill her guts about. Verdant pine trees shyly stood behind her.

A Polaroid.

A picnic table.

Few clouds scattered high in the sky.

Plaid orange and black tablecloth and the picture of this gorgeous smiling woman tilted against a leafy bowl of garden salad. A tall pot of baked beans and a foil tray of grilled, mostly-burnt hotdogs. A picnic table in the middle of a cracked and faded asphalt parking lot. Fletcher Browne gazed at the photo in front of him. He sat chewing on a barbequed chicken leg. He could feel someone approaching. Solitude. He ate his food in *solitude* until Matthew Stubbs walked up from the dreary distant building. Fletcher thought about the girl in the Polaroid. *Escapism*, he thought. *Take me to a better place*. Matt wore a shiny, new hammer on his carpenter's belt. There were a few leather slots intended for screwdrivers, pliers, wrenches and other tools. They were empty.

Far behind Matt in the distance stood a man donning a dark, push broom mustache. Tom McKay was his name. If Mario from Donkey Kong fame had been a real person, he might've been modeled after this guy. He looked concerned. He crossed his arms. He watched Matt reach the picnic table. Fletcher was almost positive both of them were going to get yelled at. Instead, Tom uncrossed his arms, turned around, and entered the zany building behind him.

"Is he mad?" Fletcher asked, then he took the picture he had been staring at and put it in his front, left pocket making sure not to bend it. Polaroids weren't common anymore and pretty women seemed to be even *less* common.

"He thinks we want to run away and tell the press," Matt said.

Fletcher felt a vile emotion. Matt was not one of the good guys. He had helped put the building up which Tom was roaming around in. In the distance, chain-linked fences surrounded them. It had been a train station decades ago. Tracks still ran through the property. Shiny, razor-sharp barb-wire circles looped atop every fence and wall in all directions. In a matter of seconds, the pretty lady from the Polaroid vanished from Fletch's mind. "*Toucan*," he said to Matt. "Tom

calls you ‘*Toucan*’ and you say ‘yes’ to everything he asks for. You’re a typical ‘yes man’ and if you ran away from this place, it ought to be because of the way you’re treated.”

“It should have nothing to do with the fact that I helped construct a gas chamber *death house* in America’s great Midwest.” Matt was nervous and fumbled to prepare a couple of hotdogs. “I had no *choice* and you know it! I’m not some *privileged rich kid* like you! I work... or I live on the streets!”

“I’m not blaming you, Matt.” Fletcher span around and reached into an icy cold metal bucket of generic sodas. He grabbed grape- and an orange-flavored cans then extended both toward Matt across the table. Matt took the grape-flavored one and popped it open immediately. “I’m not blaming you for MK-Ultra! I’m not blaming you for the assassination of William Cooper! I’m not blaming you for the fifteen hundred *other* places like this!” Fletcher opened his orange-flavored drink and chugged. “Warehouses around the United States which were designed as emergency concentration camps! I’m not blaming you for *any* of that! But people like you make it *easy* for them! Spit in his *face* the next time he calls you ‘*Toucan*’! Have a little pride when you go to sleep at night!”

“The worst of it is over though, *right?*” Matt squirted ketchup and mustard onto hotdogs on styrofoam plates in front of him. “‘*The War On Terror*’... which was a war against *Americans* as much as it was a war against Arabs! The worst of it is *over*, correct?” He bit into his food and kept talking, albeit muffled. “The fuckin’ government which knocked down our own *Twin Towers* then blamed people in Asia! The guys that did that! They’re toothless now, *right?*”

“You go in that building... and you look at what you were part of! You look at the turnstile bars! The one-way paths with arrows on the ground! You look up and observe those fuckin’ *pipes!*” Rage began to simmer in Fletch’s belly. He waited for it to pass. He stared at the building which must’ve been fifty yards away. He could see ghosts of people. He could visualize happy residents as they waited for trains. He saw anxious ladies waiting for their husbands or relatives. He could hear the “choo choo” and screeching of locomotives. *Then?* He could see what it became... and he could see what the diabolical planners wanted it to be. He could see horrified captured Americans hurried off of arriving trains led in groves and lines to the final place where they’d draw breaths of oxygen. He could see soldiers with machine guns making sure than no one stepped out of line. He could hear sirens. He could hear crying. He could *almost* smell the rot of decaying bodies outside of the station in the distance. “You’re okay, Matt. You weren’t the only who built these things. You go in there... and think for a second what could’ve happened if the dominoes kept falling in the direction for those whom *hijacked our government!* You were one of many who *built* this place... but you can have solace and joy knowing you’re dismantling it as well!”

“You know?” Matt finished the first of his hotdogs. “I almost wanted them to *do* it! I got sick of every minority and every whining person in this country! I almost wanted it to happen! And when they rigged the 2004 election? I was almost sure that this place would be put to use! It almost seemed *cosmetic* at the beginning—something to scare the populous with! ‘*Hey, we are the real-deal crazy,*’ you know? ‘*We knocked down the World Trade Center in front of*

you... and if you act up, you will be gassed!’ I thought the videos of this place were intentionally leaked almost like homeowners with these gnarly window signs bragging that their house is protected by *Smith and Wesson!*”

“I can’t shake the feeling I have of this place!” Fletcher Browne stood up and slowly observed the wackiness of such a site. He pulled out the Polaroid from his left pocket. He looked at the angelic face with a happy smile frozen in time. He tossed the picture toward Matt. “They don’t make Polaroid cameras anymore with all the smart phones and modern electronics. That’s my prom date from my senior year in high school. That’s the last time I felt like a normal person! Ever since then, it’s been nothing but following up on psychotic leads. Stacks of mass coffins in *Georgia*—thousands of ‘em—ordered by our very *government!* Mock underground jails run by the CIA in Turkey! Alaskan farms of high-energy broadcast towers! And when I see you dismantle the first pipe in there? I believe that will be the beginning of the end! *End of what?* The end of the real-life *Twilight Zone* I’ve been in! The end of this lunatic nightmare! The end of thinking that we *lost* as ordinary people!” Fletcher was glad that Matt paid attention. “Just because I have money in the bank during this insane period of history doesn’t mean I could *stop* the bull crap from happening! You have it easy, in some ways! You don’t believe you can be judged because your alternative was homelessness! And you’re in *some* denial that this place wouldn’t have killed people! Those pipes in there are equipped to *exterminate human beings!* But that’s fine! Somehow, the dominoes didn’t fall. We’re alive and three thousand people died in New York City on nine eleven... *plus a few thousand soldiers from the physical wars it spawned.* We’re alive... and no one got gassed to the best of my knowledge. *Guantanamo Bay* happened in front of the whole world but that’s seemed to recede like a recurring *cold sore!*”

In the distance, Tom McKay exited the building. He screamed, “Hey, Matt! The valves are turned off! Get to work! Let’s rip this place apart!” Fletcher watched for Matt’s reaction. No words. A slight shake of the head and a small roll of the eyes. Matt handed Fletcher his Polaroid. “*Hurry, Matt!*”

Matt got up and walked toward Tom. He took his hammer out. *He just might use that on a person someday,* Fletch thought to himself. *He really shouldn’t pent up his emotions.*

Matt Stubbs worked for eight hours straight. His job wasn’t to demolish a building which had once been a flourishing train station... and then it became a potential death house fit with modern plumbing which would theoretically supply lethal doses of poisonous fumes to countless hordes of humans no longer deemed worthy to continue along humdrum existences. Matt’s mission now was to strip the place of signs that anyone went nuts inside the *Pentagon*... or whatever madhouse had commissioned this clandestine project. It didn’t have to look like a *train station* again... but if Geraldo Rivera caught wind that America had centers with holocaustic intentions within its borders, it could publicly open a slimy can of worms. Jesse “The Body” Ventura had already began pressing sensitive issues. It was a matter of time before *Dateline* would do a piece on the nation’s nastiest closet skeletons. The guard tower would have to come down. The turnstile gates would have to be removed. The pipes—*especially the pipes boldly in open view*—would all have to go.

Fletcher followed Matt around with a Nikon and documented the

procedure. Matt worked under Tom McKay. The brunt of the hard work was done by Matt while Tom barked orders and issued priorities. Once in a while, Tom would get his hands dirty and assist Matt if extra leverage was needed to move something or pull another thing apart. The existence of the death house was top secret and Matt was chosen as the sole lay worker for two reasons. First, hiring only *one* person would ensure that nobody talked. If Matt ever had the cajones to flap his lips, no one else would be around to corroborate any possible story. Second, he helped fit the place with the very pipes, gates, and fences he was vanquishing. He would know if anything was overlooked, plus he already *knew* the government had murky ways. For certain security reasons, it would be dumb to hire anyone new to the situation. Fletcher was hired to document the event. He wondered why. *If they're so worried about covering this place up, why then take pictures where dissident agents could expose an embarrassing mark?* He knew why, though. Inside the walls of the Pentagon or White House, some important person had to be *assured*. If the president knew of the place, could he risk traveling there? The paranoia was dying down everywhere. Something stupid could spark it up again. Officials could deny knowing of the place if they never went there.

Seventies was a small night club on Sixteenth Street near the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. Disco balls hung from the ceiling. Strobe lights randomly spun in various directions. The Bee Gees, Wild Cherry, and Donna Summer blared in the background. John Travolta posters decorated walls. An attractive lady walked up to the table where Fletcher and Matt shared a pitcher of Budweiser. "Holy *shit!*" Matt said. Fletcher's back was to hot gal. "It's the chick from your *Polaroid* picture! Fletcher! Turn around! I think you're getting laid tonight!"

Fletch turned around. He stood up and held the woman tightly then kissed her. "It's been *soooo* long." A song finished and Boston's "Foreplay" started. "I got them to play some decent classic rock once in a while! We have the floor to ourselves! Wanna dance?"

"I'm here for a couple of seconds! I like what you're doing! We have more assignments for you when this is over! Was there really gas pipes everywhere?" The music was loud. She repeated herself, this time competing with the song. "*Gas PIPES?* Was it *REAL?*"

"Hold on!" Fletcher spun toward Matt. "This IS MY HIGH SCHOOL SWEETHEART! VIVIAN! Her name is VIVIAN!"

"Nice to meet you!" Matt put up is palm. To Fletcher, he looked like an Indian saying "how".

Vivian couldn't hear the greeting but she waved back in reciprocity. She pulled Fletcher a few feet by the arm and spoke straight into his ear. "I think it's over! I think the government is gonna lay off *all* of us! Anyone who knew that the Twin Towers incident was a sham is being left *ALONE!* Everyone I *KNOW* at least!"

"*No helicopters buzzed you today like a black cloud over a cursed cartoon character?*" Fletcher laughed. "I could feel it too! I think I want to marry you now!"

"*We can't MARRY!*" Vivian hit Fletch with the magazine she'd brought. "The world still has problems! Even if the government gets off *OUR ASSES*, there is still world hunger! And all the dookie that went on even before the shit

hit the fans here! We have to work toward *WORLD PEACE*, FLETCHER!"

Fletch's belly was warm with beer. His buzz moseyed into a light drunk. "I've seen your *BREASTS* before, Viv!" He pulled her back toward his table, gave her his mug then drank the last of the pitcher straight up. "I have *HORMONES*, Vivian! I need you next to me!"

Vivian hit Fletcher with the magazine again. It was *Time* and she unrolled it. Bloody refugees from Mali on the cover. "We can have sex *TONIGHT*, Fletcher! I have to fly to northern Africa tomorrow!" She kissed his cheek then licked the inside of his ear. "We'll marry *next* year!"

Fletcher Browne wanted to run to the bar for another pitcher. "Next year?!" He thought about it for a few moments. "We say that *every* year!" He pulled Vivian to the dance floor. "I'm glad you're here!" They cut the rug. Vivian thought about canceling her flight. Song after song played.

Vivian turned right from Ohio Street onto Capitol Avenue. She looked over at Fletch passed out on her passenger's seat. Her 2013 Dodge Charger roared and she could see the Hilton where they would spend the night together. "*Fletcher!*" she yelled. "Wake up! We're here!" Oingo Boingo's "Just Another Day" played from her stereo. "Fletch!"

"*Huh?*" He tried to grasp his circumstance. "Vivian? *VIV?* I gotta pee... *really bad!*"

"We're almost there. I'll check in. You *pee.*" Vivian Streets found a parking near the entrance. "*Run!*" Fletcher ran away from her. She walked casually into the hotel and thought about high school. In some ways, not much had changed. No line meant they could settle in quickly. As she received her room key, Fletcher strutted back relieved of gallons of urine from his bladder. His eyes were bloodshot. "Let's go," she said.

Sex didn't happen. Instead, Fletcher passed out face-down on a stiff mattress. Vivian stared out the window for a half hour thinking about the world. She finally heard mumbling from behind her.

"*Vivian?*" Fletcher called. "Viv? I want you to stay *here* tomorrow!"

"I feel like stabbing *Laura Bush* in the stomach!" She continued to stare into the Indianapolis night. "She's why we're suffering, you know?"

Sobriety hit Fletcher quickly. His head thudded but he knew he'd been fine in twelve hours. "Laura Bush? And the rest of the Bush family, right? This isn't about the parapsychology students from Edinburgh, is it? The ones who said they conveyed all our thoughts straight to the NSA?"

"*Yeah.* In some ways, it is. You guys are dismantling that... *PLACE!* That wicked station where someone actually figured they'd waste our *ASSES!* Everyone I know that was liberal during the two thousands was picked on! I know people as far back as the Clinton impeachment hearings that *knew* the Towers were going down! Alex Jones? He wasn't alone! A lot of people knew *something's wrong with those bastards!* Laura Bush killed a *man* when she was Laura Welch! How could anyone in the media ignore that in 2000? W Bush's brother was the head of security at the World Trade Center when the planes hit! How could people pass that up? The *MEDIA!* You know the media is in cahoots with those right-wingers! They treated us like *CRAP* for years on end!"

"Stabbing Laura Bush in the stomach is not the solution, Viv!" Fletcher got up from the bed and held her from behind. "Besides... Even *saying* you want

to stab her could get us in trouble! I mean, if those parapsychology students were correct, she's listening to us right now through *telepathy* and *their* transmissions of our conversation!"

Vivian Streets giggled and turned around. She kissed Fletcher Browne on the lips. "It does sound crazy, huh? I want to go to Africa tomorrow and I want to earn my wings in *Heaven!*" She kissed Fletcher again, this time with tongue. "We still have a ways to go!"

"*Vivian Browne!*" Fletcher kissed Viv. "In a year, maybe we finally marry! I like the sound of your new name!"

"*Vivian Streets-Browne!*" she said. "I'm hyphenating, you know?"

Fletcher and Vivian had healthy sex. They managed to get a couple of hours of sleep before Fletch had to return to the crazy, converted train station and Vivian flew away for diplomatic service. Before they parted ways, Vivian proposed what Fletch ought to work on next. It had something to do with problems in the South Pacific. Fletcher was hung over when he woke. He didn't want to think too deeply about anything.

Vivian Streets was in a 747 flying over the Atlantic Ocean when Fletcher Browne got to Beech Grove which was fifteen minutes southeast of the Hilton he'd spent the night at. Matt Stubbs was waiting for him at the picnic table. The plaid orange and black tablecloth hadn't been set. It had drizzled during the night and dark rain clouds hovered above. Fletcher asked, "Did you bring any breakfast?"

"No. We still have the hotdogs from yesterday... but I wouldn't eat 'em!" Matt had his hammer in his hand. Today, he brought more tools and they rested in his beige belt. "I've gotta finish today. Tom already said I'm behind. We still have Fort Benjamin Harrison and Kingsbury lined up for later this week."

"Vivian says there're only eight hundred of these places!" The bucket where the sodas were kept no longer had ice. Fletch reached and grabbed a strawberry-flavored generic soda. "My other sources, of course... say the number is more like *fifteen hundred*. I've gotta find out the truth. I won't be tailing you and Tom all day, though. I'm setting up a time-lapse camera at the far end of the western fence and another camera inside. I have things to take care of later."

"You don't have to follow us to the other places, you know?" Matt looked at the bucket of sodas. It was sprinkling earlier. *Rain water*, he thought. *What's the harm in popping a lukewarm soda with rain water doused around it?*

"I'm heading to Hollywood," Fletch told Matt. "It's a frickin' *police state* over there!" A drop hit him on the forehead. He looked up. The clouds swirled slowly. "Light at the end of the tunnel, though! If Romney had been elected, I'm almost sure fascist crap would've started happening again. We're going to *test* the public officials. We're sure that we can get twenty paid actors to picket against gun control, a very *Republican* issue... and we're going to have twenty people picket for gay marriage. It's something liberal *Democrats* like to tout. We're betting that the police screw with the liberals and that they allow the conservatives to run of the show. Of course, we're using paid actors who're used to sitting in television audiences and the like! We'll film it. Oughtta be a hoot!"

"Tom thinks they're not getting rid of these places. He thinks this is for *show*. We publicly tear this place apart, document it well, and spread the news to the nuts in DC... all the while, other train stations are converted other places. No

net change in other words.”

“I want to care,” Fletcher said. “I really want to *care* about all this crap. My plate is full. I have California then I take off to Sumatra. As fast as one issue is resolved, two or three more spring up.” The hotdogs were still on the table underneath foil from the day before. “They couldn’t have gone bad over night, could they? I mean, it was *cold* outside!”

Matt handed Fletch the tray. “I’ll wait until my lunch break. I’ll find something else.” He handed Fletcher some buns from a bag and the bottles of mustard and ketchup. “Tom apologized for calling me ‘*Toucan*’! He said he was under lots of pressure and the thought of dead people here gave him mental fits.”

“*Nice.*” Fletcher squirted mustard on cold hotdogs. “*Very nice.* I understand, actually. I felt weird being here. *Tingly crap in my stomach.* These are adult issues, though. What good’s it do to put your head in the sand like an ostrich?”

Matt saw that Fletcher was enjoying his cold breakfast and changed his mind about waiting until lunch. He grabbed three dogs and ate them without buns or condiments. In the distance, Tom McKay exited the former train station. Fletcher noticed another person behind him. They approached the picnic table. *Mario and Luigi?* Fletcher thought. *If the other guy had a mustache, I would say, “Welcome! Mario and Luigi!”* He shook the idea. As the mystery guy got closer, Fletcher thought, *Oh! I know this one! Mister Roper from Three’s Company! Mario’s buddy is the infamous landlord!*

“Fellas?” Tom McKay called. “This is my boss, Cornelius Stuart! He works for the CIA and is overseeing the project.”

“Glad to finally meet you!” Matt extended his right hand. Cornelius shook it firmly. “I feel like I know you from working for Tom.”

“Would you like to be photographed for posterity?” Fletcher gestured with his Nikon. “Or... are you not officially here?”

Tom put his arm around Cornelius. “He is proud that the mass psychosis has ended! We are doing the equivalent of nuclear disarmament! It is a fine time for us! We used to be men of sensibility, you know?”

Fletcher took a few pictures. “Were these camps your idea, sir?” Fletcher, for the first time, took pictures of the food they’d been eating. “Was there a unanimous decision that such places ought to exist?” Fletcher pointed his camera upwards and snapped pictures of the thunder clouds. “How does such a thing like this come about in what has been considered the greatest country on *EARTH*?” Fletcher set down his camera.

“It was politics and bigotry! There was a time when *Reagan* was president that none of us thought Democrats *could* ever be elected to the White House again. For many conservatives behind the scenes, it’s better to go out as a *crazy nut* than to concede to folks once deemed scummy... and not too smart!”

“Thanks for the candor,” Fletcher said. “Between me and you, that’s what most of us youngsters think *anyway*. It’s nice to hear it come from your mouth! *Integrity.* I remember hearing as a kid that that’s what the GOP was about! Clinton threw a monkey wrench in your plans! That’s what my mother told me!”

“*Clinton?*” Cornelius Stuart asked. “He’s a pawn! He’s one of our guys! We figured out how to keep the *authentic* liberals out of the highest posts. Could

you imagine this nation run by Dennis Kucinich? The whole *world* would go to crap! But Bill Clinton was a *Rhodes* scholar and went to one of our Ivy League schools! We filter the pieces of dung out! Bill *wants* to be Republican! You can see it in his face! So does Barack, for that matter! These guys run our core policies regarding banking. Yes, Romney would've been more ruthless about implementing our agenda... but we still have the same overall long-term outcome! We don't need these camps anymore, by the way, because the populous has imprisoned themselves in cozy track homes! *Slaves to our bankers!*"

"Fuck 'em, *right?*" Fletcher asked with a bit of sarcasm.

"Listen, *child!*" Cornelius walked around the picnic table and stood face-to-face with Fletcher. "You have a fire! I used to have that fire! I wanted to do right all the time! One day, you wind up old like me! You ask yourself, *Do I want to win? Or do I want to lose?* This world is built of winners and losers, tike! It's been that way forever, and it won't change when all of us are gone! You get to *choose* which one you are! I could resign from my post and plant flowers in front of all the hippies' homes whom I've ruined! Life won't change! Some other old cock is gonna do what I'm doing! *Concentration camps in America!* Yes! And we're tearing 'em down! Why? 'Cause it's right? No! We're finally losing! The Third World has finally caught up! *Education, infrastructure, economy, art, military!* This is good PR what we're doing! The pictures you're taking? We're gonna let 'em leak all over the internet! China won't hate us as much! We can't keep fighting everyone for *everything!*"

"*Hey!*" Fletcher handed his Nikon to Cornelius. "You have a story to tell? Take this for fifteen minutes. It doesn't take a professional photographer."

"Do your job, kid!" Cornelius started to feel more and more drops on his receding hairline. "I do what I need to do. I can live with what I'm doing."

"Hey, thanks for the honesty... *once again,*" Fletcher said. "I almost thought this *war* at home was as much a generation war as much as anything else."

"I second that!" Matt chipped.

"*Shut up, Matt!*" Tom scolded. "Hey! Let's all move this inside, can we?"

Lightning flashed across the sky. Thunder banged as the four guys trotted toward the gas house. Once inside, they sat on milk crates. Cornelius Stuart directed a question toward Fletcher, "Did you have any clue this place existed before we contacted you last week?"

"No!" Fletcher looked up at the plumbing. Much had been removed but there was still a lot to be done. "No! I mean, why would I?"

"We contacted you because we know you've photographed other oddball stuff! What else do you think your government is hiding? Do you know how large the Space Shuttle was? It piggy-backed on a jet airliner!" Cornelius believed Tom would answer the question but he remained still. "Do you know how many ICBM's we've ever built? Do you know anything about the Saturn rocket? How did we design and launch the Voyager and Pioneer satellites in the seventies? Is it possible that *Popular Science* is smart enough to know how to plan manned missions to Mars but the US government can't think of any way?"

"*Secrets. More secrets!*" Fletcher thought Cornelius wanted to continue talking. There was silence for a few moments. "You know the answers, don't

you?”

“One hand doesn’t know what the other’s doing where I work,” Cornelius said. “I can tell you that it makes no sense to me! *Thousands* of rockets with nuclear warheads. The Chevy Big Block’s been used for decades! Do you think we really have to redesign rockets every time we want to go to the *Moon*? No! The Saturn rocket can still get the job done! We can get *Curiosity*, a rover the size of a pickup truck, to land on Mars... but we can’t even manage a human drive-by? There are men in the outer reaches of our atmosphere right now! The International Space Station always has people up there! We can’t get one of these guys to sit still for six months to travel to the Red Planet? We don’t have to *land* just yet! Where is the imagination we used to have?!”

“You’re lookin’ at it!” Tom McKay said. He focused on Fletcher and Matt. “I think Mister Stuart is trying to say that none of us really knows what’s going on with these places. Why build this place, man it, then tear it down? And we *both* believe it’s going to be secretly replaced somewhere else.”

“You mentioned the banks,” Matt suggested. “They’re the reason, right? They have us hostage! They pay for the politicians running for office. In return the politicians *intentionally* run deficit budgets to fill the pockets of the people who financed their campaigns. We are still smart, right? It’s just not all of us. A few bold people chose to go to the Moon in the sixties. Today? It’s still a few people doing genius things... but the genius things entail world domination! Our pockets are all empty!”

“Is this a speech about the ‘one percent’? I’ve had enough of that!” Fletcher said. “I mean, I really want to help every living person, but that *Occupy* stuff became a tar pit for a lot of people!”

“We can discuss this until the cows come home, guys!” Thunder pounded again outside. Tom continued, “We need to get to work here! Let’s pull the rest of these pipes out today! And Fletch? Maybe it’s not the best idea to leave your camera on a tripod out there. Rain’s starting to pour down. We don’t need the time-lapse too badly. Let’s get this thing done!”

“It was an honor meeting you gentlemen!” Cornelius Stuart patted Fletch and Matt on their backs. “I will be running. My work here is done. I just wanted to make sure everything was in order.” With that, Cornelius opened the door and sprinted across the asphalt. The three remaining guys watched. Fletcher couldn’t ever remember seeing a gray-haired man run so fast. Fletch stuck around for an hour, photographed some more, then took off for Los Angeles.

The rumblings were subtle at first. The sky was clear. Ag and Og held hands in an underground cave. Ag liked to drag his fingers along the walls when rain turned the walls into workable clay. It was clear now, tough, but the walls were the perfect moisture from days of heavy showers. If the thunderous noise wouldn’t have begun somewhere in the north, Ag might’ve wanted to draw spirals, waves, circles, crude animals, and *Og* onto the wall canvas around him. Og squeezed Ag’s hand then she began to climb rocks to exit the cave’s ceiling entrance. Dark smoke rose in the direction of the chilling rumblings. Og grunted for Ag to come along and, when he reached the surface, the two began to follow the roaring sounds.

Popular culture became fascinated by petrified bodies in ruins of Pompeii. Almost two millennia passed since Mount Vesuvius erupted and

instantly fossilized inhabitants of the region. Fletcher Browne found himself on the Indonesian island of Sumatra. Los Angeles was behind him and it'd been a few weeks since he was in Indiana. He looked at one of the more peculiar things he'd ever seen. He stared for a half minute because his brain wasn't registering what he was seeing. A discovery had been made. He was here to share it with the world via photography.

Somewhere in Africa, Vivian Streets was taking care of her business. Fletcher wasn't sure what was going on because he hadn't spoke with her since she left. *How did I get here?* he asked himself. *I'm staring at what? A hoax? Could this be a hoax?* Vivian's father was successful in the art world. Viv and Fletch fell in love in high school but they went about life as strong individuals. Marriage? They talked about it a lot. Money was no issue. Viv loved Fletch and Viv's father loved her. He provided them enough funding to chase their dreams. Idealists. They were young idealists and Viv's father figured that someday they'd become pragmatic or tired enough to settle together. He would pay for their wedding. Fletcher thought about the expenses he incurred. He could see himself as a great visual artist someday. Ansel Adams. He thought about who he could be. He currently looked at something that tugged at the depths of his mind. *This is better than Pompeii*, he thought. *I mean, it's only two people.*

Og and Ag were making love when a load of soot landed on them. Now, their unfinished coitus was being observed by Fletcher. *This is sooooo romantic!* He finally snapped out of his trance. He began to take pictures. He brought the Polaroid camera which he had used for the "Vivian photo"—the captivating one he'd shown Matt Stubbs at Beech Grove. It was an antique camera and it was his *first* camera. After snapping some Nikon pics, he took three Polaroid shots. He didn't use the old thing much. He wasn't sure there was a way he could buy replacement film any more. It was a gift from his parents and, before electronic cameras replaced most of the film cameras, he bought many disposable flash bulbs and instant film cartridges. He didn't like to use it for dreary things like the death station back in America. He took his Polaroids when he wanted something instant in his hand. The Nikon was nice. It was a thirty-five millimeter *FM3A*. The obvious advantage it had over the Polaroid or camera phone was it's ability to contrast depth. Fletch liked to focus on objects against blurred backgrounds. He liked it for effect, but it also meant that he had to wait until his work was developed inside a dark room. These *love birds*, though. He wanted the picture in his hand *now*. He snapped the Polaroids then waved them in the air. There was something he found *humane* about using antique equipment now and then. It seemed to connect him to a different time when people seemed to *care* more about the work they involved themselves in. It was a mnemonic device as much as it was a practical machine.

Fletcher got down on his belly. He wanted to see the *extent* of the love-making. A group of eight people surrounded him. He was a tiny bit embarrassed by what he was trying to see. In some ways, he figured that sharing a list of his favorite soft porn flicks with the group might feel similar. There was something he had to know, though. Were they just holding one another in fear? Did Ag jump on Og to *protect her*? Or? Or? Yes... Oooooor? Was this couple the equivalent of Sumatra's *Romeo and Juliet*? Did they decide to "get busy" when they believed their lives were ending? Fletcher peered between their bellies. His

best guess was that it was intentional sex. *And?* He hoped this wasn't a hoax because it seemed too good to be true. How hard could it be to duplicate the frozen remains that Vesuvius produced? Scientists would know. A small sample would be taken by one of the eight people he'd come with. *Carbon dating*. Four hundred years ago, Mount Sinabung belched heavily into the sky. This could very well be a romantic version of what was found in the Italian ruins. Fletcher was glad to be there. He started to think heavily of Vivian. The petrified couple in front of him opened his mind to proposing marriage. He looked forward to seeing her again. As fate would have it, she would call him the following day. They rendezvoused at the Aston Waikiki Beach Hotel in Hawaii the following week.

"It was like there was a slit at the top of my head, Viv... and someone inserted a View Master slide into my *brain*! I couldn't shake the image!" There was an excellent view of slamming waves through the window. After getting some of the issues off his chest, Fletcher planned to hit the sand with Vivian. Snorkeling would be in the works by the afternoon. "This *heinous* face! She looked like a hen! I mean, her nose was all mangled and it looked more like a beak!"

"You did no drugs, right?" Vivian sat on the bed with Fletcher. Her trip to Mali would be discussed later. Right now, Fletch was trying to spill his guts about something. "You thought you were having telepathic communication with a person you barely knew?"

"You were there! I didn't tell you about these crazy perceptions 'cause I thought I was going crazy! *Summer of ninety-eight*. A year after we graduated high school. We're in *Bachaquero* and that's where I take *this*." Fletch handed the Polaroid of Vivian he'd been carrying around for more than a decade. "Leading up to our vacation in Venezuela, there were weird things going on in my family. One of my cousins began to sell '*medical supplies*'! What medical supplies?! I still don't know! I think it was a euphemism for drugs—*maybe cocaine*. They always said it with a strange emphasis. *Medical supplies*. And we're going to South America. I thought it was code for something."

"Like pick 'em up a *kilo* while we were down there?" Vivian couldn't take her eyes off the photo of herself. "I think I look *cute* here!"

"Like when you watch those movies and the slutty-looking tramp walks up to a primo ride on Hollywood Boulevard. 'You want to have a good time?' she asks, but she's not talking about Disneyland! It was like that leading up to our trip!"

"So you think you're going crazy, all these innuendoes are going around... and what?" Vivian handed the picture back. "I want a copy of that. Can ya' do it? *Please?*"

Outside, the waves rolled in and out. Fletcher wanted to give up on the conversation and hit the beach but this talk was also important. "There were voices in my head that felt *foreign* to me. That, by itself, wasn't a big deal... and I remember telling you about it. I looked into the trees, though. There wasn't much of a breeze. I *talked* to the pines behind you—the pines from *this picture*. I remember wondering if someone had spiked my drink. I was in a daze... but I asked the trees, *Will you dance a little?* They swayed. I remember that much. Not much of a breeze, and it *felt* like I was controlling the trees behind you with some kind of '*life cooperation*' of sorts!"

"Yeah, I get that." Vivian smiled. "I believe that picture was taken on our way to Mérida. I remember when we finally got there, the busses wouldn't stop for us, for some reason. I remember that when they finally picked us up, they wouldn't let us off when we yelled '*parada*'—*the word you're supposed to say*. I remember getting picked up in a van... and the driver started driving opposite of where we asked to go. Those were fun times, actually. Adventure like I don't have anymore. There was Mali this past month... *but I was alone and we're getting old.*"

"I wouldn't bring this up... but I was in Sumatra... *and it happened again!* I know it's more than cooperation between me and another life form like a bush or tree. Inside the hotel, I looked at a towel draped over a lampshade. It was there to dry, but I started getting this strange feeling of being *watched*. I thought about those trees. I was looking at your picture. I asked the *towel* to move! It did! Subtly, but it did! I thought all this time that the voices I heard in Venezuela were from a spiked drink or something. Like I said, leading up to that trip, people *joked openly* about us heading over to Columbia to smuggle coke. I just figured that *maybe* somebody spiked my drink and it was a pure hallucination!"

"The towel? You're sure it was moving and the windows weren't allowing a draft inside?" Vivian's eyes peered out the window. She was admiring the same crashing waves as Fletcher. "You think *TK* was the answer?"

"Yes! And if a *towel* can move to my thoughts, then maybe it wasn't a hallucination when we were together in South America! Maybe—*just maybe*—this parapsychology is not so off base! You said you were paranoid about *Laura Bush* having psychics spy on you through our walls! *Right?*"

"Let's go swim!" Vivian got up and pulled Fletcher with her. "I believe *you* believe what you saw. I know what I thought. I'm in denial, a bit, mostly 'cause it sounds so stupid! What would the former First Lady want with my thoughts? *Stupid, right?*"

"We'll swim... and I hope this passes! I swear there were no drugs involved in Sumatra, though. Could I have had spiked drink there as well? I mean, is it a thing foreign countries do?" His hand was holding Viv's as they made their way to the sand. "I'll shake this out! Thank you for listening without judging. I don't know why this bizarre stuff goes through my head!"

"Oh! Look! I'm totally controlling where that bird is flying!" Vivian laughed.

"Joker! I like when you tease, though." Within a minute, both of them were in the water. The waves were more than ten feet high but Fletcher had no interest in body surfing. *I'm not sure I could handle that right now*, he thought. Vivian splashed him. He smiled and asked, "Do you know what happened on November 22, 1963?"

"*JFK, blown away!*" Vivian replied. "I know my history and I know my rock 'n' roll!" Why do you ask? Do you know what happened on December 7, 1941?"

"Pearl Harbor. The answer to *your* question is *Pearl Harbor*. But you, my dearest... are only *half* right about my question!" Fletcher splashed Vivian back. He was happy. He tackled her and held her as waves rolled by them and retreated. "Somewhere here in Hawaii, *Gilligan's Island* was wrapping on its pilot episode! The first full season was filmed in black and white and was mostly

filmed around Studio City in California! But the *pilot* was filmed on location *here!* JFK, blown away! What else do I have to say?"

"I like it!" Vivian broke Fletcher's loose hold and stood up. Water was almost knee-deep. "I have something else to think about when I hear about the assassination. *Gilligan's Island*, huh? Maybe they were in on it, huh? The pilot was an alibi, of course!"

"Yes! Yes, yes, yes!" Fletcher was more than happy. *Ecstatic*. "Yes! It all makes sense now!" He rested below Vivian. Salt water tasted good. He was in no hurry to get up.

"*Makes sense?*" Vivian looked down on Fletcher. The Sun was high in the sky. Fletcher could barely make out her expression because he was being blinded. She almost looked like she had a *halo* over her head. "Don't humor me, *Fletcher!*"

"Humor?" He shielded his eyes. "*Humor?* A month ago, I was in Beech Grove, Indiana at a *concentration camp!* WTF, right? And you're where? In *Mali* because everyone's shooting at everyone else everywhere!" He thought about it and hoped he didn't come across as angry. "Makes sense? I don't know. It's just that the world's so *screwed* up all over the place... and the only things that make sense anymore are things that're too weird to contemplate."

"I know." Vivian went back down to her knees. "It's weird out there."

"*Weird!?*" Fletcher reached for Viv's hair at her collarbone. He toyed with it between his thumb and forefinger for a couple of seconds. "*This moment!* It's moments like this that I wish would never end. *There's nothing weird about it.*"

"We pull our weight and the balance of our lives maintains itself." Vivian became sad. *You're suicidal*, she thought. It was uncomfortable to have in her head. She shook the thought. *Suicidal? No. Why would I think he's suicidal?*

"I can't handle going back into the real world half the time, Viv. It's like hot water in a spa. It sucks. It really sucks, and then you're in the thing and it's okay. You get used to it, you know?" Fletcher was satisfied with his place in life at the moment and didn't realize that Vivian had a sinking feeling.

"We can conquer the world. I know we can. There's only so much we can do to change things... but sooner or later, we've gotta do this more often. We can't care about every starving child... or every shot political prisoner! We can't do *everything*." She felt better but she believed she was stating the obvious. Why clarify such an obvious thing?

"I don't want to stop, Viv! I can do this 'til I'm sixty-five... but I need moments with you away from all the lunacy. It fills my tank, you know?" All of a sudden, Fletcher felt fatigued. He wanted to take an afternoon nap. "Can you follow me for the next year or so? We'll knock out all of the main issues we discussed in high school! I need to get to Bangladesh. I don't know why."

"A calling again? I hate when you get these feelings that have no strong rationale." She got up and helped pull Fletcher to his feet. "I can go with you to Bangladesh. I want to settle in a couple of years. Are you with me?"

"I can't tell you what I'm going to be thinking in a couple of years... but... it's starting to wear on me. I want to do it less often. I can do this 'til I'm sixty-five but maybe slow to one or two things every year." Fletcher put his arm

around Viv as they walked over the sand to their hotel. “Do you ever feel guilty for rewarding ourselves with these kinds of trips?”

“After Bangladesh, I have the *perfect* place for us to go!” She smiled. “*Brazil!* We can take care of rainforest issues at the same time it’ll feel like a stellar vacation. The World Cup and Olympics are ahead! I think it’s gonna be great!”

Fletcher wanted to get back to their room and make love. More than that, he wanted to sleep for a few hours. Maybe they could cut out the snorkeling and go straight to a luau. Viv was a bit antsy. As soon as they entered their room, Fletcher plopped himself face-down on their bed and conked out. Vivian went back outside and took a stroll up Kapahula Avenue and settled on a bench when she reached Crane Park. She became sullen and couldn’t shake her emotions. While on the beach, she began to think that Fletcher was suicidal for some reason. *There’s a difference between a thrill-seeker and being suicidal. He’s always liked adventure*, she thought. *I don’t know where these ideas are coming from.* Snorkeling would have been nice. Surprisingly, Vivian believed she was better off spending time to herself. She wasn’t sure she could hold over until the dinner so she ordered a California roll at Genki Sushi while on her way back. When she reached the hotel, Fletch was snoring loudly. She waited a half hour before waking him. “It’s *time*, Fletcher! Remember?”

“Yes! Roasted kalua pig. Chicken baked in coconut milk. *Yummy!*” He was groggy, rubbed his eyes then kissed Vivian on the cheek. “I have *yuck* breath. Sorry.”

“Take a shower. We can be there early if you’re quick.” Vivian sat on the bed then stretched. “If you don’t hurry, I’ll go to sleep and won’t be able to get up.”

“Yeah. Got it.” Fletcher showered and his blood started pumping as they left. “This is too good!” he said when they reached the feast. The Sun had just sunk below the horizon. A fierce wooden soldier greeted them. “I *love* how their expressions are exaggerated,” he observed. Before long, they were watching hulu dancers and fire handlers. They ate lomi salmon. “I miss the continental United States. What’s *wrong* with me?”

“Homesick? Wow!” Vivian ate from a shish kabob. “You’ll miss this place when you’re back over there. *Trust* me!”

“I want to know what’s in those caves out there! Remember the Brady Bunch? I want to see the caves where they returned a cursed idol.”

“Gilligan’s Island... now this?” Viv laughed. “You’re not serious, are you?”

“If we find out it’s anywhere near, I think it’d be neat.” Fletcher could hear waves break. “You’re not mad that we skipped snorkeling, are you?”

“No. I took a nice walk.” She grabbed at the lei around her neck. “*Real flowers.*”

“Yeah. This whole thing’s great!” Fletcher’s mind shifted. “I want to talk about *Evergreen College*... and some of the things we were discussing earlier.”

“*The TK?* That stuff?” Vivian admired a performer blowing fire from his mouth. “Now?”

“My mother told me about ‘red baiting’ long, long ago. *McCarthyism.*

Red scare. That whole thing... and *black listing*. I remember feeling normal before I met you. I'm grateful I get to do what I do and go where I go but... You didn't join me at Evergreen after high school graduation."

"My dad didn't want me to. He's a strong believer in learning through experience... but in a different way than *your* dad." The fire show was ending. Vivian felt a little uncomfortable talking about anything personal in front of other couples. "What's up?"

"I'm trying to figure this out, still. I went to that school looking for *answers*. It had a reputation for being an excellent place for artists and liberals in general. I remember smoking pot with a classmate at his house near the school. *Led Zeppelin*. We were listening to Led Zeppelin and I was trying to get a clue. These guys! They're *white trash*, right? I mean, you take a look at 'em! Their music is great though. I love their music and I was wondering, '*What gives?*' I felt like a square when I applied there but I wanted to be accepted by your father. I figured I could be an artist like him... and he'll like me more."

"It helped." Vivian's eyes were distant. "*White trash?*"

"I mean by the looks. It was a reverse snob system at that school. I mean, if you wore a shirt and tie, they made fun of you! It was an inverted business system." A man began to play a ukulele. "The beginning was *soooo* nice. I never felt so hip." *Play your heart out, Don Ho!* Fletch thought. He was enjoying the singing. He drank Mehan Volcano Red Ale. "But the fuckin' weirdest thing happened, Viv!"

"*Fuckin'?* I don't hear you swear often." Vivian leaned over and kissed him. She was starting to feel a buzz and was thrilled with the music.

"It's the liquor. But I got 'white trash baited'! I'm pretty sure of it! These guys! I mean, they would laugh at you if you looked like an urban professional while presenting your display in a gallery. You had to look like you hadn't washed your clothes in five months. Your hair had to be long. You had to smell like *weed*! Then, when it's all over, they treat you like some kind of lowlife! I couldn't believe it!"

"You had a bad experience with bad people," Vivian said. "That's part of the learning process, actually. You have to learn what you're *not*."

"I wondered if you were mad at me, though. I agree that we had a better time after I walked away from Evergreen. *Life experience*. Heading to Venezuela was killer. Sometimes I think I should have a degree for what I'm doing now but I also feel *aimless*."

"We can't all be Gandhi. Some of us are gonna believe we're less important cogs in this machine called *life*. We're doing okay. We shouldn't be hard on ourselves."

"I guess I need to hear it from you. I started thinking about *life* since those times, though. I read something online called the '*New Jim Crow*'. The idea goes that blacks and other minorities get a raw deal in drug cases and are stigmatized by a horse crap system. In our junior year, we watched *White Man's Burden* and I remember thinking how outrageous the plot seemed. One day, minorities would be running the show and whites would be their servants. That's *California* today! We've lived to see this ludicrous and unexpected inversion of power! The '*New Jim Crow*' applies to whites, now!"

"I hate talking about race issues." Vivian was actually getting horny.

She wore a grass skirt and that pleased her. There were mean drunks in the world. There were happy drunks. Viv felt more *sexy* the more she drank.

"Here I am with blue eyes and hair to my shoulders. I have facial hair... and I wonder if I'd have a job if it weren't for your father." Fletcher kissed Vivian. The Moon was full and almost directly overhead. "Your eyes look *sooooo* nice."

"Can we talk about these things later? I would really like to try some hulu dancing!" She took Fletcher by the hand and they danced for the next couple of hours. The following day, they caught a flight to Los Angeles. They made time to visit *Pirate's Cove* in Newport because they'd been discussing Gilligan's Island. After some shopping, they passed by the Shoreline Yacht Club. By early afternoon, they drove along Orange Avenue and found themselves in Costa Mesa. Fletcher still felt worn out and wanted to nod off in the passenger's seat. Vivian hung a left at Albert Place. "Where are we going?" Fletch asked.

"Surprise!" Vivian felt a sense of vertigo. "An old pal from our past is meeting us at *Motel 6*." Their Altima turned into the parking lot.

"*Surprise*? I hope it's good!" Fletcher rubbed his eyes.

"Room 213. I hope he's here." The couple exited the car and walked up the stairs. "*Venezuela*. That's your hint."

"Could it be your sister? No. Wait. You said 'he', right?" Fletcher looked down at the pool. He felt like swimming all of a sudden.

Vivian knocked at the door. *Thump, thump, thump-thump-thump*. She waited. The door opened.

"*Hey!*" The guy at the door said. "Hey! I haven't seen you in..."

"*Eddie!*" Fletcher said. "*Venezuela, 1998!* What're you doing here? What's going on?" Fletcher slapped hands and embraced this guy in front of him. "Is that *Budweiser* I smell?"

Eddie handed Fletcher a beer. "I knew you'd want one!" He hugged Vivian. "Are you in the mood for one?" He headed to the restroom. A twelve-pack of beer sat in the sink surrounded by ice. He grabbed two cold brews and head back.

"*Eddie Callypso!* I've *always* loved your *name!*" Vivian accepted her beer.

"What's the situation?" Eddie asked. "After all these years, I was startled to hear from you."

"Fletcher's *paranoid*," Viv explained. "You've gone through this worse."

"*Paranoia?*" Eddie asked. "*Just because your paranoid don't mean they're not after you...*" Remember that Nirvana lyric?"

Vivian turned toward Fletcher. "He has it too. That thing where he feels like he's being watched... and telling plants to move... and talking to reporters during live news... and noticing responses from them that seem significant." Viv chugged half the beer she'd been given. "He says we'll notice being followed if we go to lunch with him. It's like... *people know who he is but they won't say his name.*"

"You have a hundred thousand YouTube views, Eddie!" Fletcher looked around the *Motel 6* room. It was lacking compared to the place had they stayed in Hawaii but it felt quaint for some strange reason. "Maybe people *do* know who

you are!”

“Yeah.” Eddie opened up the door. “There’s a word called ‘propensity’. It’s used by statisticians. If you flip a coin a hundred times, there’s a *propensity* for there to be roughly half heads, roughly half tails. Of course, it’s rarely a direct fifty-fifty split... but if there were eighty heads and twenty tails, well... *that would be an anomaly*. I get followed places. By cars, by people. I’ll be in a market and fuckers will stop directly in front of me pretending that I’m not there.”

“And this is all? Probably not, right? I want to hear about the more peculiar things. The helicopters that follow you when traveling to the desert. I want to hear about that. I don’t get it is all. It’s happening to me on some level... but I don’t get it.”

“Let’s roll,” Eddie said. “Try to notice things or people in the distance. Try to notice a *propensity* of people or cars closing in on us. I’m not a celebrity... but I’m guessing this is what it feels like to be scoped by paps. I’m no criminal. I’m guessing *fugitives* feel like this. I don’t get it, either.”

Vivian’s beer was done. “I’m ready!”

The *Pig’s Ear* wasn’t far. Vivian drove. If they weren’t in the middle of a social experiment, they might’ve stopped there. Instead, they headed up PCH toward Huntington. The pier was on Main Street. A couple of blocks inland on Walnut was BJ’s Restaurant and Brewhouse. That was their destination. Eddie was in the back seat of the car. “Let me know if you start feeling claustrophobic. It’s going to feel like people want to swarm our car like bees.”

“*Or zombies*,” Fletcher said. He brought a beer from the motel. “Yeah. I feel *something*.”

“What is it?” Vivian asked. “What *is it*? It’s like being on the set of a movie with badly-trained extras. They want to look at us. I know they do!” Parking was heck. Vivian zipped along Walnut toward Third. “Did you *do* something, Eddie?”

“I have felt like this since we were in Venezuela. I wondered if the government put us under surveillance for some odd reason. *Hugo Chavez* was elected when we were down there. I don’t know.” A car’s reverse lights came on. “There’s a great spot!”

Vivian’s parallel parking wasn’t too shabby. The three got out of the car. “What’re we supposed to be looking for? Is there any coded language to use?”

“Have you seen those movies where spies are back-to-back in an obscure liquor store but they’re speaking to each other while looking at products in front of ‘em? Cameras or witnesses, right? *Discrete* stuff. You’ll hear people comment on your *clothes*... but they’ll be looking at their kids. People’ll rigidly change conversation topics when you’re near. *They’ll talk about news they think you need to hear*. Sometimes... they’ll comment on what you go through in life. If you ran out of toilet paper in your house and no one has any way to *know* that... they’ll speak of it.”

“You *do* sound paranoid, bud,” Fletcher said. “If I wasn’t experiencing a fraction of this, I’d say you lost it!”

BJ’s was a great place to sample beers. On their menu, there was an option to order seven shots of various imports and high-end brew. When ordered, these shots sat on a mat indicating which each one was. Usually, the shots of beer would tip patrons toward which pitcher to order. The restaurant had an exquisite

pizza selection. Viv, Fletcher and Eddie ordered one with grilled chicken and alfredo sauce. Vivian looked around. Nothing was really, really out of place. Still, she felt uneasy. "Is there something I'm suppose to...?"

A waitress interrupted her. "Here's your garlic bread."

"They won't do it because they know we're watching them back. It's not only here in California that I get it. I've had this happen *many* places. Chicago, New York. And the more people I'm with, the less it happens—the less *brash* they are. But give it fifteen minutes! In any fifteen minute period, they break. They always *do*. Something freaky's gonna happen. You're going to say, '*What is this? The Twilight Zone?*'"

"I get it," Fletcher said. "It's the internet, somehow, but..."

"*You don't get it, do you?*" Vivian asked. She drank a sweet shot of beer from the selection in front of her. "This one! Let's get a pitcher of... What is this? *Hefeweizen Wheat!*" She flagged down the waitress. "Hefeweizen Wheat pitcher? *Please.*"

"Yes. Of course."

The waitress looked like she had a lot going on. Vivian admired her grace with the pace of her work. In her left hand, she held a plate of spaghetti. In her right hand, she held a pitcher of water and refilled cups here and there. "What am I supposed to be feeling, Eddie?"

"Like I said, it's weird around me... but it's *propensity*. There's something called 'irony' and I experience it quite often. When I think the group around me's gonna go bat crap, they act normal. *Vice versa.*"

"What is this phenomenon?" Vivian finished the fifth of her seven beer shots. "If this is real, *why?*"

"I can't figure it out. I have this *zombie metaphor* idea." Eddie barely finished his second beer shot. It was a dark beer. He had been preoccupied with looking for unusual signs. "There are people like you and me... and *Fletcher*. We've traveled the world but we're not celebrities. I feel like I have a target on my chest. I feel like people *know*. It wasn't like this before internet was everywhere. I felt *normal* as a kid."

"What's the big deal? Can't you get used to it? Why do I feel normal and you guys don't?" Vivian liked the way the restaurant smelled. Lotta spices, some beer, and garlic bread.

"I have this idea that it's because you're an attractive girl. I think eyes have been on you your whole life. Fish in water. Do they *know* they're in water if they never come to the surface or reach land?" Fletcher's observation caught Eddie's attention. "*Right?*"

"Yeah. That might be it. If you ever felt normal—one of *them*—one of the many..." Hard laughter was heard from behind Eddie. "*This is what I'm talking about, Vivian!* They've been listening this whole time!"

"*Shut up!*" a mother said to her pre-teen child. "You can't say that!" She was the lady who'd been laughing in the booth behind Viv, Fletcher and Eddie.

"That's what I'm *talking* about, Viv!" Eddie said. "They're telling *us* to shut up!—or *me!*—but they're pretending they're talking to each other!"

"This is no big deal, *Eddie!*" Vivian reached for the final piece of garlic bread. "People *do* this! You're not paranoid!" Then she whispered, "They have manners! That's all!"

"Why do I believe they follow me home? Who am I that I should get their attention?" The waitress walked up with their pitcher of beer. Eddie thanked her then kept on, "There are frickin' *helicopters* over my head in odd places! Didn't you say Fletcher was going through this? There are *vans* in front of my house at times! When I take off, they follow me! What the heck?"

"I don't think it's all the same people," Vivian said. "I want to spend time with you and Fletcher for a week. Maybe we can spend time in Frisco. I want to see more of this."

"*Thank you, Vivian,*" Fletcher said. "You know when I started to feel crazy? When I thought I couldn't talk about it. Then you brought me to Eddie who says he's going through the same exact thing."

"No problem. I think you two need to understand that there's a new 'normal'. People keep talking about it. Yes, it's the smart phones and the internet. *Things won't ever be the same.* And maybe you have a point about the 'fish out of water' thing. I've always been a focal point wherever I've gone. My parents? Whatever. I've had people around me my whole life."

"I'm used to doing the watching," Fletcher said. "I think I'm the watched, now."

"Same here," Eddie said. "I don't know what happened besides growing old."

"*Old?* We're in our thirties! Come on!" Vivian laughed. Fletcher poured a mug of Hefeweizen for her, then poured some for himself and Eddie. Vivian suggested, "Maybe we should stroll to the end of the pier after this. *Face your fear,* you know?"

"*Yeah.*" Eddie was almost sarcastic. "Yeah. That's the way to go!" He wanted to do it, but he still felt like alien antennae protruded from the top of his head. He couldn't shake the feeling that many, many eyes were always on him. "I'd *love* to see the ocean."

"Between me and you, Eddie? I think talking about this crappy feeling is the only way it goes away." Fletch slurped his beer. It tasted good.

The trio finished their lunch then strutted toward the pier. The walk was nice, the sky was clear, and many people had fishing lines cast into the sea. When they reached *Ruby's Diner* at the far end, they were glad they already ate. Masses of tourists waited for an hour outside just to be seated. A couple of days later, the three old buddies were walking along Pier 39 in San Francisco. Life didn't feel completely abnormal. They later found themselves in a *Motel 6* near Little Saigon. Once again, they drank twelve-ounce Budweisers from chilled bottles. "My life is a one-eighty since we met up in Venezuela," Eddie said. "I've been *institutionalized*. I've spoken with presidential Secret Service a few times. I've been thrown in mental health. I've gone to *jail*. I swear... I haven't done anything wrong."

"*Witch hunt?*" Fletcher asked. "If you'd told me these things five years ago, I would've labelled you as crazy. Last month? I was in Indiana taking pictures of a concentration camp."

"Some loony parapsychology students told me that Laura Bush spies on me through telepathy," Vivian contributed. She felt dumb but she wanted the guys to believe she was with them on some level.

"Your YouTube channel?" Fletcher asked Eddie. "A hundred thousand

plus views. *A separatist*. You want California to secede from the Union by 2026. I watched your thing on *NATO*. 'If there's a North Atlantic Treaty Organization, why don't we have something on the *Pacific* side?' you asked. You think Washington, DC is as temporal as *Rome* when it was the Holy Roman Empire. *Too much of an East Coast* bias in our national politics. Almost all presidents, as of late, are Yale or Harvard grads. *A conspiracy?*"

"It's not a conspiracy, but they don't respect us," Eddie said. "Marvin Bush was the head of security at the Twin Towers on nine eleven."

"*Who's Marvin Bush?*" Vivian asked.

"That's my *point*! Hardly anyone knows! He's George W's brother! A Forbes guy said that security cameras were turned off in the guise of updating internet lines at the World Trade Center in the days before the planes hit. Did anyone in the media even *try* to cover this? The buildings came down in perfect freefall. Firefighters claimed they saw a series of flashes... as in pre-planned detonations. Molten steel burned for ninety-nine days. A physics professor took samples of dust collected from a nearby apartment. *Thermite* was discovered. Any rational person knows it was a controlled event. And the steel that was left? Whisked away. *Baosteel* in China bought the stuff for a hundred and twenty dollars per ton. No one was allowed *near* it to test for irregularities."

"We were in Hawaii recently," Vivian told Eddie. "At a luau, I told Fletch I hate discussing race issues. This makes me feel weird as well."

"We've gotta hit it on the head now. Why live a lie? I told you about 'propensity' and 'anomaly'. Here's a new word: 'predication'. The whole thing's a house of cards, you see? If we can establish that nine eleven was an inside job, we can eliminate the TSA at airports that feel up models when they go through checkpoints. We can end the *police state* that's engulfed our country. We can be free again. A few heads will roll, but that's always gone on."

"Predication?" Fletcher asked. "Predicated on a young Earth—let's say six thousand years old—the Protestant ministers control the minds of American masses, correct?"

"More specifically, the evangelical fundamentalists... but yes. You're right and you understand." Little Saigon wasn't far. "I would relish the chance to come along on one of your adventures. I think it's neat what you came across in Sumatra. I think it's wonderful that Viv went to Mali. I want in."

"Our problem is the guys in the Justice Department. Did you know that George Bush—the *first one*—had a guy working as Secretary of the Interior whom believed that environmental problems were not important? The coming of Jesus is imminent, you see? Why fix our country's problems? James Watt's the dude I'm talking about." Fletcher looked at the tension on Eddie's face. He didn't seem to understand. "Those same fuck balls are still filtering the people allowed abroad! They don't want *liberals*! Liberals are the ones who get along with the natives in many places, though. DC is full of old, out-of-touch wankers! Do you believe you could get a passport to visit Vietnam or China? They want ruffians out there twisting and belittling the locals. They need more *Pepsi* sold out there. We're heading out for human rights... or just to have a good time. That's not good *enough* for them."

"So they stigmatize us as lazy or insane, right?" Eddie drank from his beer. Vivian got up and sat at the edge of a bed near the window and gazed

outside. "Listen! I've been watching the news with all these people applying to eighty places and no luck entering the workforce. I've had to do some crazy things myself. You guys are *lucky*. It makes me happy that people can still go out and about without losing all dignity. What is their motivation, Fletcher? You spoke with a chap from the CIA in Beech Grove. *Cornelius Stuart*. Tell me about him! Did he give you clues?"

"It's not his fault, but he's part of the problem. It's a phenomenon, in a lot of ways. It's the angry mob that chases *Frankenstein*. It's the frightened herd of cattle that's gonna stampede off a cliff. It's stupid people that think in straight lines. Last year, their home was valued at ninety thousand dollars. This year, it's a hundred thousand, even. Next year? It's *got* to be worth a hundred and ten thousand! Let's bet the farm on it! These things go in cycles."

"So a bunch of fuck heads get into power the legit way... through democracy. And then what? They'll kill, lie, steal, cheat and everything else to stay there?" Eddie was getting a bit mad. "I thought I had this figured out. You *know* something, though!"

"Democracy? That's a joke, but it's part of it. The *Masons* that George Washington was part of never really changed. They'll bend... but they'll be damned if they'll break their core codes. They'll tell us that that all men are created equal but you know the truth about their attitudes and behaviors. If it walks like a duck and talks like a duck, it's a duck... *right*? They've talked about inclusion, merit, and incentive an awful lot. It's been a *long* time since I'd take 'em at their word. I don't want to believe we're cursed by their existence but I can't wrap my mind around anything else. I think we're watching a changing of the guard, in a lot of ways. It might be a couple of generations, though, before anyone feels *free* in this land again. Do you remember we could pull over to the side of the road and take a piss in a bush?"

"Yep!" Eddie laughed.

"Why do I see *police officers* in my head when my bladder starts to swell while driving down the road? The '*Dream Police*' from Cheap Trick, yeah? One of these days, I'm gonna find a tree to pee on and some wacko with a badge is gonna club my lower spine with his night stick? I should be able to shoo that vision easily out of my head, yes? But I can't. I hold my fuckin' piss in 'til I'm at a grimy gas station with stinky toilets and no bathroom tissue!"

"You've got an imagination," Eddie said. "Drinking and driving? Is that the situation why'd you pull over? That was the case when we were younger on our way to TJ! Pissing out the window in a caravan of cars. *Remember that*?"

"What?" Vivian asked. She turned quickly around. "What?"

"Yeah. You weren't there, honey," Fletcher told her. "This is probably a week after graduation if I remember correctly. We spent dollars at a strip club off of *Revolución*. Fun. Lotta fun."

"I remember working at a pizza joint that year. I recall being tempted to steal from the cash register. It could've been done easily. All anyone had to do was signify a transaction as an over-ring. Once in a while, people would cancel an order or we would type in an incorrect price. If the manager wasn't in the store, we were trusted to tear out the tape and circle the inputted amount from the receipt. That way, the books would balance at the end of the night because we'd be less cash for what the machine printed. I didn't *do* it, though. Someone's

hijacked our government! Whoever it is doesn't have a sense of right or wrong! I want to hunt down that nine eleven steel. *Baosteel* in China? I heard that some of it went to Africa. I don't think the conspiracy is as widespread as it used to be—this whole deal against youngsters or liberals. I think we can travel. I almost think someone wants the real truth to come out. Malaysia recently had a Nuremberg kind of trail against Cheney and Bush. *In absentia*, they found them to be war criminals. Desmond Tutu has concurred that they're villains. Me? It was an inside job. They tried to cover up nine eleven. It's hard to know details when..." Eddie was surprised he got this far speaking. He hadn't come across many people willing to speak about this subject which was so clear in his own life. "*They're the top of the food chain, basically.* As power goes, who's going to topple rogue Republicans within the Pentagon? Who kills the lion in the savannah? I watched a documentary not long ago where *hyenas* attack a pride of lions. I couldn't believe my eyes... but that's probably rare."

"Pat Buchanan's fantasy at a time was to win the presidency and, as Bill Clinton was ceremonially swearing him into power, he'd tell him, '*You're under arrest!*' There was such a big deal made about a stain on a dress. These friggin' perverses pried into a man's social life and wanted to impeach him on the guise of perjury... but they wanted his neck all along. *Bill broke,*" Vivian said. "I think he became one of *them*. He pretends nine eleven was done by merely nineteen hijacking terrorists. He knows the truth!"

"You get what's going on here! These *guys*, as they're riding into the sunset, don't *care*! Toxic waste in our lakes? Overpopulation? An economy worse than anything I've read... *including the Great Depression!* They're going to die... and I don't think they care."

"So what's the plan, Eddie?" The room they rented had two queen-sized beds. Vivian returned to the one near the bathroom where Fletch and Eddie were sitting. "What are we gonna do? Me and Fletch? We've been at this since our junior year in high school. We go out and tackle what we can. We vacation in the *Caribbean*. Then we go out again. I don't think we're making a dent in the world's problems in the grander scheme of things but it makes us feel good. What's your plan?"

"My plan? I don't know. I just want in. I don't believe I'll make any difference, either. I'd like to believe I'm on the right side of things." A few seconds passed without anyone peeping a word. "It might sound stupid or cliché but I want to sleep better at night."

"I'm with you, *man!*" Fletcher said. "I'd love to check out the Ground Zero steel that was shipped to China and India... and, of course, the rumored stuff that wound up in Africa. We could do a documentary film. If they were dismantling that concentration camp in Beech Grove then maybe they're changing their minds about other issues. Lies prevailed for a long time. Maybe they're ready for the truth out there."

"I'd love to go!" Vivian said. "I was just in Africa, Eddie. You'd like it."

"*Sounds like fun,*" Eddie said.

The three of them drank beer for another half hour. Vivian quit drinking after her third one. They agreed to skip town and drive up to Portland. On the way, they'd discuss a more focused plan for going about their lives. They had

barely reached Santa Rosa just north of Frisco when Vivian spoke up. “I have a bad feeling about this, guys. It just seems like we’re getting sucked into someone else’s drama. It almost feels like a *trap*.”

Eddie asked, “Do you remember what our American Government teacher challenged us to do in our senior year? He said to go into *Barnes & Noble* and take account of their political section. Do you remember doing that together? In an economy which was in the black for the first time in a generation, eight out of ten books on the racks slammed Bill Clinton for some reason or another. The two pro-Clinton books were written by Hillary and Bill. I bought *It Takes A Village* that day. I can’t say I’m impressed by them, but I’m terrified by their foes.”

“Yeah?” Vivian asked. “What’s that have to do with this trip to Oregon?”

“I’m with you, Viv,” Eddie said. “The odds are stacked against what we want. We all know it. They poke, they prod. I feel it too—that we’re stepping into a trap. *Apathy*. They say our generation has *apathy*. I’ve spent years-on-end trying to restore this government to something I can be proud of.”

“I disagree with you, *Eddie*, that it’s useless. Remember when Bilbo Baggins noticed a scale gone in the flying dragon? *We have to find that*. Art reflecting life. I’m with you both if ya’ want to hit plan B. If we’re not on the same page, we’ll get smashed when we face our demons.” Fletch searched the radio. “Pull a U-ey if you want, Viv.”

“Hey! I don’t want to be the only one who decides... but I think we ought to think about...” A song played that she liked. Tom T Hall’s “I Love”. She smacked Fletcher’s hand. “Leave it there! Remember this one? Anyone?”

“*I love leaves in the wind... Pictures of my friends.. Birds of the world... and Squirrels*,” Fletcher sang. “Of course I remember!” Vivian’s father had an extensive vinyl record collection. They got into Ziggy Stardust, Pink Floyd, the Scorpions and others from listening to scratchy albums.

Eddie joined in from the back. “*I love coffee in a cup... Little fuzzy pups... Bourbon in a glass... And grass... And I looooooove you, too!* Perfect road song! Takes me back.”

Vivian sang, “*I love honest open smiles... Kisses from a child... Tomatoes on a vine... And onions!*” She smiled and exited the 101 Freeway. “We’re going to *Euro Disney*! We are not going to fight a fuckin’ machine that doesn’t budge! Not at this point in our lives!”

“You know? We’re not alone in experiencing more terror from our own government *during the two thousands* than from some phantom boogeyman. George HW Bush met with Osama bin Laden’s *brother* at the Ritz-Carlton in DC on the day of the attacks! *Carlyle Group!* Illuminati! *Templar!* Dominant hegemony! *Superstructure!* Rogue Republicans! Masons! Secret society! New World Order! Call them what ya’ want! They categorize themselves based off economics! And you can’t just win the lottery and join their special groups! You have to be *old money* steeped in maniac traditions and hatred which ya’ can’t trace the source of!” Fletcher’s blood reached a simmer. “*Thank you for driving, Viv.*”

While Fletcher ranted, Eddie kept singing the song, “*I love winners when they cry... Losers when they try... Music when it’s good... And life! And I loooooove you, too!*”

Vivian and Fletcher met up with Eddie in Venezuela many years back.

The following summer, they vacationed in Paris. Vivian asked, "Is your French passport up-to-date?" She looked at Eddie through the rearview mirror. "Is it on you?"

"Of course! We can work on a Chinese passport some other time if ya' want to follow through with documenting the nine eleven steel. Also, I don't have anything for Africa. Sometime later, if need be."

"This is the way to go, guys!" Vivian felt great. "Let's suppose you're right, Fletcher. Let's suppose the Taliban is really an arm of rogue Republicans in the NSA. We're *obligated* to go to France, right? Otherwise, the terrorists have won!"

"Yes! *Rogue*! You both have referred to this hidden group that everyone suspects exists as '*rogue*'! Do you remember '*The Warriors*' from you dad's VHS collection, Viv?" She nodded, then Fletcher said, "*The Rogues* were one of the gangs! I'm not saying it's a clue to perceiving how these secretive people operate, but maybe we can call them *that*... whenever the subject comes up, eh?"

"I like it!" Eddie rustled Fletcher's hair from behind. "We can be the *Baseball Furies*! Let's grab bats and paint our faces now!"

"Why would we not be the *Lizzies*, Eddie?" She looked back again through the rearview.

"The *Lizzies*? We're in San Francisco and many guys go in drag. This would be the place! I like *Baseball Furies*, though!"

"Baseball Furies it is!" Fletcher claimed.

"Do I get a vote, Fletcher? I'm always gonna be outnumbered for gender issues with you two! This ought to be unanimous!"

"Are you serious?" Eddie asked.

"Yes! I am... but I like *Baseball Furies*! It's cool... but let's not do this in France. I mean, if I have to use the restroom, we're not pulling over to a bush! *Okay*?" Vivian was actually joking but she wondered what the trip would be like. She hadn't felt this vibrant in a long, long time.

"Okay!" Eddie was glad they had changed course. "No pantyhose hanging from the shower!"

"*Serious*?" Vivian asked.

"*No*! You can do what ya' want! It's like old times again!" Eddie started to nod off but he'd have to do most of his sleeping on the airplane. Once the Golden Gate Bridge was behind them, the airport wouldn't be far off.

Vivian's father had been giving her a prepaid Visa debit card the past few years. Fifteen thousand dollars in January and fifteen more in July. She paid for three first class tickets to Paris. Eddie dipped immediately into a deep snooze once the plane took off for a LaGuardia transfer. Viv felt *giddy*. She couldn't remember having this emotion since early childhood. "What's your take on this all? *Fletcher*? Does this mess with your plan of wanting to find *purpose*?"

"Not at all." Fletcher had the window seat and had been locked on the moving cityscape below. "I was in fourth grade or so when the Cold War ended. I remember my dad telling me that one of two things would happen. One, the US would drastically scale back it's military and security outlets. 'The Pentagon might become a mall someday,' he said. 'Or maybe housing for all the urban poor!' Without the Soviet Union and the East Bloc to contend with, why spend so much when it could go elsewhere?"

“Or?” Vivian asked. A stewardess asked them if they’d like beverages. Viv requested seltzer water and Fletcher passed.

“Or? The other choice was to pick a new enemy! Remember the duck in *Babe*? The one that crowed like a rooster every morning? The dudes in the Pentagon, according to my dad, needed *meaning* in the post-Cold War world. They crowed like the duck and agitated Muslims... and liberal Americans. That way they could keep stuffing their pockets with tax payer money!”

“Do you believe that’s what happened?” Vivian felt parched and wanted her drink. “Are you staying sober the whole way to Europe?”

“Do I believe that’s what happened? It’s funny because when you read any blog about nine eleven, it’s the regular people that express the most frustration about common sense questions which weren’t asked. When JFK was shot; when *Challenger* went down; when Pearl Harbor was attacked... Whenever we’ve had national tragedy, an objective investigation was always done within a week or two. The Nine Eleven Commission didn’t start their investigation until *four hundred and fifty-one days* after the crap happened! If you read a point by point summary of any of these so-called *Truthers*... and if you do scanty fact-checking, it is obvious! Our government jacked its own people to maintain non-democratic power.”

“Are you mad? The TSA agent felt your balls not even a half hour ago. Are you mad?” Vivian accepted her water, opened the bottle and drank. “*Refreshing!*”

“I believe they see us as livestock. William Cooper, before he was shot dead by Arizona deputies the month after nine eleven, called it to a tee! *Osama bin Laden would be framed for an attack on New York buildings*. How did he know? Do you believe it was coincidence that government agents killed him? In *A Pale Horse*, he provides literature from many described secret organizations. Zionists refer to the masses as ‘goyim’ in their documents. What’s the word mean? It’s Hebrew for livestock. International businessmen apparently co-opted these practices. That’s where ‘Illuminati’ comes in. Interchangeable words sometimes... but they have their riffs sometimes.”

“You sound like a nut,” Vivian said. “I believe you—I go through it to—but that’s part of the conspiracy... *if there is one*, right? That we sound like nuts for talking about it?”

“This is why I wanted to meet up with you in Hawaii. There was a lot I wanted to get off my chest.” Fletcher reached into his pocket for his iPhone. “*This!*” He opened up photos. “These guys were gettin’ it *on*, Viv! The world around them was ending... and they decided to make love as their last action! Why can’t we be like that? I mean, I’m willing to fight the beast if I think we’re going to win... but this *sucks!* I don’t know if I’m supposed to feel guilty for going to Euro Disney.”

“*Wait?* Should we wait for them to kidnap us... like they’ve done other people? The only ones to become permanent on their shit-list are the William Coopers. We’ve gotta pick our fights and bite off what we can chew. We have these gut instincts for a reason. If we don’t lay off, they’ll want to swat us like flies! Besides... I was a little serious when I said that the terrorists have won if we don’t celebrate life here and there.”

“Why do you think they *care*? I mean, a guy grows his hair a bit and I

can hear them screaming through their fortified walls! What is the deal?" Fletcher's attention was drawn back out the window. "The clouds look so nice. I have mixed ideas about what's going on." In his head, he visualized the gremlin from the Twilight Zone on the tip of the wing. "Do you believe in gremlins, Viv?"

For the rest of the flight to the East Coast, they discussed Bigfoot, sea monsters, trolls, fairies and other mythical characters. Eddie slept the entire time. Once in Paris, they checked into the Hotel Lutetia and rested. Before long, they found themselves in Marne-la-Vallée at Euro Disney, also known as *Parc Disneyland*. They jogged to Fantasyland once inside the gates. *Peter Pan's Flight* was their first ride of choice. Many people weren't sure that Euro Disney would survive but it became a top ten attraction worldwide. They didn't speak a whole lot on the way to Alice's Curious Labyrinth. They felt excited and looked forward to strutting through this hedge-oriented maze attraction. The first part was White Rabbit's Hole. The challenge wasn't difficult. Once through, the maze would become tougher and it was located on higher ground so a scenic view of the park was motivation to get there. They passed through Caterpillar's Mushroom Lair and got to Cheshire Cat Walk without a problem. Vivian wanted to stop to savor the moment. *This is so incredible*, she thought. Instead of chatting, they went along and reached Queen's Maze where the Queen would pop out and say, "Off with their heads!" The goal was to reach the castle in the middle where, from the top, the best view came. Once at the castle, they were startled.

"*Cornelius?*" Fletcher asked. "What the fuck are you doing here? Are you following us?"

"We track your every move!" It was Cornelius Stuart but he wasn't dressed in uniform as he had been in Indiana. "You don't think you could document something like you did... and have us not tail you around a bit?" He wore a powder blue knit collared shirt. His shorts were beige. He wore a smoker's cap.

"We were just talking about how the government creeps us out! What the heck?" Fletcher's gut filled with bile. He wanted to punch Cornelius but he knew that wouldn't be the best long-term answer. "Are you here to abduct us? Bribe us? *Coerce* us? What's up?"

"I have a gift, believe it or not. If you trust me, you'll be pretty much pleased. I'm sure of it." Cornelius waited for Vivian or Eddie to speak but they stood dumbfounded. "See that android? You think it's part of this attraction? It's *not*! His name is Shazbot. You know? After the *Mork & Mindy* program? He was created by the Defense Department. He's a 'soldier of tomorrow'. 'The Terminator' movie isn't far off on what we're trying to achieve. In recent years, we've made *incredible* strides in regards to biped robotic travel. And the skin? You have to look really close to know it's synthetic!"

"*Are you buying us off, sir?*" Vivian asked. "Is that what this is? A *bribe* of some kind?"

"Well, the truth is—the *real* truth—is that we had a change of heart. Not all of us were full on board that we should build that death camp in Beech Grove, for example. This... *android*... It was made for killing! It was made to get into enemy territory and rip people apart. A foot version of the Predator drones!"

"You *are* trying to pay us off?" Eddie asked. He had never met

Cornelius Stuart but he felt like he'd known him for a long time. "You remind me of someone. My grandfather?"

"*Mister Roper*," Cornelius said. "I get it a lot."

Fletcher wasn't convinced that Cornelius was being upfront about all the details. "You said that everyone wasn't onboard with the lunatic station in Indiana. You know of people not on board with this. Am I right?"

"Of course." Cornelius Stuart took off his smoker's cap. "We programmed Shazbot to be friendly."

"*Hello, sir!*" Shazbot said. His head turned awkwardly toward Fletcher. He was fully clothed and could have passed for a security guard. From a few feet away, he looked ninety percent real man and ten percent mannequin. His voice had robotic overtones. If he started to sing a *Zapp & Roger* song, it wouldn't have surprised Fletcher one bit. "Would you like a beer? I understand you like *Budweiser*."

"I like where this is *going*! You can pay me off with this thing!" Eddie said. Kids and parents passed the group perhaps believing they were hired characters for the maze.

"Take it, Fletcher! We already know your plans to document Ground Zero steel. Not many people are as ambitious as you and your girlfriend. We're doing PR, here. I wasn't responsible for nine eleven, though. You have my word on that. Do I know names? Do I know details about what NORAD knew and what they didn't? Yes, but it came to me after the fact."

"Were you on 'need to know' kind of duty?" Fletcher asked.

"*Duuuuude!*" Shazbot interrupted the conversation. "Let's party! Let's *blow* this taco stand! What're we doing here?"

"He's programmed with fifty thousand phrases, Fletch." Cornelius walked toward Shazbot. "Would you like your T-bone steak well-done or rare?"

"*Rare*? What do I look like? A Cheetah? Cook the damn thing!" Shazbot scratched his head. "*Geez!*"

"He has a personality, too!" Cornelius said. "It's programmed but it changes subtly with life events. If you leave him home, he'll become perturbed... just like a real person."

"I'll take him!" Fletcher saw possibilities. "You can assure us that you're dismantling that police state junk that began after your constituents did the nine eleven thing?"

"It didn't work, Fletcher." Cornelius was somber. "The guys wanted total control and made a play for it. *Didn't work*. We fought each other more behind the scenes a bit more than Bill Clinton and Jimmy Carter fought us combined!"

"I'll take the thing, Fletcher! I mean, if you don't want him," Eddie said.

"*Fletcher Browne!* Shouldn't we discuss this privately for even five minutes? It's not like picking which brand of beer we're buying!"

"No, Vivian. Offer's off the table if we don't do this now. Am I right?" Fletcher looked to Cornelius and waited for a response.

Cornelius looked to Vivian, then to Fletcher. "Time? I don't have a lot of time. Real park security is gonna sense something off kilter soon... and if they come or the media does..."

"We'll take him," Vivian said. "Do we feed him? Plug him in?"

"He eats, believe it or not. It's done for blending into society more than anything else. And he has synthetic gastric acids which break apart the food. He *craps*, he wipes, he sweats and he tears! He has a synthetic heart which pumps necessary fluids... and these fluids have been dyed dark red in case he tears his life-like skin. He's very real in how he was patterned after an actual human."

"Shazbot? Are you Orkan? Do you come from *Ork*... like Mork?" Vivian asked.

"*Orkan*? I come from Philly! Ork is a *clown* place!" Shazbot walked to Viv and did a hip-hop move called "the wave". "We can groove tonight. Yes?"

"Of course, Shazbot. Of course!" Vivian laughed. She turned toward Fletcher. "I guess we don't need Eddie around anymore."

"You might be right!" Fletch said. He turned toward his old buddy, "Hear that? You have competition!"

"Shazbot! You watch your step!" Eddie said.

"*Dookie*? Is there dog dookie around?" Shazbot looked down then something happened which wasn't expected by anyone except Cornelius. His eyes lit up red similar to car break lights. "Dookie? Is there dookie?"

"Can we shut off that feature?" Fletcher asked Cornelius. "You said he was completely life-like. What's the deal with his eyes?"

"*Danger*. He has intel that something's going on we should take heed to." Cornelius stepped outside of Queen's Castle. "Here they come!"

"*Terrorists*?" Vivian asked.

"Worse!" Cornelius said. "It's the British paparazzi!"

"Okay!" Vivian saw a few reporters making their way through the shrubbery maze. "We split? What's the plan?"

"*Take him*!" Cornelius Stuart said. "Don't try to contact me! I'll get a hold of you in New York's Central Park one month from today. Four in the afternoon! Enjoy your gift! Take care of him!"

"You didn't tell us anything about maintenance or cleaning!" Vivian knew there wasn't much time. She could feel more than paparazzi. There were patrons that seemed to have caught wind of a noteworthy spectacle. "What if he gets on our nerves?"

"He's like a real human! If he's not wanted, he'll find us. We've given him a government credit card. And he plugs himself in at night. Let him sleep near an electrical outlet. He's like a smart phone that parties!" Cornelius put his smoker's hat back on and approached the paparazzi. "They went *that* way!" He pointed toward the Mad Hatter's Tea Cups. "You're looking for Kim and Kanye, right?"

"Good move!" Eddie said. The paps scurried away from them.

"*Okay*!" Cornelius said. "Now go! Leave this park and then pretend like you're traveling with an A-list star. I mean, we did a good job. We did a very *good* job designing him. We still have a ways to go. People will notice if they stare or look close enough. Don't let the press catch wind of this. I'm doing this for *PR* but there's no use if we lose more ground than we gain."

"You hear that, Shaz?" Fletcher asked. "Me and you gonna go to the Eiffel Tower!"

"Shaz?" Shazbot asked. "Is that some sort of nickname? Oh. I *get* it!"

Eddie extended his hand. "My name is Eddie, Shaz!"

“*Don’t teach him too much!*” Cornelius said. “He’ll freak out! I mean... I haven’t *seen* him freak out... but it’s theoretical!”

“I slap skin, *Corny*,” Shazbot said. “I can call you ‘Corny’, yes?” He shook Eddie’s hand.

“I’ve gotta go!” Cornelius took off back into the Queen’s maze.

“I guess we got ourselves a *robot!*” Fletcher hugged Vivian and gave Eddie a high five.

“*Robot?*” Shazbot asked. “Robot? I have feelings, you know? Does your mother do this to you at home? Talk like you’re not there?”

“How do you know this is not a set up?” Vivian asked Fletcher. “How do we know he’s an android and not some paid agent that’s supposed to spy on us? A *human* agent?”

“*Dude*,” Shazbot said. “You need to chill, gal!” Shazbot went to the floor and started to break dance. His ending move was a spin on his head of about fifty times. He got to his feet. “Have you seen a secret agent do *that?*”

“Shit, man!” Vivian cried a few tears of joy. “We have ourselves a real *robot!*”

“Bitch, you need to lay off on calling me a *robot!*” Shazbot did “the wave” again with his arms. “Let’s blow this taco stand!”

“He repeats himself,” Fletcher said.

“*Bite me*,” Shazbot said. “What’re we gonna do? Stick around ‘til moss grows on us?”

“*Shazbot’s right*,” Eddie said. “Let’s blow this *taco stand!*” The four of them ascended stairs to the top of Queen’s Castle. The view was nice. Eddie started getting the sensation of people closing in. “*Guys?* That feeling’s coming back that people’re looking for us!”

Fletcher looked toward their new android pal. “I wonder why!”

They left *Parc Disneyland* earlier than expected. They visited the Eiffel Tower and got used to interacting with Shazbot. They went back to their five-star hotel and didn’t know what would happen next.

They brought France’s own *Kronenbourg 1664* as their beer of choice. After almost a twelve-pack, Fletcher found himself yelling at Shazbot, “I say *nine eleven was an inside job!* I know you know it, too!”

“Listen, man! *NIST* already debunked all your zany conspiracy theories! Mayor Giuliani explained that computer simulations show how everything went down! What more do you need?” Shazbot drank beer, the group came to find. Inside of his artificial stomach were sensors which could measure blood alcohol content. He was programmed to behave accordingly. He became louder, more belligerent, and stumbled more with each passing drink.

“Computer simulations? I wonder where *your* bias comes from!” Fletcher spoke to Shazbot like he had genuine human emotions. Vivian smiled and looked on. “*Jurassic Park?* Those were computer-simulated dinosaurs! Does that mean that T-Rex is about to eat us?”

“Chill, bro!” Shazbot said. “You get so worked up!”

“*Chill?*” He looked at Vivian and saw she was laughing. “Chill? I know why you’re here now! You were sent to de-program me! *They*—the lads at the Pentagon—want me to be a *yes man* like that sap I worked with at Beech Grove. *What was his name?* Matt Stubbs! That guy!”

"You're so *paranoid*, dude!" Shazbot said. "You probably think I have microphones in my ear holes which pick up your sounds... and transmit them straight to my master in Washington, DC! You think I'm going to film Vivian naked and send those pics to the same guys... so they can stroke off to your girlfriend! And you probably think I'm going to tie you up and put you in a hidden closet when all is said and done!"

"Yes! That's exactly what I think!" Fletcher backed off. "Maybe I'm being a hypocrite. Free will? Do you have free will?"

"Free will? Yes, sir. You're correct that I have an agenda. My underlying motive is to keep you safe. I have a random number generator. Eighty-five percent of my actions are designed to serve that purpose but in the spirit of true artificial intelligence, I may learn from experience and decide things on my own. I understand the meaning of your facial expressions. I know when I'm doing well and when I'm not. I listen to the tone of your speech. One day, I might have as much as thirty percent free will. Time will tell." Shazbot belched. "You will not be disappointed."

"Vivian?" Fletcher called. "Are you hearing this?"

"Let him play tennis! He claims he has reflective motor skills. Let's do that tomorrow. He has gyros in his feet, knees, hips, elbows, head, shoulders, neck and head. I'm curious to see him do anything athletic." Vivian yawned.

"*Athletic?* Yeah, that would be good!" Fletcher looked back to Shaz. "You think you could beat me at tennis?"

"Can? Yes. Will? It depends on if you throw a tantrum." Shaz smiled. "You're tired. Time to sleep?"

"I like you, Shaz!" Fletcher was ready for sleep. "*Good night, guys!* Me and Shaz're ready to hit the hay!"

"Good night, honey!" Vivian said. "Sleep tight, Shaz... or whatever it is you do." She would've said good night to Eddie but he had already passed out. *He sure does sleep a lot*, she thought. Vivian slept deeply next to Fletcher. Her dreams were odd but she would not remember them. If she could, she would know that she was on Sesame Street talking to the *Count*. Before it was over, she'd be snug in a garbage can living next to Oscar the Grouch. Eddie had his own bed and Shazbot plugged in near the lamp between Eddie and the lovebirds. He could've slept on his feet but was programmed to minimize mental discrepancies after hours. He hibernated with his back stiff on the floor. When the Sun crept through the window, Vivian was the first to wake. "Rise and shine! Let's do this thing!"

Fletcher rubbed his eyes. Groggily, "What? Yes. Of course. *Tennis.*"

Shazbot sat upright on the floor. "I've emailed a reservation for *Roland Garros!* My wifi connection is very strong and I have direct connections to Wikipedia, Google and whatever else you may be interested in. I look forward to beating you at tennis, Fletch!"

"Are you guys up already?" Eddie asked. "Can't a dude get sleep around here?" He rubbed his eyes. "Let me in the shower first. I'll wake. I promise."

"You guys make it fast because it takes me longer to get ready!" Vivian watched Fletch and Eddie move around zombified. "I'm gonna get bagels while you guys get dressed."

"Get beer, too! For the courts. This droid is not gonna beat me!"

Fletcher's blood started flowing faster. He asked Shaz, "Hey? Curiosity, here. Whatcha got underneath there? They design you to reproduce?"

"I would blush if I could." Shazbot stood up. "*Ken*. I look like a Ken doll down there."

"Thanks for the honesty, Shaz. Please don't pull your pants down, though." Fletcher laughed. "I can't wait! *Roland Garros*, huh? I'll get to play where Lendl lost to Chang! Wow!"

Vivian stepped outside without makeup. She wore sandals, the same shorts she slept in, and merely slipped a sweater over her T-shirt. Eddie scooted into the restroom and showered. During the wait, Fletcher hit Shazbot up for more conversation. "You say nine eleven wasn't an inside job. How about this? The FBI, with the help of Elvis Aaron Presley, screwed with the Beatles and tried to deport John Lennon. That's a given... but what's your opinion on it? *You do have opinions that aren't pre-programmed, don't you?*"

"Me? Opinion? Yes! I have an opinion on that one! The Beatles? They were subverting American youth. John Lennon with his anti-war stance and his Asian babe. I mean, what would *you* do if you were Uncle Sam?" Shazbot sat on the bed where Eddie had been sleeping.

"Is it safe to say that no matter what I ask, you're going to side with the United States government?" At this point, it didn't bug Fletcher. He wanted to know how *consistent* Shazbot would be. It could help the group in tight situations.

"I will answer your question with another question." Shaz explained, "There was a classic movie called '*Superman*' starring Christopher Reeve circa 1978. In this particular anecdote, the protagonist's love interest, Lois Lane, is flying around Metropolis and they reach her balcony patio. She asked Superman why he came to Earth. 'Truth, justice, and the American way'! That was his answer. Am I to believe I should be any different?"

"You got a good point!" Fletch said. "So the *My Lai Massacre* in Vietnam doesn't bug you? Five hundred unarmed citizens, most of them children and women, massacred by American troops! That doesn't make your blood—or, *eh*—oil boil?"

"We the people of the United States, *in order to form a more perfect union*, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America!" Shazbot's face almost looked proud. Fletcher wondered if he was programmed to have these kinds of expressions. "*In order to form a more perfect union*," he repeated. "Get it? There's no pretense there! We are not saying we are gods as monarchs have pretended. We are a government of men and women trying to do what's right. We miss sometimes, Fletcher. We miss."

"We miss... but let's turn a blind eye to our problems?" Fletcher was becoming angry again. This time, sober, he became perturbed that he was becoming *agitated* from speaking to a machine without genuine human emotions. "Shazbot? I'm going to play you in tennis today... and I hope I beat you. I have to accept your stances, if indeed they're your own. I have friends like you. I send them evidence of government wrongdoing *and* corporate wrongdoing. They ignore me."

Eddie came out of the restroom toweling off his head. "Listen. I hate when people take forever getting ready so I try not to do it. I only need a couple of minutes in there. It is all yours."

"I look forward to beating you on the courts, Fletcher." Shazbot smiled. "You will have red clay all over your shirt when it's all done. I will beat you in straight sets... and I will be dignified enough to pick up the lunch tab when it's over. Time to get ready!"

Fletcher turned toward the restroom. "A *robot* is telling me what to do!" he mused just before shutting the door behind him.

Vivian walked into the hotel room as Fletcher was drying off from showering. She brought a long roll of *French* bread and a bottle of *Micand Côté Rue*. Fletcher put on white shorts, new sneakers, and a gray knit shirt. Shazbot was still wearing the same clothes they'd met him in. He looked like a security guard from *Parc Disneyland*. Fletcher looked at Shaz's dress shoes and figured he'd have an advantage, especially on clay. Vivian spoke, "I didn't want to hunt for bagels all over town. This is the first thing I came across."

"I like red wine," Fletcher said. "Hey Shaz? We don't have time to get you proper gear, but maybe you can switch shoes with Eddie. When I beat you, I don't want any excuses."

"Size ten," Eddie informed. "Yours?"

"Ten and a half. Close enough." Shazbot took off his shoes and exchanged them with Eddie's. "I'll take some of that wine, pretty lady," Shaz said to Viv.

"Good! A drunk cyborg!" Fletch wiped his brow. "I'm already sweating from *thinking* of it!"

Vivian went to her small suitcase. "I was gonna play Fletch. You'll need this." She handed Shaz her racquet. "I hope it's big enough for you."

Shazbot spun it around. "I can play with this."

The quartet left, checked out of Hotel Lutetia and were situated at Court 6 in no time. "It might not be Center Court, but it'll do!" Shazbot began stretching exercises.

"*You don't need to do that, do you?*" Eddie asked. He drank wine from a Dixie cup. "Shaz?"

"Of course not," Shaz responded. "But there are people around and it's imperative that I fit in."

Fletcher took a cue and started stretching. "I might really need it."

Court 6 was near a media compound. Vivian went to check it out. By the time she returned, Fletch and Shaz had already begun playing. "*Forty, love!*" Shaz shouted. He served a hundred-and-ten-mile-per-hour fast one inside Fletcher's corner. "Game!" Shaz updated the score. "Three, oh. First set."

"He broke my serve, Vivian," Fletch said as she approached. "It's not the wine. He's *good!*" Fletcher was merely mediocre when he played on the high school tennis team. His skills did not improve over time. He played for hobby. He was lucky if he could serve half as fast as Shaz. "Love, love!" he shouted. His serve hit the far line and Shaz lunged at it. *Whif*. "You're doing that on purpose, aren't you?" Fletcher's anger returned. "Shazbot? You don't need to hold back!"

"I totally missed it, man!" Shazbot turned his back to Fletcher and

kicked the clay in what seemed to be frustration. “*Let’s go Shaz!*” He spoke aloud in third person. “Let’s go! You can take this twerp!”

“Fifteen, love!” Fletcher took a page from Michael Chang’s playbook. *Underhand*. The serve barely cleared the net. Shazbot ran for it and dove to his chest. He got up and brushed off a cake of rust-colored dirt.

“*Damn!*” Shazbot yelled. “*Damn! Surprised me there!*”

Vivian walked up to Fletcher and kissed him below the ear on the neck. “I’m going to look around. I’ll be back before you finish.”

“*Yeah?*” Fletcher wasn’t sure how to respond. She seemed like good luck. He kissed her on the lips. “Go ahead.” She walked away and Fletch yelled, “Thirty, love!”

There was a discovery that Fletcher made. Shazbot seemed reluctant to embarrass him in front of his long-time girlfriend. When she was gone, he played harder. He even seemed to calibrate his effort so it looked more natural. A hundred-and-ten-mile-per-hour serves became ninety-mile-per-hour serves. He won the first set easily, six to one. Vivian returned to watch all of the second set. Shazbot won, six to four. “We can play French Open men’s championship rules and go until one of wins three sets. You up for it, Fletcher?”

Fletcher shook his head. “Nah. I’m good!”

Shazbot ran toward the net and cleared it easily. The jump looked awkward. It wasn’t a *hurdler’s* jump. It was more like a video game jump Luigi or Mario might make. He got to Fletch and shook his hand. “I could see you getting frustrated. I thought you were gonna get all *John McEnroe* on me!”

“John McEnroe?” Viv asked. “With his looks, he’s more like an Agassi!”

“You’re a sport, Shazbot!” Fletcher dusted himself off. “*Ready for lunch guys?*”

“I thought it’d never come!” Eddie said. “*Bread*, Vivian? It was good... but I want to stuff some *frog legs* into my stomach! *Escargot!* I don’t care! I want something *good*.”

“Let’s head out!” Vivian said. She was happy. She took her racquet back from Shaz and they headed to their rental car and went looking for a bite to eat.

At Grissom Air Force Base in Indiana, Matt Stubbs finished up work as Shazbot was being introduced to Fletcher, Viv and Eddie at *Parc Disneyland*. He was relieved when it was completed. As Fletcher and Shazbot wrapped up their tennis match, Matt found himself strapped to a chair alone in a musty hangar. In front of him was a black-and-white tube television on wheels. Under the TV was a VHS player. On the screen, *Malcolm X* spoke. Matt couldn’t make sense of what was going on. Tom McKay entered with a white porcelain tray of brownies. He wore a decorated army uniform and Mad Hatter’s hat. He took a brownie and held it to Matt’s mouth without saying a word. Matt ate. He held another, then another. When the brownies were finished, Tom exited. Matt noticed that there was a tail behind Tom—a fluffy, black tail that could’ve come off a huge mutant cat. Huge stereo speakers were situated in all corners. *The Glenn Miller Orchestra* played in the background. Matt looked in the direction where Tom had entered and then exited. A large bunny approached, pink and fluffy, perhaps six and half feet tall. This bunny twirled a large bag of aging socks. The bunny

danced to the music then put his face close enough to Matt's nose that they touched. The bunny danced some more then began to swat Matt across the face with the socks. There was probably a golf ball inside, but it was cushioned by another sock. It smelled of vinegar. The bunny stopped dancing. He put up his pointer finger and shook it. *No, no, no*, the gesture said. The bunny danced as he headed toward the exit. Matt began to feel stoned. In came a midget wearing a maroon *Zoot suit*. In his left hand, he held a classic silver pocket watch attached to his pants by a lengthy chain. He looked at the face of it then spat at Matt's shoes. He grunted and pouted in a tiny circle. In his right hand he held a soup can stripped of its original label. He looked inside the can then walked up to Matt. He spat on Matt's chest then threw the liquid contents at Matt's face. It was urine. *Matt could smell that it was urine*. The midget folded his arms then exited, still in pouting fashion. Next came a lady wearing a flowing yellow dress, blue top, and a red ribbon fixed atop her short brunette hair. *Cinderella?* Matt wondered. He was feeling more and more high. *Cinderella? No. That's Snow White*. She had an opaque Tupperware bucket full of flour. There were no dances or pouting around. She walked straight up to Matt and dumped the bucket on his head. Matt blinked and all she could see of his face was his eyes. He shook his head but flour clung to wet urine that the midget had tossed. Snow White held up a mirror. Matt looked at himself. Tears rolled down his face and he could see thin fleshy paths. He bowed his head and wished himself away. He hoped he was dreaming.

It was no dream. Matt sat strapped in his chair for three hours after *Snow White* left. Tom McKay came back. This time he wore gray Levi's Dockers, Penny Loafers, and an Oxford button-up shirt. There was a strong cologne smell that Matt wasn't familiar with. Matt trembled, but he asked, "What is this? Is the bunny a symbol of something? Did I *screw* up?"

"*Bunny?*" Tom asked. "Bunny? Did you see a bunny in here?"

"*Yes!* I think you know the one!" Matt watched Tom play dumb. Tom looked around as if he was trying to amuse a toddler.

"Bunny? I don't see a bunny?" Tom lit a cigar. "What are you doing watching *Malcolm X*?"

"I see where this is going, Tom!" Matt cried. "It's so you can deny the nature of work done here!"

"*Nature of work?* You're hired to test these buildings for safety! This closed-down base could be used again! How were the walls when you tested them?"

"*I got it!*" Matt said. "Don't peep a word. I already know! You can let me go! You can trust that I'm not going to say anything!"

"Anything about *what*, Matt?" Tom got closer to Matt's face. "You're not *stoned*, are you?"

"You came and gave me brownies! Stoned? You would know! You wore a cat's tail from your rear! Come on! Please quit with these games!" Matt looked upwards. The music stopped.

"You're looking around for what, Matt? You look like you're having some kind of delusion! Are there bunnies floating in the air?" Tom McKay puffed his cigar.

"*Glenn Miller!* What happened to the music?" Matt looked up again. The music came back on, but now it was barely audible. "It's back! *The Glenn*

Miller Orchestra.”

“I don’t hear anything,” Tom said. “Maybe you need time off, Matt.”

“So don’t ask about the frickin’ *pee* that was thrown at me?” Matt was mad but he was catching on. *Categorically deny. That’s their method.* “Listen, Tom. I don’t hear any music. It’s my memory.”

“This is done for the greater good, Matthew Stubbs. It’s for your own good. You’re gonna get a wife, someday. You’re going to be drunk in a bar. You’re going to want to talk about your *life*.” Tom McKay puffed and blew smoke in Matt’s face. “Are you going to say anything if your story is attached to a frickin’ bunny?”

“Okay. Seriously. I’m getting paid for my work, right? You’re not going to *kill* me.” Matt waited for an answer. Instead, Tom left the room. An hour later, the pink bunny rolled the TV away. An hour after that, Snow White unstrapped Matt from his chair. No words were exchanged and Matt didn’t stick around to find out what the midget might do.

Vivian, Fletcher, Eddie and the *android* stopped at Micky’s deli near *Lycée Victor Hugo*. They ordered sandwiches to go. They decided to make a run to London before the day ended. None of them had gone through the Channel Tunnel and it seemed to be the thing to do. They chatted about *Les Misérables* and hurried along. Of all things, they wanted to see *Big Ben* and hang out around the Thames. Everything went as clockwork. When they checked into London’s *Umi Hotel*, Fletcher received a text message from Matt. He told Vivian, “It would mean a lot to Matt if we meet him at Six Flags in St. Louis on Friday. What should I do?” He turned to Eddie, “Matt’s this guy I worked with at that gloomy place in Indiana.”

Vivian said, “I was hoping to travel to Spain or Germany next. *Six Flags will do.*”

“The guy’s kind of fidgety,” Fletch told Eddie. “I almost think he likes the line of work he does. It’s murky... and I’ve been involved... *but I don’t like it.*”

“Six Flags sounds like a blast,” Eddie said. “Are you guys starting to feel guilty about the way we’re living? I just figured we’d be at each other’s kids’ soccer games by now in life.”

“What about me?” Shazbot asked. “Doesn’t anyone care for my input?”

“*Shaz?* Do you like roller coasters?” Vivian put her hand on Shazbot’s shoulder. She was treating him more and more like a real person.

“*Like roller coasters?* I love them! Don’t you remember where we met?” Shazbot jumped up and down a couple of times... then he span around a few times in a pirouette. “I like to get dizzy! I hope they have tea cups! I love the tea cups!”

“Okay! This one’s settled too. Go ahead and text Matt. We’ll be there Friday. Make sure he has the *Foursquare* app and it’ll be easy to meet.” Vivian went into the restroom and looked at herself in the mirror. She came out. “I feel *so* beat but my face doesn’t show it.”

“I think I’ve had the flu,” Eddie said. “I’m not usually this much of a drag.”

“*Alright.*” Fletcher fiddled with his iPhone. “Text sent. We’ll see Matt this Friday!”

The group flew from England the next day. They had a full day to rest up for yet another amusement park. They met Matt Stubbs at the Six Flags gate at ten in the morning. He told Vivian, "Nice to see you again! I'll always remember you as the 'Polaroid girl'!"

Fletch introduced Eddie. "This is our pal. We graduated high school together in the late nineties."

Matt said to Eddie, "You have great friends! Who's the other guy?"

"Oh!" Fletcher almost forgot. "*This?* We call him '*Shaz*'! You'll like him!"

"*Hello!*" Shaz signaled with palm up and fingers splayed—the *Vulcan greeting sign*.

The group paid for their entrance. Matt approached Fletch as if he was going to spill a secret. "You know how they tell you to scream '*fire*' in a parking structure if you're being assaulted or raped?" Matt tried to read Fletch. "Have you heard of that?"

"Yes! People hardly respond to '*help*' cries. They fear for their own safety. '*Fire*', though, is manageable." Though it was early, the park was starting to fill. Fletch's first thought was to blow Matt off but he knew why they were at Six Flags. Matt was yelling "*fire*". Fletcher was sure of it. "Vivian?"

"Yes?" Vivian headed toward a lollipop vendor. She pulled out a few twenties and picked out an oversized pink and white swirled candy. "Yes? Honey?"

"*Matt got molested or something,*" Fletcher said. He didn't know any other way to handle it.

"There are *plenty* of lines for us to stand in while you explain yourself!" Vivian removed the wrapper from her treat and licked.

"*Fire*, right? This place is your cry! Matt?" Fletcher looked over at Shazbot. They bought him new clothes. He was in a three-piece suit. It's the way he had to have it.

"Yes!" Matt blushed. "They *did* something to me," he explained. "I don't know if you need the details, but I won't be speaking about the project we were part of."

"*Neither will I!*" Fletcher said. "Not 'cause they scared me! They bought me off! *With him!*" He pointed at Shaz. Shaz waved his hand and his eyes lit up bright red again.

"Holy crap!" Matt said. "Is he a...?"

"*Don't say 'robot'!*" Vivian cut in. "His full name is '*Shazbot*'! We call him '*Shaz*' for short."

"Tell me, Matthew Stubbs," Shazbot spoke. "Did they anal probe you?" A good comedian would incite laughter with timing and delivery. Shazbot was dry and off. "I'm kidding of course... but *really?*"

"I got slapped around by a bunny!" Matt felt humiliated but was desperate to get it off his chest. "*A pink bunny racked my ass up while I sat watching old speeches?*" Fletch, Viv, Shaz and Eddie all stopped in their tracks and listened. "Then a midget threw piss into my eyes!"

"*Did they threaten you?*" Fletcher asked. "It's weird because it's a crap shoot. On us, they used an incentive method. They *gave* us something. You? They're using *fear*."

"Fear? My face is still wet when *Snow White* comes in the room and tosses white powder at me! Did I tell you I was stoned on brownies while being tied up?" Matt felt good enough there. He didn't feel the need to add more. "I've come here every year since I was thirteen years old. *Boomerang* or *Ninja* would be good coasters to start with. You up?"

Vivian wanted to get wet. They headed to *Thunder River* and didn't talk too much about abnormal social occurrences for the next few hours. At dusk, they had enough and headed to leave. When they reached the parking lot, Fletcher told Matt, "*Shazbot here?* He's a hoot! You get along with him well. I want you to take him home. I need him back in a few weeks... but you could use the company!"

"*Matt!*" Shazbot said. "What do ya' say?" He extended his arms to Matt for a hug. "I will not thump you around with weighted socks! It will be *fun*."

"I guess so," Matt said. "I had a blast. I had to tell someone what happened. No one but you would understand. I was going crazy."

"Listen, man," Fletcher said. "We looked up Eddie, here, because he went through this thing before anyone else I know. I can't say I can help because it still happens to us—the *bizarre stuff*—but I think they're laying off a little."

"I think so too," Vivian said. "Did I tell you I was paranoid that Laura Bush was spying on me with psychics?"

"No!" Matt said. "It's not a midget throwing *piss* in your face... but I bet it sucks... to think they're all after us!"

"*Chill!*" Shazbot said. "These are *Rogues*. They will be dealt with." He put his hand in the air. "Slap me some skin!"

Matt gave Shazbot a high five. Vivian, Fletcher and Eddie headed toward their rental car. Matt led Shazbot to his small pickup. When Viv started the ignition, she said, "When we settle and get married, guy... We need to buy a car of our own!"

"*I hear ya'!*" Fletcher said. He turned around to check on Eddie. "You're not going to conk out, are you?"

They stayed another night in St. Louis. At six in the morning, they sat together at a booth inside a *Denny's*. "I think it's time for me to split off. It was great to see you two again." Eddie drank black coffee.

"I wish we could do this for another couple of months. I'm getting *pooped*." Vivian looked at a menu for a waffle combination.

"We're gonna head to DC—me and Viv are." Fletcher put his menu down. *Grand Slam*. He always got the same thing. "I've got some issues. DC! That's where we'll head."

"I'll call you this summer," Eddie said. "*Fourth of July*. We should do something for the *Fourth*."

"I can't think that far! What is this? March?" Vivian noticed a waitress holding a pad. She ordered a number fifteen, Fletch ordered a Grand Slam, and Eddie simply ordered toast. "You can have my ham," Vivian told him.

"Do you want to fly or drive?" Fletch asked. "I'll drive if you want to sleep. I don't want to deal with another airport right now."

"*We can drive*," Vivian said. She felt a bit sentimental. *What if it's another fifteen years before we get together again?* she wondered.

"It was one of the better times I've had in a while," Eddie said. "At the

very least, we ought to hook up in a year at the same *Motel 6* in Balboa if you get too busy.”

Fletcher wasn’t sure when they’d get together again. The route to DC from St. Louis went directly through Indianapolis along Interstate Seventy. Vivian was passed out cold and leaning far back in her passenger’s seat. Fletcher had a mini impulse to wake her and take a detour to the death station in Beech Grove. Things had been so serendipitous. No need to mess with it now. They spent the night at a motel near Pittsburgh and then they met up with Cornelius Stuart at the DC Ritz-Carlton the following afternoon. “This is the hotel where senior Bush met with Shafiq bin Laden on September 11, 2001! *Creepy*, huh?” Fletcher asked. Vivian laughed boisterously like it was a punch line. They reached room 313 and knocked. Cornelius opened. “*Salutations!*” Fletcher said. “Shazbot worked out just fine! But we *lost* him!”

“I know what happened to him!” Cornelius opened the door wider and extended his hand inward. “Come in!”

Vivian had a smile from cheek to cheek. Her fears of the government evaporated.

“Did you invite *Shafiq*?” Fletcher asked.

“*What?!!*” Cornelius asked. “*Shafiq*?”

“Never mind,” Fletcher said. “A little *conspiracy* humor!” The bathroom swung open. It was a chimpanzee. She strutted to the group. She wore a red hat which could’ve been made by draping velvet over a coffee can. There was a red tassel and a red vest with gold trim. “*Who is this?*”

“This is *Sandy!*” Cornelius said. “She communicates!” There was a device on the bed that looked like an gigantic *Blackberry*. “Here, *Sandy!*”

The chimp typed on it. “Hello!” Sandy’s machine spoke for her.

“If you liked *Shazbot*, you’re going to love *Sandy!*” Cornelius handed Sandy to Viv.

“You look *soooo* cute!” Viv scratched Sandy at the chin. She turned toward Cornelius. “Listen! I liked *Shazbot*... but we can’t keep *doing* this!”

“Yeah. We’re not married. We don’t have kids. Someday, we’ll settle and maybe have a child... but...” Fletch’s heart began to warm. Sandy lifted her hat in an adorable gesture. “We can take her for a few days! Give us the info! How do we take care of her?”

“Take her to the boardwalk. Jersey’s all ripped up. There’s construction workers all over the place. *Make up a story but don’t say the government gave her to you.* Sandy’s trained to take coins. I know she’s a bit big for it, but it’s her cover.” Cornelius turned his back to them and walked to the window.

“Fletcher?” Vivian asked. “What do ya’ say?”

“I can see us spending time on the Jersey Shore! Yes! This can give us a clue if we’re fit to be parents!” Fletch put his hand out. Sandy gave him five. “She’s hip! *Really hip!*”

“She knows how to use firearms!” Cornelius turned back around. “And she knows how to use a taser!” He reached for Sandy’s device. “This? Keep it charged when she’s asleep. She’ll talk a lot from the backseat of whatever car you’re in. Don’t give her too much chocolate! She’ll beg, but then she’ll be wired all night! And beer? *Three tops!*”

“I think we’re going to *party!*” Fletcher’s exuberance dipped. “Hey!

You said you know what happened to *Shazbot*! You know Matt Stubbs took him. What do you know about Matt getting tied up?"

"Tom did it on his own," Cornelius said. "We're trying to stop those behaviors. Tom's at the caboose of this thing. Kindness will come in time... or he'll stop drawing checks from us!"

"I want to go to *Guantanamo Bay* after we return Sandy." Fletcher took her from Vivian. "I want to get back into photography. I don't like to stay away from it for too long."

"Guantanamo? I can pull some strings." Cornelius scratched his chin. "I talked to brass—*inner workings*, you know? They like what you and Vivian do."

"So it's a done deal?" Fletcher bounced Sandy like a baby. "She's still young, isn't she?"

"Done deal? I can get you a *helicopter*. The brass wants you to buzz over Matt's house. They don't like him for some reason. Remember believing they were screwing with you? The guys in the sky? Well? Now ya' know. We *screw* with people. I don't think that's going to change." Cornelius turned back toward the window.

"Guantanamo!" Fletch let Sandy down and she went to her device. "I want *Guantanamo*! Buzz Matt's place? Sounds like a joke but I know *someone* is serious."

"Babe?" Vivian called. "Sandy wants to show you her display screen."

Fletcher read it. *LET'S GO*. "She's *quick*!" Vivian and Fletcher drove with Sandy that night and they stayed at *Harrah's* in Atlantic City. The next day it would be Jersey Shore. This kind of activity went on during the next few weeks. Fletch and Vivian would take the chimp back and Cornelius would offer an exotic parrot reciting top secret government information. They'd spend a few days with the parrot then be given a white mouse trained to infiltrate a house in order to find and retrieve house keys. Before long, Fletch was in *Guantanamo* documenting the holding cells of purported nine eleven terrorists. He got to visit *Hangar 17* at JFK Airport in Queens where roughly a hundred and fifty mangled Ground Zero pieces of steel were kept. Even though he wasn't allowed to bring in his Nikon, he embraced a tiny bit of closure that seeped in regarding the Towers incident.

It was early April when Vivian slept next to Fletcher and woke with a realization. "They're training you to replace Cornelius," she said. They were at the Ritz-Carlton in DC. "That's why they're *schmoozing* us."

It was the middle of the night when she spoke to him. He had been laying flat on his back in the bed, not able to sleep. "I've been wondering about that. You know they feed turkeys an awful lot before Thanksgiving. They *stuff* them, but they have ulterior motives. I wonder what they're doing with us. The NASA flight simulator in Houston. That's when I started thinking that torture was out of their plans for us."

"My dad, Fletcher. He's a rich man and he's mysterious even to me." She wanted him to respond. "Maybe it's a link with him? A buddy system? Rich watching after rich? I know they didn't choose us for anything we've done in high school."

"It's scary. I miss Sandy, actually. I wonder how things turned out with

Shazbot and Matt.” All of a sudden, Fletch’s eyes felt heavy. “I could sleep now. I think I needed this talk. I have *many* things swirling in my mind.”

“You said that the first day you met Cornelius, he told you there are winners and losers in the world—there always has been and always will be. I think maybe he wants us to be on *the winning side*.” She rubbed Fletch’s belly under the bedspread.

“Winning? You would think there’d be less confusion.” Fletch rubbed his eyes. “I’m tired now, darling.” He turned to her and kissed her. “I’ve gotta get some rest.” They slept until ten in the morning, checked out (*yet again*) from the hotel, then headed to *Murry & Paul’s* for breakfast. Conversation was light until they were served identical meals of fried eggs with biscuits and gravy. Vivian ordered waffles on the side. Fletcher pondered, “Okay. The bulk of the nine eleven steel was supervised by FEMA and was sent in mass to New Jersey. If there’d been no wrongdoing, why did it not stay there and become used for the new so-called *Freedom Tower*? Why sell it quickly for pennies on the dollar to foreign countries? Why pay top dollar to US Steel or whoever for the material needed for the new skyscraper?”

“You’re thinking too much again!” Vivian said. She looked around the restaurant. “I want to be ordinary like everyone else someday.” She looked at him in the eye. “Are you with me? Are we going to be *normal people* someday?”

“Do you not remember what it was like to be a student at a high school growing up in Sacramento? We wanted to challenge *everything*. We thought we would end government corruption. Now? I wonder if we’re in complicity with them. I’m wondering if we’re becoming the ‘*them*’ that we used to argue about.” Fletcher ate. “I know the answer. You die under the iron fist or you convert.”

“It’s not that easy.” Vivian poured blueberry syrup on her waffles. “*Nine eleven* has passed and national wounds are starting to heal.”

“Okay! I can accept that.” Fletcher still felt confused. He felt like a feather in the wind. He counted his blessings every now and then. Vivian was still with him. “We can plough forward.”

“I want to meet up with Eddie for *Fourth of July*. We need a break from this sooner or later.” She cut her waffles and ate. “I want to be on a California beach this summer.”

“I’m with you. Thank you for listening.” Fletcher ate and hardly spoke until the check came. “Are you ready for another outlandish event? I can feel one coming!”

Nothing out of the ordinary happened to Viv and Fletch during the next few days. They found themselves at a Washington Nationals baseball game on a day that Matt Stubbs took Shazbot to a Burger King in his hometown of Terre Haute. Matt showed Shaz his iPad. “See these little guys? I control them!” The app was *The Tribes*. “I can tell them what to do! I am their *god*!”

“Tell that one to drink a beer!” Shaz suggested. “I want to see him dance like the Jitterbug.”

“It’s not like that. I can tell them to cut trees, build huts, gather food... I like your idea, but...” Matt closed the app and opened another. “This one is *Candy Crush*. You have to connect lines of different colored hard sweets. *See?*”

Shazbot didn’t seem interested. “When are Viv, Fletcher and Eddie coming back?”

"We'll probably see them in summer. Tonight, we're going to see a *Nine Inch Nails* tribute band! Do you like Nine Inch Nails? 'I was up above it... Now I'm down in it'? It's the story of my life."

"I could dig a concert. Would you like to do some top secret spy work? I could call my peeps in Washington!" Shaz scarfed down his Whopper.

"*Spy work?* No sir!" Matt dipped fries into ketchup then stuffed them into his mouth. Before swallowing, he continued, "I'm *done* with clandestine government operations!"

"You can't just quit!" Shazbot crumpled his burger wrapper. "It's like the *mafia*. They'll hunt you! They'll track you down. Your path of least resistance is to volunteer a few times a year. You gotta make 'em think you're cool with the program."

"*Otherwise?*" Matt asked. His etiquette wasn't all that great but he didn't care. Would a robot really be hurt by bad manners? He stuffed half his chicken sandwich into his mouth and chomped.

"Otherwise they'll get paranoid! Do you know what government agents do when they get paranoid? They pretend everything's fine in their lives... *then they tag YOU as being paranoid!* Then you can't work, your girlfriend dumps you, roommates move out, you can't make rent, you lose your job... and you wind up on *skid row* in Los Angeles, California eating shoe soup and doing tricks for twenty dollars a piece if you're lucky!"

Matt washed his food down with Dr. Pepper. "You know? You're right! You get me a good gig and I'll spy on my own mom!"

"Another thing!" Shazbot looked around the restaurant conspicuously to make sure no one was listening. "Stop dumping on George W Bush!" Shaz wiped barbeque sauce from his chin. "His dad was a one-termer! In 1992, the country slapped him in face by electing William Jefferson Clinton! You would be building all these special death camps if you were in his shoes!"

"*What?*" Matt looked at Shaz's face thinking it could be a joke. "What? Is that why they dumped you on us? For propaganda?"

"*No!*" Shaz sipped tea through a straw. "He *had* to raise taxes! I'm talking about senior Bush. Do you know what a recession the country was in?"

"First of all, he promised he wouldn't do it! Second of all, I'm not going to sit here arguing with a robot who's looking up at the Sun and calling it the *Moon!*" Matt got up. "Are you ready?" He opened his wallet. "These, my buddy, are the tickets to a very fun night!" They read "Head Like A Hole" on the top and "Nine Inch Nails Tribute" right below. The venue and time were also printed with a note "standing room only" on the bottom.

"*This rocks!*" Shaz said. "It will be a holler!"

Eddie Callypso had a good time around Shazbot. From *Six Flags*, he returned to his home in Glendale, California. He had *such* a good time that he began to think that robots were hip and he ought to maybe try computer dating of some kind. *Artificial intelligence has come a long way*, he figured. He checked out *match.com* and hooked up with a lady named Nancy Moore. On the night that Matt took Shaz to a Nine Inch Nails tribute band show, Eddie hooked up with Nancy at BJ's in Huntington. Nancy's skin was olive and her eyes sparkled. Eddie was impressed. They ordered pizza with chicken and alfredo sauce. Eddie also ordered a pitcher of Hefeweizen Wheat and bypassed the seven sample beer

shots. "I'd like to tell you that you look *splendid*," he said after pouring beer for both of them. "I have to start with that."

"*Thank you*," Nancy said. "Way back when, I was on *Fifth Wheel* and *Eliminate*. I'm not really new to computer match-ups. I've done this before." She sipped her beer. "You don't have to worry or be nervous. I've seen a lot and you're not going to scare me away—*not in a public joint at least*."

"I picked you because you wrote on your résumé that you had mild paranoia of being watched." He drank half the beer in his mug. "I get that too... *pretty bad*."

"I've been on TV is all," Nancy said. "I'm a universe away from being an A-list star... but I've been on *TV*. I think people know who I am when I show up places. I know I was only featured on a couple of dating shows... but still."

"My dad was in the army and became a weapons lobbyist when I went to high school in Sacramento. It was weird growing up. My dad had this thing about *rations*. He said he lived on subsistence pay and other allocations. I thought I could get rich when we moved down here near Hollywood. I kept thinking he was *sabotaging* me every time I could get a part as an extra in a movie. Call me crazy, but..." Eddie stopped the waitress when she passed. It was the same gal that they had when Viv and Fletcher were around. Eddie ordered garlic bread. "And my dad had *enemies* I suppose—*political enemies*—because he lobbied for arms. There are people, especially nowadays with all the shootings, that're trying to outlaw many kinds of firearms."

"Sounds nuts." Nancy smiled. Eddie liked her smile. It looked genuine. Nancy said, "I believe anything today. I had crazy things happen. I'll tell you tonight at the pier if that's where we're going next."

During dinner, Eddie talked about helicopters trailing him to Joshua Tree National Park. He talked about believing that ghosts were talking to him... but not from dead people. He told Nancy it was like "A Beautiful Mind", the movie. *Phantom government agents talked to him when he was alone*. He talked about Fletch's work in Beech Grove and he mentioned that Vivian believed Laura Bush had psychics honed in on her. "It's total bullshit," Eddie said. "It's like the Twilight Zone when a man and lady run around an empty town and everything is fake. Cars don't have engines and phone booths don't work. Finally, they look up at the end and see a giant young girl. She was an alien or something, even though she looked human, and they were like dolls to her. *Play things*."

"Do you feel *warehoused*? Do you feel like they're *storing* you for a reason or another? Do you feel like you're a hostage? Do you feel like somewhere in DC there are children in adults' bodies fooling with us like Lego? I get those feelings." Nancy wondered if Eddie was having a good time. These seemed like weird topics for a first date.

"I don't know what happened. I get on the road and it seems like *everyone* is lost around me." When the waitress passed by, Eddie asked for the check. "I graduated from *Rosemont High* in 1997 and that summer, my dad took me to a Dan Lungren fundraiser—he was the *Republican* candidate for governor after Pete Wilson. I remember my dad saying what *bullshit* Pete Wilson was, though. He said he wouldn't run for president... and he did. He was *totally* against illegal immigration in all his speeches but he had an undocumented housekeeper. I was at the fundraiser and I talked to someone about it. *They got*

*pissed. Plus, my dad's brother was there, Uncle Boom Boom. His real name was Jasper but he went by Boom Boom because he had a garage door company, Boom Boom Doors LLC. He had deeper pockets than my dad and you had to walk on eggshells around him. If you had a five o' clock shadow, he'd just as soon slap your face and call you a hippie radial. I wanted to be a businessman when I was young—I mean, I really wanted the *money* that came with it—but that night, I realized I wasn't what they were. It felt evil on some level. They talked crap about scum bags living in urban slums and how they were gonna clean it all up by building prison after prison. Once in a while, they'd make snide remarks about me. I mean, they wouldn't mention me by *name* but they would describe stuff about me... *like my shoes or hair.*"*

"I understand," Nancy said. "Do you want to finish this talk near the ocean?"

"It freaked me out is all I want to say." He left money for the bill and for a tip. "They pretend like I *picked* the side I'm on. I'm liberal. It feels great. They pushed me out as much I wanted to wind up on the political left, though."

"Let's go." Nancy got up and pulled Eddie from his seat. "I want to put my feet in the water when we get to the beach." In fifteen minutes, they were under the pier with their shoes off. It was dark and there was no sign of the Moon. They played around and then sat together on the sand. "So you think your life was stolen from you?" Nancy decided she would say "yes" if asked out again.

"*Stolen from me?* I don't know what the fuck was going on! It's funny because my buddies, Fletch and Viv, were given this robot because we kept ranting about injustices. '*Shazbot*' is his name. This *android* had this perpetual boner for anything right-wing—that was his programming. He raved about W because there wasn't another *nine eleven*... but we all know he was in on the original!" Eddie reached for Nancy's hand and held it. "I haven't felt this good in a long time. There were times when cops would park outside my house and pretend they were attending to some aloof business. I felt like I was on the run for about ten years... just for being willing to talk about alternative theories of what was really going on in world affairs. The whole *Diebold* thing in 2004 when Bush stole the election? And this is after the Florida fiasco in 2000! Do you know what Dubya told Matt Lauer was his worst moment?"

"Wait!" Nancy held up her finger. "I know this! It was after Katrina when *Kanye West* said that Bush doesn't like black people during a live telethon for the hurricane victims!"

"Yes!" Eddie shook his head. "Enough about that. It'd be nice to take you out again." Nancy leaned over and smooched Eddie on the lips. He was happy and wanted to introduce Nancy to Viv and Fletch, maybe in the summer.

On the day after Eddie's first date with Nancy, Fletch and Viv stood in a Madison, Georgia field with Fletch's father, Walter Browne. "Who's the short guy?" Walter asked. He was referring to the midget whom tossed urine into Matt's face. This "short guy" wore a black tuxedo.

"CIA, dad," Fletcher said. He shook his father's hand. "You remember Viv, of course."

Vivian smiled and said, "*Long time, no see!*"

Fletcher gestured toward the "short guy" and introduced him, "This is *Spencer*—Spencer Lafayette. I got involved in this sensitive photo session, one

thing leads to the other, and before I know it... I'm taking home chimps, androids and vertically challenged."

"*You can call me 'midget'.* In these circumstances, I see no reason for political correctness." Spencer walked to a black plastic storage box. "We don't have to call these 'polymer vaults'. They're coffins. They're big enough to hold all three of you. They can probably hold ten people *my* size."

"It goes by 'Hercules', dad." Fletcher frowned. "Remember Eddie Callypso? His dad lobbied for the sale of these to *FEMA* at a time."

"And there used to be a half million here in this field? Where have they gone?" Walter Browne scratched his head.

"*Chicago*... I think." Fletch handed his father some photos. "This is a couple of years ago when everything was stored here. One hand doesn't know what the other's doing. When Viv originally sent me here, I convinced myself that these were in case an emergency deadly virus got into our world... like in the Dustin Hoffman movie. The *Center for Disease Control* is in Atlanta. Made sense to me... but I came across *this*." Fletch handed over the Beech Grove death station pictures. "Concentration camp in America's heartland."

Walter Browne shook his head. "*World War III* began on September 11, 2001. We lost a war! I can't get over that our country is *gone* somehow!"

"I've been going around to Guantanamo, Grenada, Panama and other places. Spencer's been filling us in on shit that's blown my mind. I thought I could handle anything. Supposedly, they've withdrawn. We call them the *Rogues* after a gang in a movie." Fletcher took his Nikon and snapped a few times. "I've gotta document the 'after' here. I wanted to meet for lunch in Atlanta but Vivian convinced me I ought to show you what we're working on."

They gazed quietly at a couple of hundred plastic coffins which were stacked like paper bowls. Walter's Hummer was parked behind Fletch's rental car. Walter finally broke the silence, "There's a place called *Fox Brothers Bar BQ* on the Twenty just as you get into the city. Follow me there?" He looked at Spencer. "Would you like to ride shotgun with me?" Spencer's face lit up. He nodded "yes" and climbed into Walt's tall four-by-four without help. Before long, they were ordering burgers and fries.

"They were surrendering to *camera crews*! The war took a hundred hours! You said it was your proudest moment as an American!" Fletcher had his father's full attention—a *rarity*. "Bush was gonna get elected in a *landslide* come 1992! A war hero! Our last real war was in Vietnam and it didn't go well. But something happened! *'It's the economy, stupid!'* Remember that? And we're going through it now! *Sequester*? What's that? Funny thing is that ol' man Bush *called it*! Voodoo economics! When he ran against Reagan in 1980, the national debt was one trillion dollars. It quadrupled under good ol' *Ronnie* and now it's sixteen trillion and counting! So I think Bush had motive!"

"*George Herbert Walker Bush*, former director of the CIA, had motivation to stick it to our country because he wasn't re-elected?" Walter shook his head. "I don't believe it was merely nineteen hijackers working alone any more than anyone else does... but... give me more. Why these mass plastic coffins? Why that hideous camp in Beech Grove?"

"Sink or swim. There's nothing special in our water, dad." Fletcher looked at Vivian. She looked like she wanted to cut in. Fletch figured she'd say

something about *fluoride*. “Hitler did it. Stalin did it. Napoleon did it. *An insane grab at absolute power*. There are more things pointing in the direction that it was the *Rogues*—these older, hardline conservatives in key government positions. Remember that movie with Harrison Ford where his wife gets an immunity deal to testify and then she confesses that her husband couldn’t have committed a certain murder... *because it was her?* These movies are a reflection of *life*. At the beginning, the culprit is so obvious. By the end of the show, it’s all reversed and suspects are cleared while the most seemingly innocent person is the one who had everything rigged. *The butler did it, you know?* Scooby Doo... but on a world scale!” Fletcher drank soda through a straw and enjoyed a caffeine rush. “No mother *ever* believes her son is capable of murder but we see it all the time! I didn’t want to believe any of this, either!”

“So Scott Forbes is working at Fiduciary Trust on September eighth and ninth, the weekend before the attacks? There’s a power down where he’s at in the south tower from the fiftieth floor and higher? Security cameras were off as supposed cable guys upgraded internet lines and loud sounds could be heard above him? His company had offices between ninety and ninety-seven... W Bush’s bro, Marvin, was head of security at the World Trade Center at the time... and one of these floors high up is completely empty? Scott Forbes watches the towers go down on the day of nine eleven from Jersey City. Firemen claim they witnessed flashes...which can now be seen in slo-mo video... but they’re hushed. There’s no wreckage in Pennsylvania, no wreckage outside of the Pentagon, no black boxes recovered in the rubble in New York... and Fox local news in Cleveland, *WCPO-TV*, claimed Flight 93 landed at Hopkins Airport. Mayor White corroborates! Somehow, everyone’s told to shut up! An ‘official story’ is starting to materialize and it has *nothing* to do with NORAD complicity! It doesn’t have anything to do with a fact that we were in the second day of drills in which terrorists hijack an jumbo jet and aim to hit a skyscraper in the Big Apple? Mayor Willie Brown of Frisco was told not to fly before nine eleven. *Conspiracy?* A half hour ago, I saw evidence that the government through FEMA was prepared to put many, many humans in cheap coffins. I could be in denial like the millions whom’ve gone along with the so-called ‘official story’... but my mind is starting to *gnaw* at me. I can’t buy it.” Walter drank from a glass of ice water. “*Presumed Innocent*, son,” Walter said. “The Harrison Ford movie you brought up? And I don’t believe she confessed on the stand. I think he found bloody garden equipment or something. He knew then... and she confessed to him.”

“Thanks, dad!” Fletcher leaned and kissed Vivian on the cheek. “Stuff like that bugs me. I’d go to sleep trying to figure out the movie’s name!”

“Hey guys,” Spencer said. “You tell really good stories... but I’m here too, you know?”

Vivian looked straight at Spencer and took off his dress hat—he *looked like a small Al Capone to her*—and she rustled his hair. “You sure *are* here, Spencer baby!” She might’ve added “goo goo, ga ga” because she spoke in the same tone that she’d speak to a toddler. Her focus became adult again. “Are you saying that nine eleven doesn’t happen if USA elects George HW Bush president in 1992?”

“Yeah,” Fletch said. “But not definitely. The Bushes and bin Ladens go

way back. I think the sure bet would've been if Dan Quayle would've been elected to consecutive terms in 1996 and 2000. The Republicans, especially the core *Rogues*, truly believe they are the epitome of goodness. They believe Democrats *barely* qualify to be called 'human' and they consider everything else as mildew. I think the Bush family not just felt *betrayed* by America in 1992, I think they believed the populous betrayed goodness itself!"

"*But he said he wouldn't raise taxes,*" Walter Browne said. "I moved our family to Sacramento before you went into high school because I wanted you to understand politics close up. There's a lot they say in commercials and you know now from experience that it's quite often *way* different than what you see with your own two eyes."

"You're saying he's *Iron Man*." Vivian noticed a puzzled look on Fletch's face. "Not the movie superhero. Ozzy's Iron Man. *Kills the people he once saved.*"

"Glad you cleared that up. I'm trying to picture *any* president in the Iron Man suit from the movies. *Kills the people he once saved?* Yes. I think that was his intent but where Darth Vader was not successful, Herbert Walker *was*. The dark side, you know?" Fletch noticed Spencer squirming. "Hey Spence? You've gotta have a take on this?"

"They're all heroes to me," Spencer said. "I know you complained about *Shazbot* going on and on about how great our government is... but the truth is, shit happens. *Wars happen*. There's never been a period of human history where a war wasn't going on *somewhere* or another."

"*Good answer!*" Walter said. He looked to Vivian. "It's so *cute* to see a CIA midget sitting with us!"

"Hey man!" Spencer growled. "I can figure things out that no one else *can*! He you ever been on the lot of a Hollywood major production? I have!"

"Good, Spencer!" Fletch tried to diffuse his emotional retort. "We're not far from Disney World in Florida. I've had a really swell time with Shaz at not one, but *two*, theme parks already. You up for the challenge? I don't think you're this uptight all the time!"

"I can drink you under the table!" Spencer slammed his small fist onto the diner table. "I say we *all* pound a fifth of *Goldschläger* when we get there. If none of you's puked after a few thrill rides, I'll have real respect for you!"

"I *like* Goldschläger!" Vivian smiled. Fletcher still had the Polaroid of her with him in his pocket. It was taken more than ten years prior in Venezuela but it was lighting in a bottle. When Vivian smiled, she could move the world. That's the way Fletcher took things. He truly wasn't sure if he was alone in seeing a brightness in her or if it was evident to all whom came across her. Vivian's smile didn't change over the years. She was unaware that she was deciding for the group. "I'm in!" she said.

Fletcher was only half serious when he challenged Spencer. Vivian now made it official. There was a fear there below the conscious level. Vivian had smirks and she had grins. When her smile went cheek to cheek, Fletcher was afraid to say "no". That particular radiant smile might never come back, at least not in it's full form. He never told her how much it meant. He complemented the gleam in her eyes and it tickled him when her forehead wrinkled with feelings of confusion. "Not only am I in... I'm going to one up you!" He flashed his own

smile and reached for Viv's hand to let her know he wasn't seriously competing with her wish. "After Disney World, I say we take a *Carnival* cruise!"

"Yuck!" Walter's face became sour. "After the disaster? There was *sewage* in all the halls! Living horror story if I've ever heard of one!"

"Yes! *Especialy* since they had that tragic engine failure!" Fletch thought he'd hear protest but got none. "They will go out of their *way* for the next year or two to make sure everyone has the times of their lives! Service will be through the roof!"

"I'm in!" Walter wiped his mouth of tangy barbeque sauce. "I'm in! I haven't had a good family vacation in a *loooooong* time. I'm sorry your mother's not here, Fletch, but I can set our differences aside if you want to invite her."

"*You're still not speaking?*" Vivian asked. "That's too bad."

"I'll ask mom if everything goes well after Disney World. Let's start there!" Fletcher got up. "Are you guys ready to hit the road again?"

"Let's get the liquor now and get an early start!" Spencer said. The group dumped Fletch's rental car in Atlanta and headed toward Orlando. Disney World came and went and they found themselves on a luxury liner in the Caribbean. "This is the *life*!" Spencer toasted the group. He exchanged his tux for jester's attire. He felt comfortable that way. People around him assumed he was part of skit somewhere or another. It made him laugh when strangers would come up and ask when his show was.

"You didn't drink *any* of us under the table!" Fletcher looked from Spencer to a stage where jazz musicians were setting up. They dined around a circular table in a lush lounge room. "You drank *half* a fifth and started complaining about your stomach!"

"It was something I ate, man!" Spencer rubbed his tummy. "I still feel it!"

"You talk tall to compensate for... Well?" Vivian didn't want to be cruel but Spencer had shown thick skin. "You're a small man with tall tales! How's that?"

"You can say all you want! Have you ever juggled five bowling pins?" Spencer fiddled with hanging balls from his jester's cap. "I juggle knives, too!"

"Let's get back to George W Bush!" Walter Browne drank from a glass of burgundy wine. "*Harper's* made a case to impeach and no one listened. This is a guy who was wrong about WMDs and a guy who *you* believe conspired to bring down domestic buildings in New York to justify implementing national martial law. You think there were a hundred times more reason to impeach him than Clinton but *Rogues* not only defended him behind the scenes, they encouraged him?"

"Time will tell, dad." Fletcher's eyes were still on the musicians setting up. "Unfortunately, every moment that they roam free and speak on Sunday morning political shows, our country slides further and further into the fuckin' stone age."

"*Lewis Lapham.*" Vivian handed her iPad to Walter. "Thanks to modern amenities, we don't have to wait for the article. Back when you were in school, you'd have to go to a library's microfiche! I bet that was a nuisance!"

"Viv wants to go to Midland, Texas after this. That's where Laura Welch ran a stop sign and killed Michael Douglas." Fletch finally turned his eyes

to the group.

“*Laura Welch? Michael Douglas?*” Walter was confused. “I would’ve known if Michael Douglas will killed in an automobile accident.”

“*JFK, blown away,*” Vivian said. “It was the same month that JFK was shot in Dallas. Laura Welch’s boyfriend, Michael Douglas, was thrown from his car and suffered a broken neck. Fletcher wants to go to Memorial Hospital where he was pronounced dead. He was Laura’s boyfriend in high school at a time. Laura would later marry and become *Laura Bush*. I had something crazy happen a while back where some freaky students told me she was utilizing clairvoyants to spy on me!”

“So we’re not talking about the *actor*! Good!” Walter was drawn to the musicians Fletch had been intrigued by. Sound check was starting. Feedback could be heard for a few moments.

“Did you know Dick Cheney shot a lawyer in the *face* in Texas? They run a buddy system that’s despicable, dad! Laura Welch was not charged for *anything* when she killed her ex-boyfriend in 1963! Cheney? They were on a hunting trip and it was chalked up to an accident! This, in a state known for locking people up and throwing away the key!”

“But it’s not really *them* that screwed America, right?” Walter signaled for another glass of wine from a finely-dressed waiter. “*The Rogues!* The dudes in the so-called Military Industrial Complex! The fuckers from Philip Morris who *finance* them by paying a quarter mil per plate to sit at a fundraising event! The media cocksuckers who give the masses a choice of ‘screwed over big time’ and ‘screwed over, not as bad’! Those are the jackasses who stole real democracy from us!”

“You were friends with Eddie Callypso’s father when I went to *Rosemont High*, right dad?” Fletch waited for his dad to nod “yes” then he continued, “Eddie went to one of these bat shit fundraisers a long, long time ago. Dan Lungren, a Republican candidate for governor of California, had this ritzy event in Palo Alto. Eddie’s uncle, *Boom Boom*, started getting all snooty so Eddie decides he’s gonna bail, right? He thinks he’s gonna find a motel somewhere nearby but he winds up walking fifteen miles in the rain before he calls me and Viv to pick him up. He’s convinced that it’s a generation thing and that it’s the beginning of the end for us. ‘*They’re selling us out,*’ I remember him saying.”

“His uncle, *Boom Boom*, was doing really good money-wise until he sold his garage door company and went into real estate. It was bad timing. He used to be a really good guy, too! He invited me to his country club when I was chums with Eddie’s dad, Winston. I told them I was voting for Gore in 2000 and guess what happened? They stopped talking to me! Not only did they stop talking to me, I swear I starting noticing cable vans parked in front of the house. I’m talking about work that went on for *weeks!*” Walter took a glass of wine from the finely-dressed waiter.

“*Spies?*” Vivian asked.

“I try not to talk about it because of the ‘paranoia stigma’ but, yes. I talked to *Eddie* about it one day while he waited for Fletch to get dressed when you all were teenagers. *Propensity*. That’s the word I told him. I used to have these neighbors who would bang away at personal construction projects next door. Fletch’s mom said they would only do this ten or fifteen minutes after I came

home from work when I wanted some peace to read or nap. If I had errands to run and if I came home a couple of hours later, they would wait until *then* to start hammering away. *Propensity*, you see?"

"It's funny, dad! We met up with Eddie in Huntington and he starting talking about that. I never knew it came from you! He something else. *Predication*. House of cards kind of thing. One thing builds on the other." Fletcher noticed Spencer becoming restless. "Why don't you ask the jazz guys if they'll let you sing?"

"*Good idea!*" Spencer ran off to the stage.

"Are you serious?" Vivian asked Fletcher.

"I was kinda messing around." Fletch watched Spencer speak to a trumpet player.

"Predication? Yeah. I talked to Eddie about that on the same day. The British government is built on the legend of King Arthur, you see? It's *predicated*, in other words, on the story that a lady in a lake gave a guy a magical sword which was later lunged into a giant rock. As archaic stories go and subsequent rules apply, the person who could pull the sword from the stone became ruler of the land. *Predication*. A government was set up around this special chap and a monarchy ensued in which his offspring would run things for eternity. Now... if a person or *groups* of people figured out that no such lady in the lake ever existed, the whole thing falls apart. You get colonists out here in America who believe that King George was just another dude no different from you or me... and you get revolution." Walter watched Spencer grab a microphone from one of the musicians. Lights dimmed a little.

"*And if Christ be not raised, your faith is in vain; ye are yet in your sins.*" Fletcher's eyes had rolled back like he was reading from a chalkboard inside of his skull. "Predication. Saint Paul wrote in the first epistle to the Corinthians that it *mattered*. If Jesus did not physically rise from the dead, all faith was futile. When I started getting serious with Viv in high school, I remember asking you about religious issues and what church we should go to... or if we should go to church at all. You told me that verse. You said I had to figure it out for myself." Everything became dark and the drums began to roll. Fletcher turned around to the stage behind him. A spotlight focused on Spencer. "*Crap!*" Fletcher couldn't believe what he was seeing.

"*Ladies and gentlemen!*" Spencer thumped the microphone a few times. "Welcome to Carnival Cruises!" People cheered. "We have a great night of classic jazz!" People clapped and music began. "*Oh when the saints... Come marching iiiiiiiin. Oh when the saints come marching iiiiiiiin...*" Spencer sang the first number then returned to his table with Walter, Vivian and Fletch. "That was a riot!" he told them. He drank some ice water then watched the musicians carry on without him.

"That was *good*, Spencer!" Walter complimented the miniature singer in a jester's garb. For forty-five minutes, they enjoyed live classics and didn't discuss anything while the band played. For the next few days, it was joy. Shuffleboard, pools, and casinos.

Fletcher Browne woke up strapped to a cot. He felt dazed and allowed his head to look around. Vivian Streets was strapped to a cot next to him. She was asleep. He noticed power tools hoisted to filthy pegboards. The smell of

motor oil was thick. Light came through broken glass windows high in the rafters. Directly above him was a net which held many boulders. "Viv?" Fletcher looked for her eyes to open. "*Wake up!*" He tried to wiggle his way from the belts that held him down.

A door opened. Walter Browne walked in with Spencer. This time, Spencer was in a chipmunk costume. "We're in *Yucatán*, son!" Walter walked around the cots where Fletch and Viv were. "You *know* too much." He scratched his chin. "Winston and Jasper Callypso have tight ties to Cornelius Stuart. I can't have you do what you've been doing. You came across our secrets... and I can't afford to let you tell the world that we've built concentration camps... and that we've stocked plastics coffins capable of disposing hundreds of thousands of corpses. I can't have that."

"*What's... going... on?*" Vivian eased into consciousness. "Where... are... we?"

Spencer walked to Vivian and moved hair from over her eyes. "This is an abandoned mechanic's shop, Viv. Those are stones held in a net above you."

"*What?*" Vivian looked around then looked at Fletcher. "Fletcher? What's happening?"

"Happening?" Walter decided to answer for his son. "You saw the pictures of pretzelled Iraqi prisoners and you've seen marines pissing on dead Taliban bodies. You know that madness exists but you never really can tell where or when it'll happen." Walter pointed to the rocks. "There is a thick rope which holds these things from crushing you. *Think Batman*, if you will. I will light that rope on fire and it will be a matter of time before you are crushed to death! I will take Spencer back to the cruise ship because the layover isn't a long one. By now, you've figured out that your drinks were spiked with sedatives. I will leave this old fashioned tape recorder between you two and I hope to retrieve it in order to listen to your final moments. Truth be known, I want to hear confessions! You dare pretend that our government is somehow *wicked*? What a ludicrous thought!"

"Dad?" Fletcher sweated. "Dad? What the heck?"

"I must be going!" Walter produced a yellow Bic lighter. A thin fuse led up to the thick rope. "It was nice having you as a son!" Walter lit the fuse. He literally skipped out of the shop with Spencer trailing him.

"What are we gonna do?" Fletcher struggled. "Can you get loose, Viv?"

"Huh?" Vivian didn't move. "Are you really going to spend our last moments in a useless attempt to escape? These straps are an inch and a half thick!"

"What? Vivian? You can't reach around? A buckle! See if there's a buckle!" Fletch looked above and wondered how much his body could handle.

"I wanted two children, Fletch." Vivian looked over and wanted to have bedroom talk. "I wanted two, but one would've been okay."

"I wanted three, Vivian!" Fletcher was frustrated. "Why's it matter?"

"I can't tell if the rope's on fire. Can you see it? Can this be real?" Vivian refused to move. "I wanted to marry, Fletcher... but in this world? Danger is everywhere! Why have children on a planet with so many problems?!"

"I think I can rock this cot and tip over near you!" Fletcher shook back and forth. "If I can fall near you, I can bite the straps loose!"

"Fletcher? Let's not fight it. This is our fate!" Vivian looked from Fletcher to the net above. "This is fitting, in a lot of ways. Out there, we're crushed by the weight of the world. Here? We're crushed by the stones of a government that blew a fuse. *Understatement!*"

"Vivian? I never was truly mad at you... *but I don't like the way you're handling this!*" Fletch rocked but couldn't tip. "Can you fight? *Please.*"

"Fight? And then what? Run from gumshoes through Latin America? If they've decided we're goners, there's nothing we can do to beat the machine! Maybe it's better to die here and now than to live the rest of our days like foxes hunted by bloodhounds." Vivian's mouth was parched. "I could use some water."

"*Fine!* I will take fifteen seconds to tell you that I believe you're the best blessing I've ever had! I enjoyed everything we did together. We fell short of conquering our demons, but we fought... and I'm proud! That's *all*, Viv! Now I've gotta try to save us!" Fletcher's hands were fastened tightly yet he used his fingers to search for a buckle... or anything that might help.

"Fletcher?" The rocks above moved. "I think I heard one of the cords snap."

"*Motherfucker!* I thought something like this could happen... but what chickenshit method to kill someone! *Smashed.* What the...?" The rocks moved again. "Yeah. The cords are snapping. I can't see the rope. I have no idea how much time..." Another cord snapped.

"Seconds!" Vivian smiled, but it wasn't the gleeful smile from Fletch's momentous Polaroid. "We have *seconds!*"

"Are you laughing?!" Fletcher demanded.

"*Laughing?* I feel delirious! It makes so much sense!" Vivian's delirium turned into mild anger. "Why did you not yell at your father before he left?"

"*Yell?*" Fletcher's eyes rolled. "That's gonna help? They're all crazy! Every older person I've met believes that America has lost a war! They drive luxury cars, live in relatively safe homes, and travel anywhere, anytime! The war is in their heads! *They lost a war!* Never argue with crazy people, remember?"

"You're the funnest person I've ever been around, Fletch." Vivian looked over at him then back up to the net. "If this is it, I'm happy to die next to you!"

The rope snapped.

"*Shiiiiiiiiiiiiit!!!!!!*" Fletcher screamed.

They came down but they weren't boulders.

Each second felt like an hour.

Fletcher waited to see angels. He looked down at his feet and there were clouds. He looked forward and saw a gate made of gold. A ray of sunshine and a sensation of disorientation.

He smelled oil.

"*You dickhead!*" Vivian looked over at Fletcher. "You didn't even say you *love* me! These were our last few moments on *Earth!*"

A stucco boulder was on his chest and many more were around him.

"It was a vision, Viv!" Fletcher felt like a child submerged in colored styrofoam balls. "I saw *Heaven*, Vivian! I saw a golden gate... and I thought I

heard harps!”

“You dickhead, Fletcher! I wanted you to tell me how much I meant to you! You wasted our last seconds on planet Earth struggling! In some ways, I know that’s what you’re always going to do! *Struggle!* Will you ever accept what the world gives you?” Vivian felt delirious but it was passing.

“*Dickhead?*” Fletcher thought he knew what was going on but it didn’t make complete sense yet. “Were you in on this, Vivian?”

“We got the idea at Disney World with all the decorated roller coasters!” Vivian heard the creak of a door. “Here he comes! I can hear him!”

“What’s really going on, Viv?” Fletcher heard footsteps. “*Vivian?*”

“Hello, son!” It was the voice of Walter Browne. “Did you really believe I would betray you and become a comic villain?”

“Hello, dude!” It was Spencer.

Rustling. Fletcher heard hallow stucco boulders being tossed. “Dad? You always wanted me to learn from experience... but this takes the cake!”

More rustling. Vivian could see Walter Browne. “Sir? Did it have to be so real? I imagined the stones would look like painted *piñata balls*. This was quite good!”

Fletch’s head was clear of the phony stones and Spencer was working on releasing him from the straps. “We’re still continuing with the cruise, right?” Inside, he knew it was a joke. He felt *good* that his life took these spontaneous turns. Something was unsettling, though. In the act, it felt too real. Fletcher had faint fury but it didn’t show. He tried to understand his feelings. *Am I mad at the world? Am I mad at my dad? Vivian doesn’t fool around like this. Am I mad that I couldn’t predict her behavior?* Fletcher let it pass and stood up as soon as he was able to. Spencer undid Vivian’s straps. Fletcher hugged her as soon as he could.

Vivian dusted herself off. The rocks probably came from a special effects movie studio. Vivian thought, *I figured only Hollywood would have these things.* The rocks were fake but the dirt was real. She held Fletch’s hand as the group headed to leave. She sang Pink Floyd to him, “*Mamma’s gonna make all of your nightmares come true... mamma’s gonna put all of her fears into you... mamma’s gonna keep you right here under her wing... she won’t let you fly but she might let you sing!*”

“Yeah, yeah.” Spencer held a phony boulder above his head. “It’d mean a lot if someone could pull out a camera phone and take a picture of me with this!” The rock was about three feet in diameter and would’ve weighed hundreds of pounds if it was real. “Mamma will keep you cozy and warm, Fletcher!” Spencer yelled and Vivian snapped a picture with her iPhone. The group of them laughed then made their way back to the cruise ship. Things picked up without much of a hitch. They wound up in the same ball room where they had watched the jazz guys but this time it was a magician’s turn to perform. Spencer had luck at getting on stage before so he tried to fit himself in again. This time, it didn’t take. “The guy doesn’t see how a juggler could make his show better!” He wore a leprechaun’s outfit even though Saint Patrick’s Day was well behind them.

“*Payback’s a bitch, dad!*” Fletcher was on his third glass of wine. “You know what hurt most? I mean, they weren’t real rocks and I didn’t have bones broken... but I saw a vision of myself in Heaven. Some people say their lives

flash before their eyes before death... but I saw clouds under my feet... and it hurt more that you *betrayed* me more than getting crushed. I mean, I wasn't really crushed but in that split instant I didn't really, *really* know!"

"Payback's a bitch?" Walter scratched his head. "What is this? *Punk'd*? You need to learn through experience and all these excursions around the world are so that you can understand people—*suffering* people. I gave you a chance to be inside of the skin of someone *captured*. You want to work for Amnesty International? Do you want to know what the people *feel* like—the ones you're trying to save?"

"I'm messing around, dad. But since you brought up *Punk'd*, my favorite show in high school, you know that these things come around to haunt you! Ashton Kutcher got *punked* once and flew off the handle! Spencer here specializes in screwing with people's heads and jabbed a guy I worked with in Indiana." Fletch asked Spencer, "Don't you ever worry about it turning around on you?"

"Me? No. I'm *CIA*. I don't worry about things like that. My whole life I'm called 'shorty' and 'pip squeak'. I was brought into the Agency because they *know* it happens. I don't have to do one thing wrong! I will be called 'short shit' just for existing! We go after the worst of the people. Matt? He's a 'yes man' but he hates himself in some ways. He *wants* people to die in camps and that's why he was picked to modify the Beech Grove train station into a place of death. He has no conviction... so we picked him to tear it apart. Do I worry if someone's gonna start hating me? That's how things began." Spencer had a cauldron of what seemed to be gold coins resting at the base of his chair. He reached down and pulled a few of them out. "Want one?" He unwrapped golden foil. *Chocolate treat*. "They're delicious."

"Vivian has convinced me that suffering has always existed and always will be around. We have to pull ourselves out of our missions, sometimes." Fletcher grappled with the mixed emotion he had right after the prank with the rocks. "You did this to teach me a lesson... but don't you worry about my trust?"

"No," Walter Browne said immediately. "I have a few strikes, I figure, if these things go wrong. I don't think this went wrong... otherwise we wouldn't be here discussing it. You have this burning house, you see? There's a distressed pet in the kitchen and you hear it barking. Upstairs, you see a child waving her arms through an open window but the roof's too steep to step out on. Fire trucks are coming but they might be too late. Do you run in for the pet? For the child?"

"*I don't know*," Fletcher said. "I mean, how *close* are the firemen? How hot is the fire? Do I know the kid?"

"Depending on how effective I set up the boulder scenario, you now know how you feel about Vivian. Do you want to marry her? You've been talking about that for years! In those moments before you thought you were gonna die, did you want her near you? Did you wish you were far, far away? The memories of those thoughts will nag at you for years. We don't have to play through hypothetical situations if I did my job right and got you close to *believing* you were going to die... and she would die next to you."

"You're a sick man!" Fletcher was cold but he grinned. "You are sick! But it's worth it! I love Vivian—I *know* I do—but I wouldn't say it." He turned to his girlfriend of many years. "I love you, Vivian." He almost expected her to

say it back. "I love you," he said again. "I don't like to waste words on it... but if you have to hear it, I love you very, very much." He turned back to his father. "She was mad that I didn't say it before the stucco rocks came down."

"*Fletcher Browne!*" Vivian blushed. "I knew the rocks were fake! I was joshing you until you realized it was a prank!"

"*Okay. Makes sense!*" Fletcher thought that things would clarify in his mind but he felt more and more confused. Loads of questions sprang up and no answers settled in. "What if I crapped myself, dad? Would that've been worth the deceit?"

"We're back to hypotheticals, Fletch." The lights dimmed. Walter subtly pointed toward the stage. "*Show's beginning.*"

Fletcher turned around. The tricks were good. Fletcher mused over the swirl of thoughts in his head when he was strapped down. He enjoyed the entertainment but he wondered just how much he knew himself, let alone the girl he cared about. By bedtime, he was at ease and slept well.

They made it to the Dominican Republic and were met with a military Boeing CH-47 Chinook transport helicopter. Cornelius Stuart had a situation which required their immediate attention. As they flew to the Florida Keys, Cornelius explained, "*Shazbot really took Matthew Stubbs. They kidnapped Thomas McKay and they have him tied on a fishing boat deck!*"

"Wow!" Fletcher ignored the briefing. "I've seen these things fly in the sky when I was younger but they're really awesome to be inside of!"

"What does it have to do with us?" Walter Browne couldn't figure out what was going on. "I'm Fletch's father, Walter!" He extended his hand for a shake. "The scare tactic in Yucatán you helped us arrange went quite well, I might add!"

"We're ending a lot of torture programs! The war in Afghanistan is ending, too! I have all these guys specialized in torture and interrogation and they're like kids at those amusement parks you've been going to! Right before closing time, they're zipping this way and that way trying to get every second's worth of their money! At bars, guys break down and ask fat ladies to dance! It's the nature of how it goes down!" Cornelius wasn't angry but he yelled in order to compete with the copter's noise.

"You guys are turning on each other?" Walter asked. "Is that why you approved frightening my son? You had all these plans lined up and you might as well use 'em on someone? Wow!"

"In a nutshell, yes! But we can't control some of these guys! I didn't order or approve Tom giving Matt the works. He wants an apology from Spencer. In the mean time, Shazbot has Tom tied up and painted clown makeup on him. They're gonna dunk him in tank of tuna."

"*Tuna?* What text book do you fuckers use when you decide how you work people over?" Fletcher shook his head in disbelief. "Are you affiliated with writers from DC Comics? What happened to simple waterboarding? Who is in charge of this crap?"

"It took creativity when the Senate lowered taxes on wealthy Americans under Bush. They used an obscure parliamentary procedure and it wasn't administered in the original way it was intended. The war in Iraq flew in defiance of the United Nations and there was no formal declaration of war. *Law hardly*

matters anymore! Waterboarding says ‘fuck you’ to the Geneva Convention and there are warrant-less wire taps and illegal searches and seizures. It’s all about who you know!” Cornelius Stuart looked down into the sea. Fletcher dared not sit near the wide open doorway. “*Whims!*” Cornelius turned around toward Fletcher. “Remember I told you that this world is about winners and losers? And you get to pick which one you are?” Fletch nodded that he remembered. “*Matt Stubbs has decided to be a winner!*” He looked down into the sea again then back at Fletcher. “It’s a gamble!”

“He has a robot coaching him!” Fletch yelled. “He has never trusted actual people!”

“You’re right!” Cornelius said. “What comes around goes around!” He sat next to Fletch. “Tom is getting a taste of his own medicine! He thought he had clearance! He didn’t have *clearance!*”

“What’s going to happen to the *Rogues*? We started calling the core conspirators ‘*Rogues*’ after a movie gang! What’s going to happen to the Rogues?” Fletcher held Vivian’s hand. She sat to his left. “Is our government going to make it? We have trillions of dollars we owe!”

“*Fuck if I know, man!*” Cornelius rubbed his eyes. “Everyone’s trying to hold on to scraps. We have guns. *The military has guns.* It’s not right, but they’ll screw with us last!”

“Is that why you’re torturing everyone? So they know you’re serious?” Fletch pulled Viv’s hand to his mouth and kissed it.

“*No, actually.* I got pissed! That’s why I got into it! We have intelligence on all these peons. *Bill Clinton and those kinds, you know?* This swinging dick’s going around getting laid here and there! You get these guys with a splinter of power and they fuck up! They don’t care about America! They just want to get banged every which way!” Cornelius rubbed his hands through his gray hair. “I don’t care if fifty million people voted for you! You ain’t telling me what to do!”

“You, my friend, are the dark secret that my history teacher used to speculate about!” Fletcher liked the candor and became numb to the behavior of Cornelius and his constituents. “You are the reason we head back into war when every child cries for world peace!”

“*Thank you!*” Cornelius responded. He was tired. “I take that as a compliment!”

As the dusk broke, the *Chinook* landed and it wasn’t long before the drama unfolded. Tom McKay, dressed as a clown, was tied to a chair on a fishing boat. As Cornelius, Walter, Fletcher, Vivian and Spencer reached them on the vessel’s deck, Matt was taking glops of tuna and slinging it at Tom’s weeping face. “I need you to say, ‘I’m sorry!’” Matt spoke to Spencer. “I don’t need to stoop to your level! Urine, man! Come on!”

“I’m sorry,” Spencer said. Behind Tom, Shazbot combed Tom’s hair with an oversized afro pick. “*Shazbot!* What are you doing? We are programmed to respect rank! *You can’t do this!*” Tom’s hair was teased and became frizzy. Dye had been added. He looked like a rainbow snow cone.

“Tell him!” Shazbot commanded Matt. “Tell him what you told me!”

“*George W Bush was really a great leader!*” Matt almost smirked.

“Hear that?” Shaz asked the midget. “George W Bush was a very good

leader! I have a convert... so I helped him capture his tormentor!”

“What’s it going to take to release him?” Cornelius was concerned for Tom. If Shazbot was simply a human, he could be bullied—*mentally pushed around*. Shazbot was designed, though, to increasingly use his own interactive experience. *Human logic did not apply*.

Shazbot stopped combing and reached into the tuna bowl. He smeared some onto the face of Cornelius. “This is all your fault! ‘An eye for an eye leaves the world blind’! *Gandhi*. Do you want this to continue? Are you not familiar with *Three Billy Goats Gruff*? What is supposed to happen here?”

“You’re right, Shaz!” Cornelius wiped tuna from his face. “You’re totally right! We went too far!”

“*Yes you did!*” Shaz stooped to speak to Tom nose-to-nose. “Who is more sexy? Spencer or Cornelius? You will tongue kiss one of them!”

“*The midget is hot!*” Tom said. He believed it was a head game as much as anything else. There would be no room for playing bravado.

“I’ll tongue kiss him!” Spencer looked down at his clothing. He was still dressed like a leprechaun. He turned toward Viv. “Could you film this on your iPhone?” Vivian starting filming and Spencer smacked a wet one on Tom’s lips. “*I really like this,*” he said into Tom’s ears. He kissed him some more and raspily whispered, “I could use some new shoes!”

“*Enough!*” Shazbot clapped his hands “Enough! Tom has learned his lesson!”

Fletcher didn’t speak. He wanted to pinch himself. Life was getting too weird. A week later, he was in Huntington, California at Ruby’s Diner at the tip of the pier. It was a double date. “*Shazbot starts going on about Three Billy Goats Gruff, right?*” Nancy Moore and Eddie Callypso sat across the way. “Shaz starts thrashing everything on the boat and pounds his chest. ‘*I will find launch codes! If you know of a larger billy goat than me, I would love to meet him!*’ He tells Cornelius and Tom that they better stop pushing people around!”

Vivian rubbed Fletch’s leg under the table. “This is not long after they tie me and Fletch up and dump fake rocks on us!”

“So where are they? The robot and midget?” Nancy hit it off well with Eddie and was hoping that she would like Viv and Fletch. “Did you have enough of them?” *I hope these guys aren’t pulling my leg!* she thought. *I barely know any of them.*

“I know it sounds nuts,” Eddie said. “This is life now!”

“I was in Hawaii with Fletch not too long ago.” Ruby’s was busy as usual. Vivian marveled at the chatter everywhere. “I really thought he was suicidal with all this thrill-seeking... until we were trapped under those artificial boulders! I realized that he just thinks he’s invincible! He’s over there knocking around thinking he’s gonna escape like a real-life *Batman!*” Eddie and Nancy laughed. Vivian felt great. “I want the ride to end. I want to settle down.”

“I still have a few adventures in my system!” Fletcher put his arm around Viv. “Who’s for climbing *Everest?*” The others laughed and weren’t sure if he was serious.

Walter Browne looked down from a fifth story office in the Pentagon. “You seized *all* the nine eleven tapes for seventy-five miles in all directions... except one.” He stared out nearly in a trance.

"That's what we had to do." Cornelius Stuart walked up to Walter Browne and put his hand on his shoulder. "No one really wants it this way."

"One day, those tapes will be released." Shazbot sat in a chair next to Spencer. "*Freedom of Information Act*, sir."

"Yes! Yes, of course!" Walter looked at Shazbot and thought, *That robot doesn't understand how the real world works! It's like hearing a child tell his friends that his mother has gone on vacation to a farm and she'll be back... not knowing she's dead and it was a made-up story from the dad.*

"There was no wreckage and no black box. The engines had titanium alloys! I watched this show called '*Lost*' a while back. The show began on an island where a plane crashed. The *fuselage* was right there on the beach next to pounding waves. I think the producers were sending a message that you guys are wrong in how you reported September eleventh to the public." Walter looked down and tried to imagine *Flight 77* hitting the wall below him. "In season two or three—I can't remember which one, now—a quarantined metal bunker blows up. There are no remains whatsoever of the steel but somehow, on this magical island, there are a couple of unharmed survivors... and one of them is naked. I think they're poking fun at what you tell the public. You can find passports and identifiable body parts... but you couldn't find the black boxes or engines!"

"We found the black boxes," Cornelius said. "Watch footage of the news on the internet. A couple of firefighters handed over the black boxes at Ground Zero to FBI agents. Obviously, you realize we denied receiving these things."

"*Why?*" Walter left the window to join Shazbot and Spencer. He sat then asked again, "Why?"

"It got too hard to govern. I can trace my bloodline to the seventeenth century. My family traded in the British East India Company. We had indentured servants and the system evolved to full slavery. Many of our intentions were honorable. Imagine a heavyweight champion sparring with a partner who one day becomes stronger and faster. What do you do? Do you tell the world, 'I am no longer the best'? No. Not if you have an ample sense of self-preservation. You want to believe you meet all these ideals but sometimes something has got to give. Your kid started yelling when we were in the Florida Keys that we've passed peak production in regards to oil. Vivian asked what we're doing about global warming. It's true that there's a resource crisis. Put yourself in my shoes. World population doubles every generation or two and more and more of our trees are gone... as an example. Am I supposed to say we'll all suffer? No. I look after myself and my friends here in Washington. It's easy to be benevolent and fair when goods are plentiful. Pragmatism necessitates that tough choices must be made." Cornelius Stuart removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes. He had been doing this more and more in the recent weeks. "I chose *my* side, Walter. And if you believe we are evil... you are wrong! There's not enough to go around. Promises are made to be broken. The *Constitution* is a promise. Your son somehow figured out what's really going on behind the scenes without being here... where you and I stand."

"He's right, you know?" Spencer was dressed in ordinary clothes—beige dress pants and a powder blue knit collared shirt. "Your son is *sharp*."

"He doesn't esteem George W Bush too highly," Shazbot added. "I question his patriotism at times."

Cornelius disregarded Shazbot. "I sent your kid on his way because he deserves a break! Somewhere toward the northern pole in Canada, our guys are operating the heaviest of machinery to scavenge through shale where there are scanty oil deposits."

"*Peak production?*" Walter asked. "This is it! He talked about it during our cruise in the Caribbean."

"Imagine being pretty low on gas. You're a teenager who has to deliver pizza for the night shift at a *Papa John's*. You call an aunt who lives fifty miles away on a farm. She has five gallons of gas in a canister, your car gets twenty miles per gallon, and the trip is a hundred miles total up and back. Even if you could make it up there, your net gain is zero." Cornelius sat down with the others. "That's what's going on in Canada right now. We're expending almost as much energy running machinery as we'll be pulling out of the project. I want to tell you that we're close to cold fusion... but we're really not to the best of my knowledge. There's oil under the sea and oil in high latitudes. The cost is hardly worth it."

"You look worried," Walter observed. "Ignorance is bliss, eh?" Cornelius did not respond. "You think my son can do your job. You would like to retire and hand pick a person you value."

"Your son is a great guy. He thinks all of us wanted the torturing going on. He thinks all of us want to wage war at the drop of a hat. He calls us *Rogues*, you know? He thinks I can somehow stop this government from spying on its own people."

"I'm glad he's here. He convinced me that it's worth trying. I don't like the suffering of the world but if your complaints aren't followed by actions then it does no good." Walter stopped speaking when a secretary walked in carrying a chimpanzee. "*That must be Sandy!*" The diaper-wearing primate skirted along the floor and jumped onto Walter's lap. "I'm gonna like you!"

Walter Browne spent the night at the Ritz-Carlton. Fletch and Viv did not go to the Himalayas. Rather, they were summoned to return to DC. It was their first time inside of the Pentagon. Walter showed up separately and arrived around the same time. Cornelius briefed them, "Your nephew is quite a popular kid at the University of LaVerne!" He held a few color photos which were produced from a laser jet printer. He held one up to the group. Shazbot walked into the room as Cornelius spoke, "Thaddeus Streets, also known as '*Tad*'! Quite a nice smile much like his aunt who graces our presence. This is him on campus with an anti-war group." He passed the photo around. "This is Tad masturbating in his backyard. This illustration here is double. One, our satellites take *incredible* pictures from miles above our surface. Two, we have dirt on people. We have dirt on *a lot* of people." He passed around the photo and pulled out a third one. "This is infrared imagery of Tad jacking off on his bed. Even before the Department of Homeland Security came to be, we spied on couples having sex. Regional law enforcement helps us via Bell 206 sky choppers. We know when Tad signs on to porn sites because we intercept wifi signals. The guys in the sky shine spotlights on homes blocks away from where Tad's at... all the while they're filming him through his roof! He decided he would join an anti-nukes group! Ha! Now he might not graduate because he's going bonkers thinking that everyone's after him!"

"*But you are after him!*" Vivian said.

“Yeah? He can’t prove it which makes people believe he’s a paranoid loose cannon! This is going to go on. We’ve done this over and over.” Cornelius looked at Fletcher. “You were right. *Rogues*. We are Rogues. I believed we were the greatest of *patriots* when we schemed the nine eleven thing. *Rogues*.”

“But you don’t care. I sense that you don’t care.” Fletcher reached for Viv’s hand.

“You’re right. *Wham bam, thank you ma’am*. I was never like that as a kid... but I have a comfort level that liberals threaten!” Cornelius pulled out a fourth photo. “This is a Staples warehouse facility. This is where products arrive in mass, get splintered and stored, then re-distributed to public stores. Tad has worked part time at this place while going to college. He tried to start a fuckin’ union there!”

“A union? That’s good, right?” Fletcher squeezed Viv’s hand. He didn’t like the butterflies in his stomach. He thought he had become numb to these curious meetings. “It’s better than going postal in other words, correct?”

“No! Mitt Romney took over Staples because there was no union there to protect workers! Mitt is now worth nine figures... and even *that* wasn’t enough to win back our presidency! With these wankers like Vivian’s nephew, the CEOs of the world opt for Canada, China and other places around the globe!” Cornelius looked at Shazbot. “Am I right?”

“*You are preaching to the converted, sir!*” Shazbot saluted Cornelius.

“So now we have this PR quagmire! The Lakers have to win championships at the Staples Center in LA to distract the public from Teamsters snooping around warehouses near Ontario International Airport!” Cornelius took a few deep breaths and tried to calm down. “Do you know why they told hippies not to trust anyone over thirty? It’s because there’s truth to it. You aren’t going to help Tad because no one can help him except *time*. He hangs out at Red Robin for cheap tacos every Tuesday. This is where *MK-Ultra* comes into effect. He has a few tight buddies and we’re going to send word to police and deputies that they are dangerous—they are *de facto terrorists*. They will get DUIs over the next six months. We will send undercover agents to screw with Tad. He’ll explode in public because they always do. We’ll institutionalize him for his own good!”

“*What?*” Vivian wasn’t scared. She thought about stucco boulders above her head. She turned to Walter. “Is this another prank?”

“I wish it was!” Cornelius passed around a spreadsheet. “These are raw numbers of what the liberals are trying to cut from defense. We’ve got to nip these things at the bud. Tad Streets is no problem to us right now but Bill Clinton wasn’t a problem when he was merely governor of a crappy state. We can’t let these true liberals gain power! They will eliminate what we have going!”

“The schmooze worked.” Fletcher analyzed numbers on a sheet passed to him. There was a bar chart with a paragraph underneath and a couple of pie charts with another paragraph. “I was identical to Tad when I came out of high school. As a matter of fact, if you made this same presentation three months ago, I might’ve been tempted to sock you in the jaw.”

“*I would have to put you down,*” Shazbot said. “One must respect authority, Fletch.”

“Calm down, *Wire Head!*” Fletch shook his head in frustration. “Three

months ago, this would've been too much to stomach. You've convinced me of a couple of things. One, it's always been this way and always will be this way. Two? You have to pick your side."

Vivian was appalled and shook her head. "We have to fight, still!" She leaned over and sucked at Fletcher's neck below his ear. "For me!"

"It's already been decided!" Cornelius walked to the same window where Walter had gazed from. "That's my point! We, as an agency, are as robotic *Shaz*. There are protocols. There are contingencies. If your nephew was *only* part of the anti-nukes movement, I could pull strings. The Mitt Romneys of the world shudder when they believe a workforce is empowered by collective bargaining. Tad is involved in a labor push... and he's marching in Los Angeles to stop the war in Afghanistan! And there's already a pullout date! Why can't he just be like every other college kid and go to bars trying to get laid?"

"I hope you're kidding!" Vivian looked at all the faces in the room for a clue. "Why would you call me here to tell me this?"

"I might be able to stop it," Cornelius said. "If I can't, you can expect calls from your nephew from mental health facilities or from jail. We have a few operatives in these police departments who will literally break your tail lights and then cite you afterward. You've seen it on TV probably? Have you seen when they're fist pumping each other after flooring liberal registered nurses? What about high fiving each other after socking a suspect in cuffs? This is caught on film and then you hear the explanation that the culprit was resisting arrest! And nothing is done to reprimand these guys! Why? Beginning in the W Bush administration, the secret laws started to apply more than the public laws!"

"*Praise the LORD!*" Shazbot's eyes looked upward and he lifted his hands in praise. Vivian was baffled. He told her, "I believe in higher order, ma'am. I apologize for this public display."

All of a sudden, something snapped inside of Fletch's mind. Total denial kicked in. "We still haven't tried *Cirque Cuisine* on Farragut. Want to get some now?"

Vivian thought it was a cue. "Lunch? Yes! Lunch already! I love to have lunch at eleven so we can beat the rush!" She got up and pulled Fletch from his chair.

"I can really use some organic chow!" Shazbot stood up.

"Why don't you skip this one, Shaz?" Vivian tried hard to think. *Are they friggin' joking? I got on a three-thousand-mile flight to listen to a fruitcake telling me he's gonna ruin my nephew?* "I need time alone with Fletcher."

"I get it!" Shaz pointed his finger at Vivian's face. "You're too *good* for me now! I knew this day would come!"

"*The penguins eat tofu in Siberia,*" Cornelius said. Shaz became frozen. "He has an off button. *That's it.* If you ever need to shut him down, say those words."

"*Wow!*" Fletcher thought about Tad Streets locked in a padded room. *Maybe we're all going crazy. I need a break from this.* "Cirque Cuisine, here we come!" *If I never come back to the place again, it'll be too soon!* He limply held Viv's hand. Before they left the room, he asked Cornelius, "You guys aren't after me and Viv? Are you?"

"You and Viv? No." Cornelius thought they would leave but they

wanted more assurance. “I was telling your father, here... that you are wonderful people! Tad has to be purged of his anarchist tendencies. It’s a business, you understand? You hear athletes talk about it in sports and you hear actors talk about it in the movies. *It’s a business, you see?* There’s nothing personal.”

Viv opened the door with her right hand and pulled Fletch along with her left. In minutes, they were eating lettuce wraps in near silence. From there, they split. Fletch went back to meet with his father. Vivian sped to Dulles International to catch a flight to the West Coast. *Securacom. Marvin. Nine eleven. My head is so jumbled.* Anxiety crept into Viv’s arms and she shook as she boarded the jumbo jet. *Wirt? Who was Wirt again? Bizarre name.* She slept most of the way to Ontario International. She rented a tiny car at Budget then zoomed westbound on the Ten to San Dimas where her nephew lived off campus with a couple of classmates. “So good to see you!” she said when he opened the door.

“Aunt Vivian? What’re you doing here?” Tad Streets kissed his aunt’s cheek. “Don’t mind the smoke. It’s sandalwood incense. Makes the place smell better.”

“Your truck is going get slammed at eight fifteen if you leave it parked on the street.” Vivian came in and handed Tad a list. “I was in the frickin’ Pentagon and got this from a CIA agent.”

“This one already happened.” Tad pointed a third of the way down. “Ramon? Last night? DUI. We’re kicking back at Red Robin, like we always do... and I kind of knew it was coming. People were acting weird around us.”

“Okay. Leave your truck out there. I will give you a thousand dollars to put down on something new if your truck gets slammed in to. That way, I know it’s real. That way, I know they intend to keep you from graduating... and they’ll soon put you behind bars. Have you been getting problems out of nowhere from trusted teachers this year? They’re on the take! According to this document, they’re in bed with Uncle Sam.” Vivian went to the curtain and looked out. “That beat up old truck? Is that a gardener’s? It has tools all over and it looks out of place.”

“Javier? He does our yard too. We know him.” Tad scanned the list. “Eight fifteen? You think he’s one of them? And yes, my geology teacher lost my midterm paper. He said he never got it.”

“Let’s wait. Some of these things are very specific. If your truck gets hit, we’re jetting out of California. They’ve gone *crazy* out there. Inmates are running the asylum.” Vivian watched television with her nephew. Ramon Johanson was in jail, not just for the DUI. He was accused of battery on a peace officer. Tad explained that he wasn’t doing anything wrong and then the shit hit the fan. Three officers were on Ramon yelling at him to stop resisting arrest. Tad didn’t see Ramon swing at anybody but it turned up on the report. His other roommate, Brent Hoover, was out on a date.

BAAAMMMM!

“There it is!” Vivian went back to the curtain. “Do not go outside yet!” Viv pulled out her iPhone. Precisely eight fifteen. “The paper says cops are gonna come for a report. They’re going to set you up like they did *Ramon*. We’ve gotta leave through the backyard and let it pass.”

“I would say you have a screw loose... but this is a little too exact.” Tad

joined his aunt at the window. It was the gardener's white hooptie that broadsided Tad's aqua Chevy pickup. The gardener was scratching his head. He looked around but he didn't try to hide what he had done. After a few seconds, he walked toward Tad's front door. "Let's get out of here! That guy doesn't have insurance! I know it's a set up!"

"My car is parked at a donut store up the street. Just in case this happened, I prepared." Vivian walked to the kitchen and made her way through the sliding back door. *Thump, thump, thump*. Tad followed his aunt and ignored the knocking. They jumped a backyard fence and jogged through an alley. Once in Viv's car, she asked Tad, "*Christopher Dorner?* You have a self-made poster of a renegade cop on your wall? That's why this is happening!"

"A sniper ploughs a hundred and fifty Iraqis and we have a memorial for him in Cowboys Stadium? Auntie Viv! You raised me to be free! And to think for myself! Cops in LA are bad! Dorner helped free us of their tyranny!" Tad Streets pulled out a baggie from his jeans. "Do you mind if I roll up?"

"Yes! Hide that!" Just like clockwork, patrol cars raced in the direction from where Viv and Tad were coming. "*No nukes?* What was that? Are you trying to be popular with hippies?"

"Do you know *nothing* about the land of the Aha Macav? How long are we going to push Native Americans around? They want to put nuclear waste on their reservations!" Thaddeus Streets tossed his baggie of marijuana outside the window. "This is giving me the creeps. You're right, auntie."

"Why were you trying to start a union at the Staples warehouse?" Vivian turned onto the 210 Freeway. "Are you making trouble for the sake of it?"

"*Ramon*, auntie Viv! He was gonna get fired. The fucker couldn't make it to work and was gonna get the axe because of the attendance policy! We called the Teamsters Local 495 in Covina because professor Zeke Fowler had connections. He's the guy that lost my term paper, by the way!"

"He didn't *lose* it! It's on that list I gave you! He's one of them!" Vivian noticed that she was at ninety miles per hour and slowed down to a comfortable seventy. "*The Rogues*. That's what we've been calling them. There's this breakaway group that has ties to the NSA, FBI, ATF, NORAD, CIA and whatever else. *They don't care about democracy*. They don't care about regular people. They hate liberals. Their tolerance is zero! They will try to kill you if you have any more success at convincing students to join your movements!"

"Yeah?" Tad wished he hadn't thrown away his pot. "Flattering. *Really flattering*."

"Fletcher was just like you! He thought he wasn't making a difference! You get under their skin! It's like seeing a mouse to them! They want *none* of what you are!" Pasadena was coming up. Vivian wondered if she'd feel calm enough to stop for coffee. She doubted it. "They're grooming Fletch to be what these thugs are!"

"Uncle Fletch? I can call him 'Uncle Fletch' even though you never tied the knot, can't I?" He started to feel homesick already. "Are we going to turn around? I mean, they can't stick around all night."

"Turn around? No. We go to Canada—*maybe Toronto*. You break ties to this place and you give up on your diploma for now! When you pull yourself

out of California, you'll see what everyone does. *It's gone.* The good times are gone!"

"Thank you, auntie. Can I have five hundred? I mean, you offered a thousand. If we get separated, I'll need money." Tad Streets folded the paper Viv had given him.

"Five? Yes. When we stop, you get five Benjamin Franklins." Vivian didn't speak until they were past Colorado Boulevard. "We're driving to Frisco. Okay? From there, we go to Toronto."

"*You're the boss,*" Tad said. He dozed off and let his aunt navigate. She drove for eight hours, stopping for gas only once, before Tad woke. "Where are we?"

"Almost in San Francisco." Vivian made good time and they flew to Toronto. "I grabbed a bunch of stuff. Maybe it's top secret—I *don't know.*" Vivian rarely got the window seat. This time she did. It didn't matter much to her because it was dark outside. "If the Democrats win again in 2016, the *Rogues* have a plan to hit the CN Tower. That's where we're going. Those fuckers are crazy! They're trying to hold the public hostage."

"What's the difference between me saying the LAPD is corrupt and you saying that Washington, DC is?" Tad was tired. "I knew somehow that college wasn't going to matter. I have many friends that've graduated and can't find work."

"You've been decommissioned. As a society, you've been decommissioned! That's what I found out by hanging with these Rogue characters. They won't call it slavery, but for all practical reasons, most people who have jobs are in slave situations. If you don't participate in the slave system, you are warehoused in a suburban home. They make sure that all funds coming in pay for food and shelter without much more." It was dark but Viv stared out anyway. She tried to imagine a gremlin on the wing.

"Decommissioned? You mean like an obsolete machine?" Tad shook his head. "How do they get away with this?"

Vivian was tired. "I don't know. Cornelius Stuart, our CIA contact, said he traced his heritage to trade ships from the sixteen hundreds. Colonists couldn't rebel at Jamestown and they wouldn't want to. Living under a monarchy was fine. One day, they got strong enough to break away. It was the Masons and George Washington was a leader. The Masons in England? Have you heard of Jack the Ripper? He wasn't alone. Cornelius told us that *Masons* committed *most* of these heinous slayings attributed now to one of the world's most infamous villains of all time. These Masons broke from England in America. Democracy was real enough until their push in 2000. Just as colonists made their move from England, *Rogues* made their move away from elected officials. There's overlap here and there but the Pentagon believed it achieved primacy over the White House."

"Makes sense," Tad said. "What are we supposed to do? They have billions of dollars to work with every year! They have every reporter and police officer tooting their horns!"

"First and foremost, we survive." Vivian felt crazy. If a gremlin *did* appear outside, she was sure she wouldn't scream. It would simply fit in with life's madness. "Second? We block it out. They want us sucked into their

drama. They get off when they see *Occupy* protesters lined up in front of their city halls across the nation. It affirms their existence! They pepper spray these guys with the same abandon ordinary people treat house flies! It's *gone*, Thaddeus! The American dream is gone! It's a *zombie* at best! It is dead! It might be walking in decrepit CIA agents' minds... but it is dead!"

"Canada? You think Canada is going to be any better?" Tad felt weary. He had enough sleep but his mind was laden with heavy issues. "I can live off the land if they cut off our funds."

"Live off the land?" Vivian laughed. "I plan on winning. I no longer believe I will save the world together with Fletcher... but I won't let these screwballs rip their talons into my flesh."

Vivian checked into a two-bed suite at the Four Seasons in Toronto. She slept almost until noon as did her nephew. As mid-day rolled around, Fletcher was in Richmond, Virginia with his dad, Cornelius and Shazbot. The men were inside a large CIA warehouse. The roof was almost fifty feet high and there were at least a hundred aisles of metal racks with pallets housing various boxes and crates. There was a section for office space and yet another section where forklifts and other heavy equipment were parked in between yellow painted lines. "Somewhere in this facility is the answer," Cornelius said.

"What answer?" Fletcher asked.

"JFK blown away? I heard your girlfriend singing 'We Didn't Start the Fire'! Don't think I'm so old that I don't know some rock 'n' roll. Somewhere in these racks is the real answer! People know who did it! The Russians? The Cubans? The mafia?"

"Do you know the answer, sir? Can we find it? It would really put my mind to rest!" Fletcher begged.

"I brought you here because it's an asinine conundrum... just like everything else. There's a code I have to tell security when we get into the office. If that code is correct, I get to talk to dispatchers. They have an inkling where I *might* find the answer but it's buried in crap. There is *too* much information on the subject. We saved tabloid stories. We interviewed distant relatives and took thousands of pages of affidavits. I don't know who the heck blew away JFK!" Cornelius felt a tiny bit ashamed but moved on. "In the far corner of this place, is a labyrinth of sorts. I want to show you this!"

They walked along. Fletcher kept stride and said, "Dad! I have some really awesome pictures of the bridge coming down around Sepulveda on the 405 during *Carmageddon*!" He pulled out his iPhone. "Check it out!"

"You're going to have to put that away!" Cornelius said. "This is a top secret area."

"Whatever!" Fletcher said. He put his smart phone back in his pocket.

They walked for another minute. There were yellow bars surrounding a strange set of double doors. "Imagine you are a firefighter in New York City." Cornelius clapped his hands twice. The doors opened. The facade was medieval. Dark burgundy paint with decorated black metal trim. Large rings hung from either side presumably for knocking. *Dark gray gargoyle faces above the rings.* The doors opened... but they did not *swing* open. They slide apart to the left and right like Moses commanding the Red Sea to move. Then there was a chamber with nothing in it... except more doors. "We got the idea from Maxwell Smart!"

Cornelius was proud. “This is one of my designs, Walter.” He spoke specifically to Walt because he didn’t believe Fletcher was old enough to remember *Get Smart*. He was wrong, though. Walter Browne was an incredible fan of that spy series. He bought a DVD collection at Best Buy and watched them with Fletcher on rainy nights.

“Are you insane?” Walter asked. “I mean no offense whatsoever.”

“Insane?” Cornelius laughed. When Walter thought he was done laughing, Cornelius laughed stronger and longer. Walter waited a few seconds and it began again. This time, Cornelius couldn’t maintain his feet. He collapsed to the ground and was pounding the cement they all stood on. “Insane?” he asked again. He stood up and blushed. “*Insane?*”

Walter felt stupid.

“Insane?” Cornelius shook his head in disappointment. “Insane?” Walter was counting. Five times in a row. Cornelius asked the same rhetorical question five times in a row. “The United States of America has spent tens of thousand of dollars to build a better toilet! *Solar powered!* There is a frickin’ bridge in Alaska that cost tens of millions to build and has fifty cars run across it every year! We have killed more monkeys redundantly than any country ever will! And we have also gone to the Moon! For every stupid thing like this, we are a fraction of our way to brilliance somewhere else!”

“I get it!” Walter wanted to move along.

Fletcher Browne stared directly ahead. He knew what he was seeing. It was the hexagon iris hatch from *Star Wars* movies. Fletcher even knew what to do. He clapped twice. The iris opened. Fletch sang, “*Clap on, clap off... the CLAPPER!*” The group made their way forward. Fletch felt livid feelings again. “Please! What the *FUCK?! You spend millions on disguising this facility! You spend millions on building a replica of a sixties spy show production set! And you use the fuckin’ CLAPPER? Jesus fuckin’ Christ! Is this why we’re trillions of dollars in debt? Jesus fuckin’ Christ!*”

Cornelius Stuart brushed it off. “You won’t be disappointed.” The next door split evenly from top to bottom. They walked into the next section where four wooden vertical boards twisted ninety degrees and allowed for five slots to walk through. At the end of the scheme, there was an old-school Pacific Bell phone booth. One by one, each guy entered and shot down to a lower level. “This is the madness,” Cornelius told Fletcher. “There was a day when we could interrogate prisoners. There was a day when we could question murder suspects. That fuckin’ Constitution that brought us our riches and secured our sovereignty from Europe also tied our hands. Serial killers have the right to an attorney, you know?”

“So you built these crazy places so that no one would speak of them?” Fletcher asked. “You did this to Matt Stubbs. You beat him with a pink bunny—a man in a costume. No one would listen to such a far out story!”

“Let’s walk along,” Cornelius suggested. “Do you see those men in those cells?” There were black stereo speakers above them and Dishwalla’s “Counting Blue Cars” played. “Have you ever seen a drug dealer drive a blue Ford Tempo? It doesn’t happen! If you’re driving a conservative economy car, you are trying to fit in! Chances are, you are on our side! Sometimes, fuck heads screw with our boys!”

It must have been a two-way mirror. Fletch watched two cells with two people. He was looking directly at replicas of standard jail cells. They were eight-by-twelve feet. There were metal sinks, beds and industrial-strength toilets. Each cell had a frustrated man sitting on a paper-thin thin mat. "Who are these people?" Fletcher asked.

"Have you ever watched *Sixty Minutes*?" Cornelius asked. He felt proud. He heard about "natural highs" and thought he was having one. "Laura Logan was my dream. I admit that. It used to be Christiane Amanpour, I've gotta say. There was this study they did recently. Toddlers were secretly observed in a room. They were given a choice. They were told that someone else their age would be coming into the room. They could decide if they would receive two snacks... and the next child would get two snacks as well... or they could choose to receive only *one* snack... but the next person would have nothing at all. Do you know what they chose?"

"*One snack*. This is too easy! I've been around too many youngsters in my life!" Fletcher wanted to know what point Cornelius was getting at.

"We have a circumstance where local law enforcement insists on arresting people we deem to be operative. We're talking about artists, professors, producers... and the like! This is a game of 'who blinks first'. We snatch them from their precincts and bring them here. They think it's a gag because of the *Maxwell Smart* doors. They wind up in a real competition. If you arrest one of our favorites, you better be willing to pay the price!"

"You've gone mad," Fletcher said. "Those guys are drones. They are trying to be fair!"

"So one of us wins, Fletcher!" Cornelius started to believe that all the out-of-the-way constructions were worth it. "You are now what I am!"

"Oh? Because I'm sticking up for law enforcement? And I suppose when I'm sixty-five I'm gonna want to push the *BUTTON*!" Fletcher Browne was frustrated... but he was intrigued and didn't want to admit it.

"*DICK FACE!*" Cornelius yelled. "This is a game of 'who blinks first' and someone's future is about to get better... and another guy is going to be deemed as socially unstable! They are put in cells the same size as the place where people they arrest wind up. Can they handle it? Every two and half minutes, they ring a buzzer. If they sleep, too bad. They have sent *friends of mine* to local jails where they have to worry about their surroundings... even when they're expected to rest!"

"And when they're done here, what happens to the winner?" Fletcher asked.

"Oh boy! I like you! You know that something is next!" A dinging sound interrupted the song. *It's getting cold, picked up the pace*. Dishwalla in the background. An occasional ding. *How our shoes make hard noises in this place*. Deputies in separate cells rushed to their sinks. There was a silver aluminum button for water and a separate red button to cease the dinging. One of the contestants would fall asleep and fail to press his button within thirty seconds. At this point, he would be sent home tarred and feathered. He would be considered mentally ill and collect roughly one thousand dollars per month for the rest of his life. The other deputy? He would make it to the next round of the insane round robin. He might battle wits with a burnt out FBI agent... or a city police officer

who shot someone in haste.

One deputy collapsed before he could reach his button. His head slumped over a metal toilet as if he expected to puke. The other deputy raised his arms and shouted that he was ready for the next round.

"I'm not getting it," Fletcher told Cornelius. "We are all valid people... and you treat humans as if only the champions deserve anything good."

"Do you really want to die in the suburbs?" Cornelius asked. "Lazy fuck balls perched on sofas all day watching re-runs of *King of Queens*? You are pathetic if that's the case! And I'm a horribly bad judge of character! We have come too far to accept incompetence!"

"Okay. So one of these deputies moves on and wins the challenge where he bounces off the large red balls in the lake? Then what? He drinks donkey sperm faster than some other douche? So he qualifies for the pay-per-view fight when he has to swim into the ocean in order to retrieve puzzle pieces... then bite off pieces of his opponent's ear? What's really going on here? Are you *fag*, Cornelius? Does this get you off?" Men entered one of the rooms and escorted the sleeping deputy from his quarters. Fletcher still considered that he might be dreaming.

"These are identical replicas of standard jail cells. You and your father will stay here for seventy-two hours. You have no idea what actual people go through." Cornelius looked at Fletcher's face. There was no fear.

"*When you ain't got nothing, you got nothing to lose!*" Fletcher was undaunted. "Bring it on! When I survive without complaining, I want you to lay off me and my family!"

Cornelius Stuart hesitated but carried on. "You will never know what it's like to rule the world!" He waved to one of the ceiling corners. Guards came in and escorted Fletch and Walter to the cells where they had just watched deputies struggle. Walter decided he would not compete with his son. He heard dinging in a couple of minutes and ignored the red button. Fletcher decided he wasn't competing with his father. Cornelius and his gang were going to do whatever they wanted to do. It didn't matter if a button was pressed or not. Fletcher pressed his button and wanted to do better than anything Cornelius would do.

Cornelius cut the game way short. He ordered his assistants to take Fletch and Walter to other holding cells. These were slightly bigger—*fifteen feet by fifteen feet*—and had single beds with comfortable mattresses and pillows. Each room had a desk with a traditional tower computer. Each room also was connected to a regular restroom with toilets made of porcelain instead of metal. When each guy was situated in his respective room, Cornelius spoke to them over a speaker. "The computers are outfitted with *Rosetta Stone*. You will be learning Mandarin Chinese. You will learn how to speak it. You will learn how to write it. There are thirty lessons. In order to earn your breakfast tomorrow, you must pass the first lesson. In order to earn you lunch tomorrow, you must pass the second lesson... and so on. You can be out of here in as little as ten days. If you finish on time, we will compensate you with ten thousand dollars. We will drop you off at *Parc Disneyland* at the same place that I gave Shazbot to Fletcher. If you resist, you will not eat. If you are stupid... and unable to learn... you will not eat." He waited a few seconds. "Out of the kindness of my heart, I will feed you dinner every three days if you choose to do nothing at all."

Fletcher rested on the bed. He decided he would give it a try but he would wait a few hours. Walter abruptly changed his mind about the other holding cells. Why get in the middle of learning an Asian foreign language then get snatched away again? Walter turned on his computer. He didn't understand what was going on. He didn't have much fear of Cornelius and believed it must've been a ruse. Cornelius had put Walter up to scaring his son in Yucatán. This had to be another one of those instances. Walter began his Rosetta Stone lessons without much care to figure out his circumstance in the bigger picture.

After a week, they had both studied quite a bit. Fletcher Browne finished all thirty lessons ahead of schedule and would've felt comfortable being dropped into Beijing without any company to help translate. Fletcher and his father were both taken together into yet another room. This one was larger than the last—about thirty by thirty. There was a square table in the dead middle. There were chairs on opposite ends of the table and there was a partition separating the two sides. Fletch was escorted to one chair and Walter was seated at the other. Assistants backed off and Cornelius approached. "I started to believe that you men were frauds. After days of observation, I am impressed." He held up a deck of cards. "These are *Zener* cards. There are no hearts, diamonds, clubs or spades." He splayed the cards toward the guys. "Five figures. Wavy lines, a cross, a square, a star, and a circle. Your girlfriend, Fletch, complained about a former First Lady spying on her with our psychic operatives. *I think she referred to them as 'pawns' and 'cronies'.* I started thinking that you just want a free ride in life. Why not try this? You understand what *propensity* is all about. You have a twenty percent chance of guessing what your father is looking at, Fletcher. I will hand him these cards and my assistants will tally your accuracy. If you guess thirty or thirty-five correctly out of a hundred, I'll believe there's merit to your claims. If you go as high as fifty correct, you will have unconditional release... and you will have my apology."

"Let's do this!" Fletcher was ready. "Not to jinx the process... but I understand these things are tough to prove under clinical situations. Did Vivian tell you I have experienced mild telekinesis?"

"*Vivian!*" Cornelius grinned. "Vivian! Yes, Vivian!" He handed Walter the Zener cards. "I gave her a document when I was passing around the photos the other day. I tried to win her trust by tipping her off that we were on her nephew's tail! Yes! It went quite well! Our agents crashed into Tad's truck on cue. We had a feeling she would rush to save him... and sure enough, she did. We sent police officers to investigate the wreck so Vivian bit on the next item—*inside information that another nine eleven was going to take place in Toronto!*" Cornelius chuckled. "I am sorry, Fletcher! You guys are quite upstanding people! I will send our guys to tell her she's on a wild goose chase!"

"*You stupid fucker!*" Fletcher regained his composure. "Let's start this imbecilic test!"

"Very well." Cornelius signaled to one of his aids. "As you will."

Fletcher was correct with fifty-three out of a hundred. It was more than he thought he would do. He didn't bother asking if they could leave because he could see it on the face of Cornelius that there was more. Cornelius clapped his hands twice and his aids exited the room and re-entered with items. There were candles, incense, wind chimes, a potted fern, and a spoon. "Your girlfriend said

that you had telekinetic powers. I had these prepared. I did not need to hear it from you.” Cornelius removed the table’s partition and set down four of the objects. He hooked the wind chimes to a thin chain suspended from the ceiling. He lit the candles and incense.

“I can bend that spoon, dad!” Fletcher wasn’t serious. He was near delirium.

Cornelius reached into his back pocket and pulled out a surgeon’s mask. “You will put this on.” He handed the mask to Fletch. “I will direct you to make the flame of the middle candle flicker. I will tell you when to bend the smoke from the incense. If you pass these mild tests, I will ask you to move the chimes and then the fern leaves. If that goes well, I would like you to bend the spoon with your mind.”

“It’s catch twenty-two, man!” Fletcher looked to Walter for agreement. “If I fail, you charge us as phony then dump us in the Jersey river. If I demonstrate psychic powers, you keep me! I wake up on a hospital bed in *Area 51* laying next to a space alien!”

“You will have your release!” Cornelius insisted. “You have my *word*.”

“Let’s do this thing!” Fletcher put the mask on.

Cornelius directed Walter to stand up and observe from a few feet behind the table. When the air was calm in front of Fletch, Cornelius commanded, “Make it move! The candle!”

Fletcher stared for one second then two. He could not feel any draft in the room. The candle’s flame flickered left and right noticeably for three seconds. “*There!*” Fletcher pulled his mask down.

“Put your mask back on! We’ll do this a couple of more times. We need to go beyond *belief*. We need to *know*.” Cornelius waited for Fletch’s mask to be put on again. “*Now!*”

Fletch concentrated. The candle flickered and danced for ten seconds. “*There!*” This time, he did not remove his mask. “Give me a few seconds to refocus.” He swiveled his neck around. If he felt butterflies in his stomach, he wouldn’t have been surprised. Instead, he became more and more calm. “I’m ready!”

“*Go!*” Cornelius couldn’t believe his eyes. Fletch started to stare. Five seconds into the gaze, the flame went out. “What was that?”

“You haven’t seen *shit* yet, stupid boy!” Fletcher stared some more. The flame came back on.

“Steer the incense smoke! Do it now!” Cornelius was torn. Fletcher could be insulting. On one hand, Cornelius Stuart wanted to slap Fletch across the face for his rude remark. He also wanted to grasp him in a bear hug. All these years about *hearing* about these things. He hadn’t ever believed anyone could have such command. “Do it!”

“*Spiral!*” Fletch yelled from under his mask. “*Spiral!*” The smoke began to spiral upwards. “*Donut!*” It wasn’t perfect, but smoke began to form in rings. “*Zig zag!*” Smoke went from side to side. Fletch’s last command wasn’t yelled. In conversational tone, he said, “*Be yourself, man!*” The smoke went about random and sporadic twists and turns. He pulled down his mask and turned toward Cornelius, “Is that enough? Do you want me to have the fern run at you? Attack your scalp?”

"No!" Cornelius Stuart turned his back to Fletcher. "In the name of all the holy crap I have ever seen!" He looked at aids standing near the wall. "Did you see that?" Walter and Fletch were allowed to leave. They were given hush money and Cornelius groveled a bit. "*I'm sorry!*" He wanted to keep them and knew he'd have security clearance to do so. "I'm not a monster!" he told them. "It truly was a prank at the beginning. Walter? You tested your son and I wanted to test *you*! I'll make this up to you!"

The father and son team headed to Toronto. They wanted to make sure Vivian was in good health and good spirits. It wasn't hard to find her. Fletch sent an email explaining everything he had gone through with his father. Vivian gave him directions to a cottage she rented in Dagmar. It was quaint and just north of the urban area. To the west was Glen Major Forest and Walker Woods. Vivian was surprised that there were many golf courses in the area: to the north, Wooden Sticks and Oakridge; to the east, Royal Ashburn; and to the south, Lakeridge Links and Watson's Glen. She arranged for her nephew's friends to fly up to Canada. The group met at Chalk Lake with less than an hour of daylight left. "They're very old school," Walter said. "They're the type who beats their wives and thinks it's okay. *Love, honor and obey*. Wife is property and kids get the belt if they don't listen."

"Do you know what they're rigging?" Fletcher had a soft spot for lakes. He looked across the water from the picnic bench where they gathered. "*Happy birthday!* Do you know what that is? Torture! From a children's cartoon! They have these rooms connected to one another, and you have to go through horse crap in one area to make it to cat piss in another! Somewhere out there, someone watched too much animation! '*No, not the happy birthday! Anything but that! Not the happy birthday!*' Remember that? And this overly-developed scheme is employed by a dog to teach a cat whatever moral lesson by putting him through contraptions that bonk the snot out of him. Reminds me of that freaky board game, *Mouse Trap*!"

Tad Streets, Ramon Johanson and Brent Hoover sat shyly. Finally, Ramon cleared his throat and said, "We go through that. I'm sure you do too, but we go through that. We worked at the smelly warehouse for chicken scratch. We went to that school where we slaved over term papers... and for what? To get a diploma which won't net anything? Then you tell me those *Rogues* you speak of planned to sabotage us? We're going through that dog and cat thing... but it's a lot more subtle."

"What the heck did we do, aunt Viv?" Tad held the list of bad things that were supposed to happen. "How did we get on their radar? They treat us like we're nothing at work and school... then they're gonna spend millions of dollars to make sure we can't have cheap tacos at Red Robin?"

"It's a mystery to me," Fletcher said. "There's a specialized sub-discipline in psychology called 'abnormal psychology'. *These guys aren't normal!* How did they get to places where they got? I don't know." He almost felt defeated. "I don't know what to do. Two thirds of Americans are living their lies. They are cowards, uninformed, die hards, evil, or whatever. They collect paychecks and they pretend that the USA is still a shining beacon."

Vivian took the list back from her nephew. "On this list, it says that my nephew was going to go through trials which looked like accidents. You say that

Cornelius put some decoys here? The CN Tower?"

"Yes." Fletcher took out a paper from his pocket and unfolded it. "Here's a new list." He handed it to Viv. "If we don't get our acts straight, he's going to strap us up next year in Candlestick Park. They're gonna demolish the place. Verbally, he said it'd be something else because this is now evidence."

"*What the fuck?*" Vivian looked westward. Trees were silhouetted in front of the setting Sun. "We ought to head to the cottage now." There were two cars around them. One was Fletcher's rented Accord. The other was a car that Vivian recently bought. "How do you like my new ride?" It was a gray Chevrolet Corvair. "*Classic, huh?* This is the kind of car Michael Douglas drove when Laura Welch killed him." Vivian liked Fletch's smile of approval. "It's *rear-engine*, guys!"

"I want to drive today, honey!" Fletch held Vivian tight. "I never ask to drive. *Let me drive!*"

"I guess I'll take the boys in the rental?" Walter asked.

"All we need is an old Chevy Impala! Then we can re-create the ol' fiasco!" Fletcher took keys from Viv and started up the Corvair. Viv jumped into the passenger's seat. "*This is completely awesome!*" Fletch revved the engine. Not too much later, they were all at Vivian's humble place. Darkness had set in. Fletch could barely make out a small lawn with a stone water well featured in the middle. "*Toasty!*" Fletch could feel the warmth of the fireplace as soon as he stepped in. There was a tiny kitchen, a confined bathroom, one bedroom, and the living room where they all stood. "I could use a shot of whiskey or bourbon!"

Vivian had spent the past week with her nephew and his two buddies chatting and playing board games. The college kids slept on the floor in front of burning logs. "I don't mind sleeping on the floor," Walter said. "If we're here for more the a week, I'll get a hotel." Fifteen minutes later, he was struggling to doze off in a sleeping bag next to three snoring youngsters.

In the bedroom, Fletcher rested next to Viv on a mid-sized bed. Vivian read *The Terror Conspiracy* from Jim Marrs next to an antique kerosene lamp. Fletch asked, "Aren't you tired? I mean, you've been running around like a *mother* lately."

Vivian set down her book on the nightstand next to Paul O'Neill's *The Price of Loyalty*, Greg Palast's *The Best Democracy Money Can Buy* and Michael Moore's *Stupid White Men*. There was also a thin booklet which was held together by plastic ring binding called "Rebuilding America's Defenses". Vivian rubbed her eyes. "Our enemy has a name!" She reached for the booklet. "Thomas Donnelly, Gary Schmitt, and Donald Kagan." Vivian adjusted her position to her side and handed the literature to Fletch. "*The Rogues*. These are the guys—at least some of them." Fletcher flipped through the pages. Vivian continued, "We were right! A lot of our intuitive beliefs were on the mark! Right before the election in 1992, this idea starts to formulate that America's somehow getting weak! It cites the 'Cheney Defense Department' and talks about 'constabulary operations' and crap like that."

"Is this '*Project for the New American Century*'? The subtitle reads '*Strategy, Forces and Resources for a New Century*' but I heard Cheney headed something which yearned for a *Pearl Harbor* kind of event... so the military can run things everywhere... and so cops would have free reign domestically with

interrogations and the sort.” Fletcher thumbed through. “It’s in here somewhere. I know it is.”

“Yes, that’s the document that people talked about.” Vivian turned for one of the books. “This is Paul O’Neill falling out of line. He was Treasury Secretary and wanted to ensure that our multi-trillion dollar budget surplus remained. He’d talked to Cheney in the halls of the White House and expressed his concern for Bush’s ways. Cheney would nod but O’Neill believed he was being blown off.”

“Wow! I passed it. *Project for the New American Century* on page two. Established in the spring of 1997. William Kristol, Devon Gaffney Cross, Bruce Jackson. Cites the Pentagon’s *Quadrennial Defense Review* and the *National Defense Panel* regarding military down-sizing.” Fletch handed the booklet to Vivian. “It was printed just before the election in 2000. Our country spends more on defense than the next seventeen nations combined! And most of those seventeen? *Allies!*”

“Imagine this make believe-scenario, okay?” Vivian put the writing next to the lamp. “It’s the Old West in the middle of nowhere like Dodge. New shops are being built and one is ready to become a tailor shop... or something else. A fire burns down a gun store and a bakery. One of these stores can move over to the newly-built spot. Which owner do you tell that he has to wait?” Viv looked at Fletcher but there was uncertainty. “You have to let the gun shop owner have the new slot and tell the baker he has to wait.”

“I’d argue with you a year ago. It’s these fuckin’ nuts, huh? They’re selective about what they see. We spend more than the next seventeen countries combined and we’re balancing our budgets... *but we dip below three-point-six on defense as far as gross domestic product!* They have a shit fit! Yeah, you give the gun shop owner the new store because he’s gonna cause mischief whereas a baker can only call you names at worst.” Fletch rubbed Viv’s belly. “You know what I saw in there? Those dim-witted wankers advocated a new military branch called ‘US Space Forces’! *Really?*”

“And we were talking about the poking and prodding. *The provoking. The agitation.* That was Rumsfeld’s brainchild! *P2OG.* Proactive Pre-emptive Operations Group. A hundred American specialists funded with hundreds of millions of dollars to fuck with Arabs and others in the mid-east. *Taunting.* Keeping food from children. Anything so that the leaders will turn on their people. Then? We can consider ‘em terrorists and whip ‘em, adding insult to injury!”

“*Rumsfeld? He’s a great patriot!*” Fletcher watched Viv smile.

“You miss *Shazbot*, don’t you?!” Vivian kissed Fletcher. “There are loads of things in these books. Coming to Canada reminds me of climbing a mountain. You can look down and see what you’re in the middle of. I couldn’t get these books at a *Barnes & Noble* in the United States. I can feel the eyes on me from all the morons who don’t want change.”

“Don’t get too angry. We’ll have to live with them again.” Fletcher nibbled at Viv’s ear. “We’ll sleep and talk some more tomorrow.” Vivian turned off the antique lamp. With only scanty light from the Moon outside the window, Fletch asked, “Is there something in there about sucking everyone into their drama?”

"We'll talk more tomorrow." Viv held Fletch and slept with her head on his chest. The couple woke early and headed to downtown Toronto. They spent time around the CN Tower and they spoke about all kinds of issues.

Walter Browne decided to take charge once Fletch and Viv slipped away. He headed to take back the rental car. On the way, he spotted a tan 1961 *Chevy Impala* for sale. He had to have it. Tad Streets, Ramon Johanson and Brent Hoover were with him. Walter's spree didn't end with the car. He discovered that Brent was okay at playing piano. Walter found an ad for a used walnut Mickleburgh and figured there would barely be enough room at the cottage. Fletch and Viv got home in the afternoon and were astonished to see a mover's van in the driveway. The piano was stuffed into a corner and Brent was playing scales. It sounded a bit out of tune but was otherwise solid.

No one complained about the living arrangements. Fletch and Viv slept in the sole bedroom. The four others stayed in the living room—three on the floor and Tad on the couch. Fletch began playing golf with his father. On their fifth day in Dagmar, they headed back from the Bushwood Golf Club. "I'm on the back nine of *life*, son." Walter drove the Impala. "I'm looking at this whole thing way different than you and Viv." They scooted along *Concession Road 9*. "Us old people? I don't think we care about the issues in the same way. That piano for instance? I wanted a *guitar* when I was younger. Now? I'm more at ease to settle in."

"They stole our country from us. It's not really fair. I see this a lot. Republicans like to rise as individuals and they fall in groups. Bush is out there talking crap about everyone and it's the same thing. If he succeeds, it's for himself or for his party. If he doesn't, he says they hate *all* Americans. It's not fair." Fletcher looked at the street sign for Balsam Road. He was feeling more comfortable with the area. Home was near.

"Rise as individuals? Yeah." The Impala rode well. Walter was satisfied with his purchase. "The bankers? They're out there on yachts when they gamble and win. When they lose? It's the taxpayer who foots the bill. You're right." *Concession Road 9* turned into *Myrtle Road* after Lakeridge. Walter was also becoming more relaxed as he understood his surroundings better. "When you get to be my age, you realize there's only a few years left and too many problems to solve. I don't know what you want me to do for you and Vivian. Your plate is full."

"Vivian has started a garden. I didn't even know you could *do* that up here because of the cold. Broccoli, cabbage and tomatoes. It keeps her busy. If I'm here another three months, I might just forget about all we went through. *Suppression*, you know?" Fletcher reflected on the insane hallway with the different types of doors. "I never wanted to give up fighting but there's so much to be remedied. It's a drain, but that's not always the worst part. Sometimes? It backfires. Cornelius said they were screwing with Tad because of his social activity. I think they did it to get to Viv."

"No one will ever know their true motives. *They are crazy.*" Walter gripped the rubber padding of the steering wheel. *Have I stepped into a time machine?* He looked at the black wire which spiraled around the wheel and fastened the rubber in place. He looked down at the dirt-caked AM radio. "We have many months to figure it out."

Walter and Fletch parked behind Viv's *Corvair*. Walter headed inside to rest. Fletch walked around to the backyard where Viv was planting carrots. As he began to talk about his day, Cornelius Stuart was arriving at the National Security Agency headquarters in Fort Meade, Maryland. His best friend there was Herman Eichelberger, a former army lieutenant. Cornelius greeted Herman, "How's it going, old pal?"

"I have the intercepts you wanted." Herman handed Cornelius transcripts. "Your buddies believe we have turned American masses into *zombies*. Vivian Streets has been reading a few Jim Marrs books. She thinks we wanted it this way—a *populous going through the motions but not really living*."

"Yeah?" Cornelius scanned the information. "Yeah? It says here that they believe we're eavesdropping on their cell phone calls! It's funny! It's ironic! Because this transcript is from one of their calls!"

"They know about our supercomputer data storage at Camp Williams in Utah. Remember when people used to say NSA stood for '*No Such Agency*'? They've been doing their homework and they're beginning to connect dots here and there." Herman sat down behind his desk.

"'No Such Agency'? I remember it as 'Never Say Anything'!" Cornelius handed back the transcripts. "I came here because you said they want to make it *permanent*. We're starting to lose a lot of people—a *lot of good people*. No one ever cared about the piss ants on the lower rungs... but some of these guys are special. We didn't need the terror. We didn't need the *Patriot Act*."

"There had to be a better way. I know." Herman watched kinetic balls thump each other in front of him for a few seconds. "*There's no use crying over spilled milk*." He reached to the swinging balls in front of him and stopped them. "They're trying to get it all out of their systems. They have a garden shed in the back of a cabin north of Toronto. They keep their retorts there. Vivian made a poster of Uncle Sam with a caption '*No More Bushes*' because she heard we're trying to put Jeb in the White House in 2016."

"*That would be good for us!*" Cornelius reached to the kinetic balls and restarted their motion. "These things are truly fascinating!" He watched silver balls. There were five of them hung down in a perfect horizontal line. The three in the middle never moved. The one on the right swung upward then gravity returned it down. It hit the first of the three middle balls and it's energy knocked the left ball upward. *Tick tock*, Cornelius thought. *Like a clock*. He snapped back into the conversation. "That would be great for the country if Jeb Bush was president! We could do *so* much more than if a Democrat was elected. Even a Republican like *Rand Paul* would screw us up! A filibuster against our drones shooting Americans domestically? Come on!"

"Yes! The libertarian wing of the *GOP* would rip funds from our programs." Herman Eichelberger reached to balls in front of him. Once again, he stopped their motion. "They're teaching the kids the intricacies of our system. The Republican Party is divided into three camps: You have your military nuts like Dick Cheney; you have your religious zealots like Rick Santorum; and you have your economic goofs like Steve Forbes." Herman pushed a sheet across his table. "This is a jpeg diagram we intercepted from an email Fletcher Browne sent to Eddie Callypso. There is a larger circle outside of smaller circle. Inside, it

reads ‘*Rogues*’. Those are the Bushes. He explains that Herbert Walker’s wet dream was that he would’ve won in 1992 followed by Quayle until 2000. But you know that already because you’re nodding. He goes on stating that W was penciled to be president from 2000 until 2008 and Jeb from 2008 until 2016! This Fletcher Browne kid thinks that we’re rigging elections so that America has a monarchy of Bushes! I think it’s funny!”

“Outside of the middle circle...” Cornelius looked at the diagram and read text. “Makes sense. Never really thought of it this way. Military, religious and economic factions. They build our *party*!”

“They believe that these headquarters here represent only *GOP* agendas. They believe the same about the Pentagon. They’re in Toronto trying to unify a headquarters for all the disenfranchised people of the world. Outside of the two circles, I expected to see another. Instead, it simply reads ‘*Abyss*’. They believe we don’t care about them.”

“I *would* care.” Cornelius pushed the sheet back to Herman. “That Fletcher, for instance! He doesn’t shave for five or six days on end! He thinks he’s some kind of *Don Johnson*! He thinks he’s about to sing ‘*Careless Whisper*’ on MTV or something! *Belligerent kid*! I tried to turn him on to what *we* do! The guy can be saved, you know?”

“*Saved*? That’s funny.” Herman pushed yet another sheet to Cornelius. “This email is from Fletcher Browne to Matt Stubbs. He makes fun of us—all of us. Hypocrisy. He talks about our so-called idols and heroes. *Jesus Christ. George Washington. Abraham Lincoln*. None of them were clean shaven.” Herman decided he missed the ticks of the kinetic balls and got them going again. “*Dorks with too much power*. That’s how he describes us!”

“*Dorks*?” Cornelius was shocked. “He wrote that? You’re not making this up?” Cornelius’ feeling of surprise turned into shame. “We hit it off. I was training him to do what we do!”

“You scared him!” Herman said. “They’re all freaked out thinking that we’re going to trail ‘em their whole lives!”

“What’s wrong with that?” Cornelius asked. “Aren’t we like fathers? They are like *babes*. They don’t know the dangers of the world! They think they can waltz into Afghanistan and talk to Taliban soldiers... and they’ll give up their guns for *flowers*.”

“Do you know when the last time anyone’s mentioned the *Fourth Amendment* in this office? They’re across the northern border and it’s legally *easier* to spy on them abroad. *ECHELON*. USSID 18. No one brings up the *Constitution* anymore! That bugs me.”

“*The Constitution*?” Cornelius scratched his head. “I told them it was a broken promise. It doesn’t matter anymore.”

“Doesn’t matter?” Herman Eichelberger was annoyed. “I fought on battlefields so it *would* matter.” He felt dejected. “So you want some of our guys to abduct them if they remain in Canada longer than your emotions can handle? That’s why you called for this meeting?”

“They were born in America and they need to behave like Americans! It is our *duty* to make sure our red, white and blue flag is honored. They are up there playing golf, living like gypsies, and saluting a frickin’ *maple leaf*.” Cornelius felt hypnotized by the knocking balls.

"Cornelius? You are one of my favorite people... but you need to let it go! I miss the days when people went about like idiots. People got thrown from the beds of pickup trucks. Kids fell from roofs and broke their legs. Cyclists hit pavement and their skulls were splattered across the road. *They had the choice.* There's something to the Jim Marrs postulate. *Zombies.* I look out there, and that's what we've made them into."

"*Go fuck yourself,*" Cornelius solemnly responded. He got up from the chair across from Herman and started toward the door. He stopped then, without turning back, he asked, "Are we still on for golf later?"

"*Five o' clock tee time.*" Herman was happy. "Go fuck yourself, too."

"I'll be there at five." Cornelius let himself out the door.

Fletch was helping Viv in her garden when Cornelius was driving away from Herman's office. "Do you enjoy this?" he asked her. "Is this just to pass time?"

"It keeps me busy." She sweated under a straw hat. She wiped her forehead and replaced beads of sweat with grains of dirt. "It keeps my mind off all the shit we've gone through. *Speaking of...?* Your father told me you performed a really neat trick in front of Cornelius. *A telekinetic performance with incense smoke.*"

"My life was on the line. I believed it was." Fletcher was on his knees putting seeds into the ground. Carrots were almost done. Chives would be next. "I told the smoke to move." He stopped planting and looked at Viv. "It's like asking a buddy for a favor, you know? I thought about it a lot. I had these perceptions long ago and there was a lapse. I almost thought it was my memory playing games. You ask a neighbor for a favor too often and he's bound to say 'no'. I never *sought* to have strings move at my command. I believe there're real *sprites* in the world... and they live near objects they can move... like a shirt hanging in an open closet. I asked for a favor. That's what I did when I was trapped in DC with my dad. It was an improbable coincidence for the smoke to move the way it did." Vivian held a small hand shovel. Fletcher wanted to take a picture of her. Dirt was not just on her forehead but also on the tip of her nose. She could be a calendar girl. *Miss July*, Fletch thought. *She could be Miss July, Miss August, and Miss September. Maybe October, too.*

"Do you think you could do this with a car?" Vivian felt foolish. "My *Corvair*? Could you lift it off me if I was in trouble?"

"*Maybe.*" Fletcher went back to dropping seeds. "I don't think *sprites* could do it. There would have to be something else out there."

"An angel? A wraith or phantom?" Viv continued forming small ditches.

"I couldn't know unless the situation presented itself. I don't think it's smart to screw with those phenomena for entertainment's sake." Fletcher visualized the plot he was on. He could see full-grown vegetables and herbs. He looked forward to eating something fresh and home-grown.

"One of these days you might have to move a mountain, you know?" Vivian laughed but it was almost forced.

"*Move mountains?* We've been doing it all along!" Fletcher tossed some dirt at Viv's shirt. She tackled him and they rolled around in the garden. Fletcher gained the upper advantage and pinned Viv's hands to the ground.

"We've got many more mountains to move!" He kissed her. Something was missing but it was the best he knew how to do. He looked into her eyes. He looked at the concern on her forehead.

"Something's been bugging me," she said. Fletch got off her and she sat up. "*Shafig*. Ever since we stayed at the Ritz-Carlton, I wondered why more people didn't talk about him."

"*The press?*" Fletcher took pumpkin seeds from his pocket and popped a few into his mouth.

"Wouldn't it make more sense that *he* was the bin Laden connected to conspirators inside of our government? *The Rogues?* He was in America. Osama denied any involvement on *al Jazeera* five days after the Towers fiasco. His brother was with the president's *dad*... and the bin Ladens were the only family in the air a few days later... escorted by our military out of the country."

"There's a lot that bothers me," Fletch said. "That makes sense. Who do we tell? What good does it do to know such thing? Do we find *Shafig* on camera then insist to all national TV networks that they broadcast his confession?"

"*Right?*" Viv took off her gloves. "Right. My mind is working too much." There was one more thing she had rattling in her head. "*Remember that picture of Shafig smooching W on the lips?* Would anyone believe they kissed each other? Is that more than culture?" Vivian wanted Fletcher to answer. Instead, his face became pale. He spoke of *sprites* and it looked now like he was seeing a ghost. Fletcher pointed into the sky. Vivian turned around. "*My GOSH!*"

Fletcher's first thought was that it was an F-14 Tomcat coming at them from the south. The plane slowed. *A fuckin' alien ship. It's moving like an alien ship!* Fletcher's jaw dropped. The plane hovered in one place. Fletch wanted to run but realized that if the military was after him, it'd just be a matter of time. He thought about trying to undo the straps in Yucatán. He finally told Viv, "It's like a rowdy kid who enjoys stomping at ant holes! The fuckin' kid likes to see 'em scurry. When they're relaxed, the wild child stomps again! What do they want with us?"

The airplane descended vertically. It was an F-35 fighter. Viv held Fletch's hand. "They'll leave if we want them to. You have to tell them we don't want to be what they are. What is this? A 1960's draft?" Vivian could make out the pilot's face. "Forget it, Fletch!"

"*Is that who I think it is?*" Instead of running from the plane, Fletch ran to it.

"Fletcher! Be careful!" Vivian stayed at her garden. The plane landed fifty feet in front of her. The front hatch opened. Shazbot stepped out in a decorated Air Force uniform.

"Shazbot! What the fuck?" Fletch shook Shazbot's hand. "Where have you been?" Before Shazbot could utter anything, Fletch noticed another aircraft.

"I want you to meet someone!" Shazbot pointed to another F-35 hovering above them. "You'll like this, Fletcher!" The second plane lowered.

It was another android. Shazbot was designed to appear human. This other droid looked like a female C3PO. "Who is she?" Fletcher waved for Viv to join them. The plane landed.

As Vivian reached Fletcher and Shazbot, the she-bot lowered herself.

She wore no clothing at all and her face resembled a crash-test dummy more than anything. Her skin was golden and she looked like a large doll without hair. "Who is she?" Viv asked Shaz.

"*She's my girlfriend.*" Shaz held the mystery robot when she was close enough. "Dinah? I want you to meet Fletcher and Viv."

"Zzzshzzbttt," Dinah said.

"Shaz! She can't speak! What's going on?" Fletcher extended his hand to Dinah.

Dinah sounded beeps and gleeps similar to R2D2. She shook Fletcher's hand.

"I'm Vivian!" Viv noticed that Dinah's eyes weren't disguised like Shazbot's. There was no white and no color. *Black dots*. No nose either except for a couple of small puncture marks. "Can you speak English?"

"I'm kidding, ya'll!" Dinah's voice rang with a Southern accent. "I'm here to party!"

Fletcher finally realized what he was seeing regarding the aircrafts. These had to be prototypes of *Lightning II* he saw on cable television. Although advanced, funding was going to make production difficult. "How did you manage to get these?"

"We're *test* pilots! How long do you think it takes to program us? Not long!" Shazbot held Dinah at the waist. "She's gorgeous, isn't she? I won't be so lonely now!"

"Lonely?" Vivian asked. "You're a *robot*!"

"I told you not to call me that!" Shazbot pointed his finger at Viv's nose. He calmed his tone, "My artificial intelligence is ahead of schedule. My masters believe I am achieving actual human emotions."

"*Wow!*" Viv looked Dinah from head to toe. Then she looked her from toe to head. "She could use some clothes. What size is she? *Seven?*"

"That's why I'm here, good friend." Shazbot put his hand on Viv's cheek. If this had been a guy in a bar, Fletcher would've become angry. "I need help developing her!"

"*Help?*" Fletcher asked. "Don't you have the internet in your head?"

"I need the opinion of *friends*. Cecily Strong, Kristen Wiig and Tina Fey have always done it for me!" Shazbot put his index finger to his chin as if he was considering an important decision. "I like funny ladies... but they have to look better than Sandra Burnhart."

"Go with Tina Fey!" Fletcher patted Shaz's shoulder. "She's a good one!"

"Nah! This has to be *my* decision. I wanted you to help eliminate a choice." Shaz paused then turned to Dinah. "*Cecily Strong.*"

"Yippie!" Dinah clapped and beeped. "Yippie! I was hoping I could look like her!"

"So you came here to *mold* her?" Vivian wanted to run inside and at least grab a bed sheet so Dinah would wear a toga.

"Yes, Vivian. You do the same things, you know? Half your record collection exists based off your acquaintances' tastes. I will learn subtlety over time and you will like me less when I pick your brain with idiotic inquiries!" Shazbot looked at the garden. "You are getting a green thumb!"

“Yes!” Fletcher was happy. “We couldn’t do this in LA! They would think we’re freaks! They’d send screwballs to mess with us!” Fletch looked again to the planes. “Not that it didn’t happen here with you guys!” Vivian took off in a sprint to the humble cottage. Fletch called, “*Vivian?*”

No one said anything for a few seconds. Viv came out with a pink flowery summer dress. She handed it to Dinah. “I want you to have this!”

Dinah took the dress and slipped it on in front of everyone. “Thank you, Viv!” She turned slowly in a three-sixty. “Do I look good?”

“*Wow!*” Shazbot shot smoke from his ears. Fletcher never knew he had this ability.

“*You guys make a wonderful couple!*” Fletch jogged to the tool shed and brought out his Nikon. “I have to take a picture of this!” The android couple posed for a few pictures.

“We have to go!” Shaz said when the snapping was done. “Do you know how many retired Air Force commanders work at the Pentagon?” Shazbot didn’t wait for a guess. “*A lot!* Many of ‘em drive one of these!” He gestured to the two F-35s then he kissed Dinah on a thin rectangular slit where her mouth was supposed to be. “We are going to have such fun double dating!”

“I look forward to it!” Fletcher saluted Shaz. “You kids get running!”

“It was a pleasure to meet you!” Dinah curtsied. “I will look different the next time you see me!”

“If you like the dress, I got more!” Vivian waved at the androids as they boarded their respective planes and flew away. It occurred to Viv that no one was in the house when she ran in for the dress. She later found out that Walter took Tad, Brent and Ramon to the movies in the city.

As Vivian romantically held Fletch and discussed what had just happened during the visit, Eddie Callypso was having a light appetizer with Nancy Moore at *China Panda* near the Ontario International Airport in California. They ate lettuce bowls and drank Tsingtao. “Fletch has been sending some really nutty emails. It’ll be good to see him.” Eddie was glad that things were working out between him and Nancy. He looked at a TV hoisted above the bar. A baseball game was on.

“Our flight leaves in a couple of hours.” Nancy wore a short glittery black shirt with a matching top. “I still get willies when I go through checkpoints.”

“He thinks he has nine eleven solved and he started trying to crack seven seven.” Eddie wanted to be interested in the ball game but was pre-occupied with Nancy and traveling to Toronto. “I hadn’t even *thought* about the British bombings in... I don’t know. Two or three years?”

“*British bombings*” Nancy asked. “There is *so* much violence in the world that I lose track of what’s happened here and there.” Nancy noticed it was the Angels. Mike Trout was batting. He was on her fantasy baseball team, *BrainOrBraun*.

“On July 7, 2005 four explosions happened at the same time in London. Three on rail cars and one on a double-decker bus. Giuliani was conveniently in town... and near all the bombings. Like nine eleven, *terror drills* were going on. Fletch thinks that the so-called terrorists were patsies—they thought they were really part of a *drill*. They had bombs in *sacks*. Any dignified *real* terrorist would

have ‘em strapped to his body!”

Mike Trout knocked a single into right field. “*Yes!*” Nancy clinched her fist and shook it in celebration. “What? Oh. Yeah. Terrorists.” Nancy turned her attention back to Eddie. “Did you see that gross thing Dave Navarro did?”

“Hanging himself with meat hooks?” Eddie looked at the TV screen. Albert Pujols was swinging a bat with a rubber donut in the batter’s box. “Yeah. That’s sickening!”

“I’d rather blow myself up with explosives in a *train* than do that!” Nancy smiled. “Just kidding. We should have one more drink then head out.”

“I’m with you!” They finished their food and watched the game for another twenty minutes. Next stop would be the airport. Once on board, Eddie restarted the conversation on terror. “The Brits were the only full supporters of ours after nine eleven and the ‘*War on Terror*’”

“What about Micronesia?” Nancy felt silly.

“*Okay.* It was us, the Brits and Micronesia.” Eddie sat one seat from the window. To his right, Nancy fidgeted next to the isle. To his left, an elderly man squirmed next to the window.

The elderly man hoarsely added, “The Dutch were on our side... I think.”

“*The Dutch?*” Eddie was startled that he was interrupted. He turned back to Nancy. “The theory goes that Britain had to bomb its own citizens in order to feel terrorized enough to justify maintaining a police state.”

“Yeah.” Nancy wasn’t too interested in the topic. “The Angels have Trout, Pujols and Hamilton this year! How can they lose?”

“Our terror expert at the time in the Department of Justice, John Loftus, claimed that the *mastermind* behind seven seven was working for *MI5*. Haroon Rashid Aswar put in time for British Intelligence!” Eddie Callypso felt tired and believed he might doze. He leaned back and closed his eyes.

“*That Saddam Hussein was a really bad guy!*” the elderly passenger said. “They hung *him* for a good reason!”

“*What?*” Eddie’s eyes opened. “Saddam?” Eddie looked at the elderly man and thought, *You believe everything CNN has ever reported.* Nancy wasn’t much into talking about anything but baseball. Eddie decided to have a little fun. “McGyver could’ve caught Saddam Hussein if they dropped him in before the *Shock and Awe.*”

“McGyver? I would’ve used Captain America!” The elderly man felt proud.

“*Captain America?*” Eddie wasn’t sure if he was having a real conversation. “What about Aquaman? Imagine if...”

“*Aquaman is no good in the desert!*” The elderly man became flustered. “You know the problem with your generation?”

“*What?*” Eddie was truly curious what the critique would be.

“You have no idea what reality is! You’ll have a superhero who *swims* everywhere take out a guy living in arid land!” The elderly man was matter-of-fact about his speech. “That Saddam Hussein was going to destroy America!”

“Yes sir!” Eddie decided on a nap.

Cornelius Stuart played nine rounds of golf at *Timbers at Troy* with Herman Eichelberger. Eddie Callypso settled in with Nancy Moore in Toronto. Something buzzed in the belly of Cornelius. He felt defeated. America was doing

great in many regards. The infrastructure was spectacular. The only people whom managed to *screw* with America was other Americans. This went for *nine eleven* and Cornelius knew it. When America got greedy, it fell short sometimes. Falling short left a sour taste in people's mouths. As Eddie and Nancy caught up on their lives with Fletch and Viv in Dagmar, Cornelius arranged a meeting with Mathew Stubbs. *Bear hunting*. He knew Matt would be up for it. Whenever called, Matt seemed to be up for anything.

Cornelius walked along the ridge of Wills Mountain State Park near Cumberland, Maryland holding a Marlin M-1895 rifle. Three days prior, he held a three iron and a pitching wedge. He now looked at tall trees and felt like a teenager at prom. Mathew Stubbs walked next to him. Matt wore brown and tan colors with a fluorescent orange vest. He wore a cap with bills on the front and back similar to something Sherlock Holmes would wear if he was along for the trip. Cornelius asked Matt, "Do you know how many permits are allowed every year in Maryland to hunt bear?"

"*No clue.*" Matt opened a package of trail mix. He popped raisins and nuts into his mouth. "Ten thousand?" Matt guessed out of courtesy more than anything else.

"Three hundred and forty." Cornelius grabbed Matt's mix without asking for permission. He poured a third of the bag into his mouth. "Somewhere around a hundred black bears are legally killed every year in this state."

"Yeah?" Matt never knew if he was going to be commended or reprimanded. He thought, *Maybe I'm out here because you're going to shoot me. It'd make sense after that giant bunny assaulted me.*

"Do you know why we kill bears, Matt?" Cornelius gobbled some more of the trail mix then stuffed the bag inside his pocket. He didn't wear an orange vest. He thought Matt would ask about it but nothing gave. "We kill bears because they would run this place if we let them!" Cornelius walked along and felt proud. He felt *intelligent*. He believed he was making a point. "They're like Indians, you know? It's them or it's us! Bears would be eating *babies* if we didn't shoot 'em! You know that! The Indians? There would be no American cities! You can't cut a frickin' tree down because they would be shooting their bows and arrows at us!"

"Yeah. I know that." Matt wanted to ask for his trail mix. He was scared that Cornelius would react violently.

"Democrats are like those bears and Indians! You let them thrive? They're going to want money for everything!" The woods thickened. "I remember 1984 like it was yesterday! Walter Mondale showed up to the dance but he knew the show was meant for Ronald Reagan! *Mondale won one state that year!* His home state of Minnesota... and he won DC because all the coloreds. *They don't like Republicans too much and maybe they never will.* My point is that, eventually, there were too many of them! You built that death camp in Beech Grove because of where things were heading."

"We should shoot 'em like bears?" Matt walked with Cornelius and felt at ease. For some reason or another, *wackiness* made him feel that he was safe. If all the ducks were in a row, he thought someone was plotting something. "Bears are dangerous. I know people can be dangerous, too."

"I need you to kill Fletcher Browne," Cornelius Stuart said. He looked at

Matt's gun. It wasn't a rifle. It was a hand gun—a nine millimeter *enhanced micro pistol*. "This isn't a done deal. Early next year, Candlestick Park will be imploded in San Francisco. I need you to maintain his trust." Cornelius walked for a half minute without giving more information before saying, "He *mocks* me. I tried to give him this lofty position in the government... and I can feel him *hating* me. You understand me, though. You know that bears have to be killed or they'll be running in our streets! Fletcher? He would call every animal rights organization there is!" Cornelius discovered that he was near tears. "I fought so hard for this country!"

"*Thermite?*" Matt asked. "Is that what this is about? Nine eleven is much ado about 'he said, she said' but the smoking gun is in the particles found in the dust blown into apartments surrounding the World Trade Center. *The thermite*. Without this explosive substance, Fletcher Browne and Vivian Streets go into denial. They accept your gifts. *Shazbot and everything else.*"

"He knows I'm wrong." Cornelius Stuart thought he heard crackling in beyond some bushes. He drew his rifle and waited a few seconds. He let it down after silence. "He knows the government lied. I can deal with that. What I can't deal with is his self-righteous behavior. *Like he wouldn't do what I did if he was in my shoes.*"

"Hey, man! I'm with you." Matt carried a backpack and slung it around in front of him. He put his gun inside. "You can handle a bear if we're attacked, right?"

"Regular hunting season is in late October. I pulled strings. I'm not sure what to expect this time of year." Cornelius admired Fletcher because of his independent thinking. He also *hated* him because of it. Matt, on the other hand, was willing to agree with almost anything. After Herman Eichelberger challenged his motives, he was pleased to be around such a compliant person. "I'll have you know that I'm giving it time. *Fletcher needs to change this summer*. He's out there thinking he's some rock star photographer! He's just a guy like you and me. He needs to cut his hair. He needs to stop talking trash about the guys that cut our taxes!"

"Yes!" Matt walked along. "He should know that Uncle Sam needs every iota of energy he has. Maybe I can talk to him and we can avoid the catastrophic demolition deal."

"*No!* He has to do it on his own!" Cornelius reached into a man-purse at his waist. He unwrapped a cinnamon roll from a wrapper. "Bears *like* these! They'll come and try to get it!"

"What are we gonna do if we blast one of these things? Rug? Do we eat it?" Matt meandered through trees and brush. Cornelius spoke about one plan after the other. Matt became more and more relieved as he believed he wasn't being sabotaged. Night fell and no black bears were spotted. They retired for the time being and got their kill the next day.

Eddie Callypso and Nancy Moore checked into the same Four Seasons in Toronto as Vivian had stayed initially with her nephew. Most of the day, Eddie and Nancy would be at Viv's place in Dagmar. Tad, Brent and Ramon took an interest in hiking. Though they were young adults, Fletch and Viv continually referred to them as "the kids". The piano in the cottage was a main focus of entertainment. Eddie kept up his YouTube channel and the group recorded a

music video called “Sizzling” which accrued more than four thousand views in its first week.

*Some say life has a master designer
Our love sizzles like a Beech Grove pyre
Where there's smoke, there is fire
Our passion soars like a gargoyle flyer*

*If they are vultures, we're doves on the wire
They're the zombies, we're the survivors
We escape to our pleasant place, nothing could be finer
Light at the end of the tunnel becomes brighter and brighter*

*We rub each other
It causes a spark
Our love is combustive like thermite
It lights up the dark*

*It's a devotion
An emotion
An explosion
And it tears down their wicked lair
Sizzling... smoking and sizzling... smoking and sizzling*

*If life is cereal, you are the fibre
You are the flower child, I am your fighter
We can pull a freaky all-nighter
When you're gone, life grips so much tighter*

*If your heart is solid gold, I am the miner
Your desire is a rocky mountain, I am the climber
You are the newspaper, I'm your ardent subscriber
I chill and think of you all day on my very soft recliner*

*It's an emotion
A commotion
An explosion
It's the reason to breathe
Sizzling... smoking and sizzling... smoking and sizzling*

Brent Hoover played piano for the piece. Viv and Fletch sang a duet and the other “kids” harmonized backup during the chorus. It was arranged so that Viv sang in unison with Fletch for the first couple of verses and wound up alternating lines with him. Eddie Callypso’s YouTube channel was filled mostly with conspiracy rants and proposals for alternate social futures. “Sizzling” was the first *music* video that he posted. He was happy with the attention it got and he was glad that most of the comments were positive. He laughed openly at one of them: “This rocks like your mother!” A week after Matthew Stubbs shot a black

bear through his ear hole, Eddie was discussing his internet channel with Walter, Fletch and Viv. They made sandwiches which featured freshly-grown tomatoes from the back yard. "I wanted to be a celebrity, I suppose," Eddie said. They sat on the floor in the living room around an antiquated trunk which served as a coffee table. "I wanted to be honest, too."

"*Write what you know.*" Fletch liked the idea of eating fresh food. The chives were still coming along and would be a nice treat soon enough.

"Every single one of us hated what was going on during the two thousands. The Republicans haven't won an election since 1988! Right Viv? You read the Greg Palast book. *Right?*" Eddie checked his YouTube updates through his iPhone as they chatted. Viv nodded in agreement. "I'm not sure I wouldn't do what they did: *Hijack our country!*"

"It's gonna be over," Vivian said. "I keep telling the kids we just have to wait it out. A year? I don't know. We have to wait it out."

"*That Romney thing was so close!* They almost ripped our progress away." Eddie was surprised that Fletch and Walt didn't chip in. "In my last vlog before the '*Sizzling*' vid, I lined out what I propose should happen if our government never implicates the *Rogues*. Thermite! I think that in 2046, demolitionists should line the White House pillars with the same incendiary substance that they put along the core beams inside of the World Trade Center towers. Poetic justice, you know? It took a while for America to contemplate the '*multiple shooter theory*' with the JFK assassination. One third of the people in our nation think it was an inside job. Shouldn't we have the freedom to make the movies we've always made? Why were senators hounding the makers of *Zero Dark Thirty*? And that flick at least *tried* to go along with the so-called official story!"

"Do you remember CBS gave in to pressure about showing a series about *Ronald Reagan*?" Fletcher finally chimed in. "It's the same thing over again... and again. You can say Jimmy Carter was behind nine eleven and Fox News is gonna run with it—*no proof needed*. Implicate someone from the GOP? Get ready for the clink or padded walls!"

"This whole thing with *Kim Jong-un* threatening to nuke LA? I think he's trying to liberate us! I really do! I believe he thinks we're prisoners of our own government. *That's what I talked about in my most recent vlog*. Your music video has more views, by the way. All these right-wingers wiggling out that Dennis Rodman went to North Korea? Do you remember when Jesse Jackson had to go to Israel to solve a dispute? These *suits* think they're going to strut into struggling areas, smile their gleaming smiles, and all the children of these foreign lands are gonna beg to produce our products in slave conditions! It doesn't work like that."

Vivian laughed. "Remember *Romney* went to see Manny Pacquiao before a fight? *Pacquiao got his clock cleaned that night!*"

"That's what I'm saying." Eddie shook his head in revulsion. "These guys think they're good luck charms but their times have passed and they're riding coattails of ghosts."

"I'm an older white man." Walter finally entered the conversation. "I don't behave like them. The kids are out there hiking somewhere. *Ramon* was talking about being adopted. His biological father is Buatista but he didn't know

about it until high school. He got treated different by school counselors than Tad and Brent even though they had the same grades.”

Beep, beep.

“What’s that?” Eddie stood up. “I think I hear...”

Beep beep beep.

Vivian and Fletch stood.

Beeeeeeeeeeep.

“Someone’s trying to get our attention.” Walter stood and headed to the front door.

Eddie Calypso peeked through window curtains. “Guess who it is, guys?”

“It’s gotta be *Shazbot!*” Fletcher held Viv’s hand. “He’s the only one that knows we’re here!”

“Yeah! It’s *Shazbot!*” Eddie motioned to Walter to open the door. “He’s got company. Matthew Stubbs is with him and... Is that *Cecily Strong?*”

Walter eased the front door open. “He’s driving a vintage World War II Jeep!”

Vivian rushed passed Walter. Fletch followed her. “*Shazbot?* What’s going on?”

“We have a gift for you! First, I want to present *Dinah!*” Shazbot hugged Vivian then gestured toward the passenger’s seat. “She’s a *beauty!* And later, I have a special surprise that Matt, here, doesn’t even know about!”

“Hello!” Dinah’s new face blushed. “I feel so much better. I feel like a real *person.*”

It really is Cecily Strong, Vivian thought. She approached Dinah and put her hand below her ear and rubbed the base of her neck. *No. Not human skin. Android. Looks real, but she’s the same thing as Shazbot.* “Good to see you!” Vivian finally said. Dinah made her way out of the vehicle. In the back seat, Matt sat next to a bear rug. “What’s this?”

“I shot him,” Matt said. His face twitched and he averted eye contact. “Democrats? There’s too many of them. Maryland. I went hunting with Cornelius. You guys have to shape up or he’s going to blow you up next February in Candlestick Park.”

“It’s not going to happen!” Viv said. Matt made his way out of the Jeep and pulled the bear rug with him. “Those dudes are *crazy* and they’ve done a lot of damage... but they’re scared now. And they *know* they’re crazy.”

“Before they didn’t know they were crazy?” Matt slung the dead bear over his shoulder. “When they had me build a death camp in Indiana? That wasn’t crazy? They know it *now*, though?”

“I could see it in his face last time,” Vivian said. “They’re doing these nutty things still... but they don’t want to. At least, *Cornelius* doesn’t want to. These are the last of his wild oats.”

“I hope you’re right.” Matt walked to the cottage’s door and handed the bear rug to Fletcher. “I didn’t want to kill him.”

Fletcher took the rug. “This was your lesson, huh? There’s too many useless people in the world for the *Rogues* to handle so Cornelius Stuart takes you hunting? It’s supposed to show that we’re all in a ‘kill or be killed’ universe?” Fletcher plopped the bear onto the floor near the fireplace. “As much as I’m

against this—*hunting wild animals with insanely overpowering weapons*—we’re going to use this to remind ourselves that it’s real. *Their desire to clear our planet of unwanted inhabitants.* Doesn’t matter if you’re human or not.”

“Can I have a sandwich?” Matt looked at the trunk they’d been eating around.

“*Knock yourself out!*” Fletcher went outside to talk with Viv, Shazbot and Dinah. He looked into the northern woods and saw that Tad, Brent and Ramon were returning from a walk. Nancy was with them. Fletcher almost forgot that she was missing from the group. Fletch went to greet them. Matt had fixed his sandwich and ate as he strolled to the Jeep. “What’re you looking for?” Fletcher asked him.

“I got souvenirs!” Matt rummaged. Under a camouflage sleeping bag, there were a few items. He pulled one out. “This? Do you remember *this*, Fletcher?” He held it up and gained the group’s attention. “This red fabric thing? It’s a *wind sock*, people! It’s to give helicopters a solid idea of how much wind is blowing... and its direction, too.”

“Why’d you bring it? Where’d it come from?” Vivian approached and felt the wind sock with her hands.

“I got it from the Beech Grove facility I worked at.” Matt looked at Fletcher. “Do you want to add anything?”

“They were all over the place,” Fletcher said. He looked at the “kids” and noticed interest in their facial expressions.

“The place once took in Amtrak trains. It had cranes there from the Army. It had locomotives marked with ‘US Air Force’ paint. The facility was designated with green, blue and red zones. The red zones had miniature lanes, probably for humans to stand in line.” Matt laughed. “There was this high guard tower. I raced Fletcher to the top. We didn’t go at the same time. We used a stopwatch app to determine the winner.”

“And that’s funny?” Vivian handed the wind sock back.

“What doesn’t kill ya’ makes you stronger.” Matt searched through the back of the Jeep again. He pulled out a sign. “*Burle*,” he read large white print on a black metal placard. Under “Burle” were smaller white letters. “Robot access control hardware,” Matt read it then passed the sign around.

“*Stealing from the United States government is a felony!*” Shazbot took the sign then handed it along.

“Tom McKay said I could take some things,” Matt told Shaz. “The metal turnstiles were operated electronically. That’s the company that provided the Beech Grove stuff.” Matt went back to the Jeep. He pulled out a red tarp, perhaps six by eight feet. “Here’s one of the ‘*Red Zone*’ posters. I thought Tad might want to hang it on a wall. I understand he collects movie posters and even makes originals of his own.” Matt handed the tarp to Vivian. She examined it then gave it to her nephew.

Fletcher Browne trotted to Viv’s Corvair and pulled some pictures from the glove compartment. “I have some stuff if ya’ guys want more!” He handed a handful of photos around. “There was a black helicopter that kept zooming overhead. You’ll notice many fences. The barbed wire when it’s not coiled in a spiral loop faces inward. It’s to keep people *in*. The small, yellow hut is where the main gas was. There were furnaces other places but...”

"I don't think they're gonna keep it closed." Matt interrupted Fletcher. "I went hunting with Cornelius. Those guys don't change."

"Okay?" Vivian wanted more of an update. "Are we supposed to be scared? Should we run and hide somewhere else?"

"It was on March 14, 2008 when Congress held its fourth ever closed-door meeting from the public since 1776." Matt leaned against the vintage Army Jeep. "They knew the economy would collapse by September of that year—a collapse *now* known as the 'Great Recession'. Cornelius Stuart was privy to the subjects discussed as he *briefed* many members of the House and Senate about intelligence and solutions. They believed *Civil War* could ensue if the downward spiral couldn't be stopped. The Beech Grove facility was one of many which were prepared for 'worse case scenarios'. They figured that North America would become a nation. Canada has resources and Mexico has cheap labor. The 'Amero' would replace the dollar and peso."

"It sounds like a *stupid, stupid* movie!" Vivian put her arm around her nephew. "When is this wacked out bull crap gonna end?"

"I'm never going to be the same," Matt told her. "I never wanted to put the things together to begin with. I didn't want to shoot a bear. I've been beat up by a large man in a rabbit costume, though. Why can't we shoot bears with tranquilizer guns and give 'em their own island somewhere? I don't know the answer to that. I mean, if we're killing them now because there's too many and they'll come into our neighborhoods? I don't know. *Ninety percent*. Cornelius said ninety percent of us would have to die for them to be comfortable."

"They could do that and have the same feel as spraying houseflies with *Raid*?" Fletcher shook his head in disbelief and disgust. "Shaz? How are you coming along with free will?"

"I'm almost all there, sir. Almost a hundred percent. It is true that I was designed to have a pro-American bias in my initial setup. I believe George W Bush is..." Shazbot hesitated. "I'm teetering, sir. I could answer. My program prompts me to say that George W is wonderful. My life interaction thus far has only confirmed this pre-stated notion with certain members of cable network news television. I haven't found many people, face-to-face, touting his record as a president. These are basic facts and I am on the verge of having a unique opinion *based* on those facts—an opinion which is not a simple regurgitation of Bill O'Reilly... or something else found in bytes on my internal hard drive."

"That is good to hear, my friend." Fletcher ruffled Shazbot's synthetic hair.

"If they gas you, I will fly an F-35 Lighting II and whip the White House into shape," Shaz said. He scratched his chin. "Would that be called an opinion?"

"There is subtext to what you said, Shaz. That means a lot!" Fletcher smiled.

"Can he really do that?" Vivian asked. "I mean, if they're really trying to bury us under the rubble of Candlestick Park next year..."

"We can't be like them." Fletcher held Viv's right hand as she continued with her left arm around her nephew. Fletcher said, "There are many minority groups who'd love to enslave white Anglo-Saxon Protestants, particularly older affluent males. We can't become the thing we hated and struggled against. How are we gonna go to bed with clean conscious?"

"We've got to teach them *consequence*, Fletcher." Viv squeezed his hand. "They'll keep screwing with us. Why do they get to skate by?"

"We'll cross that bridge when we get to it," Fletch said. "I feel sorry for them, for some reason. I can't figure out why. I feel *sorry* for them." Fletcher pulled Vivian next to him. Her smile hadn't changed since high school. He pulled her head close to his and touched her nose with his. "It's time, I think."

Vivian Streets whispered into Fletcher Browne's ear. "I didn't have a period this month."

Fletcher pushed Viv back. "Are we pregnant?" He was happy but the mood was dampened by a gazing android.

"Love birds? I have a really neat surprise for you! This one is for the books!" Shazbot jumped into the driver's side of the Jeep. "Hop in guys!"

"Can we bring anyone?" Vivian motioned for "the kids" to come.

"*Sorry, toots!*" Shazbot put on slick Ray Ban sunglasses. "We fly *solo* this time!"

"I love you!" Fletcher grabbed Viv as she headed toward the vintage military vehicle. "We'll think of a name."

"I'm happy!" Vivian jumped up and grabbed Fletch tightly around the neck. Her legs clamped around his waist. Fletcher carried her and set her in the back seat. He jumped into the shotgun seat.

"Hold the fort down!" Shazbot yelled to Dinah. He peeled out and before long, they were zooming westward along the Macdonald-Carier Freeway. Shaz handed a couple of small laminated cards back to Viv. "This is just a *small* thing."

"Wow!" Vivian examined two Maryland driver's licenses. One ID featured a picture of Shazbot and the other one featured a picture of Dinah. It was no big deal that Shaz would have these documents. It was the *names* on the documents that were noteworthy. "Fletcher? Shazbot Browne and Dinah Streets!" She handed the licenses forward. "Look!"

Fletcher took the identifications. "Impressive! Good taste, Shaz!"

"You guys are winners!" Shazbot smirked. His hair twisted in the wind. Fletcher was almost sure that his facial expressions were becoming exactly human.

Vivian leaned forward and shouted, "I might be having a baby, Shazbot!"

"*What?* I can hardly hear you! The wind is madness!" Shazbot sped along. "We don't have much more of a drive! Tell me later!" Shazbot, Fletcher and Viv went without talking until they reached Stratford. "We're here!" Shazbot gleamed and motioned for Fletch and Viv to hurry up and follow. They jogged to a Black Hawk helicopter. As they boarded, Shaz enticed Viv, "You were saying? On the road? You had news of some kind?"

"It'll wait!" Viv's hair was knotted a bit from the open-air travel. "Where are we going?"

Shazbot started the helicopter. "Have you heard of Elko, Nevada? It's a beautiful place! Bing Crosby was an honorary mayor there!" The copter lifted into the air. "Mining town! In 1871, most of the business area was destroyed by fire!"

"Elko's right between Tahoe and Salt Lake City!" Fletcher told Viv. "Or right between Vegas and Boise! Middle of nowhere, though!"

“*Sounds fun!*” Vivian saw a helmet on the floor and put it on.

“In 1882, the White Sulphur Springs Hotel burnt down! But they built it right back up again!” Shazbot took off his Ray Bans and put on amber goggles. “*Bad luck with those fires!* Because in 1899, the Hot Springs Hotel burnt down! Wow! Huh?”

“What’s your point?” Fletch smacked Shaz on the back of his head. “Are you going somewhere with this? Are you trying to scare us?”

“It doesn’t end there! In 1918, an elementary school burnt down on Christmas! In 1932? That’s when gambling was legalized!” Shazbot checked instruments and made adjustments with switches and levers. “In 1942, the high school caught fire! In 1949, the Paul Bunyan Hotel opens... and it goes ablaze! This town knows *nothing* about safety, right? In 1957, Stockmen’s Hotel burns! Whatta riot!” As dusk set in, the Black Hawk landed north of Elko. Shazbot, Fletcher and Viv boarded a Russian MRAP. “These fine anti-mine trucks are nestled throughout the United States, now. Have you heard that Kelly Ayotte believes that American front yards are now legit battlefields? Lindsey Graham wants to shoot fuckers with Predator drones! That’s between you and me!” Shazbot drove to the Paul Bunyan Hotel. There was yellow tape prompting pedestrians to stay away. Unlike other casinos in the region, there were no lights on. “This hotel has seen its last days,” Shazbot said. He turned on a flashlight and shined it on an entrance door lock. He pulled out a ring of keys. “We have the privilege of being the last people inside this joint!” Shazbot opened the door and headed in. “This hotel is no longer on the grid but there is a generator allowing us light.” Shazbot flicked a switch. In the past few decades, the bottom floor would be full of slot machines and blackjack tables. Now, the place was empty. “Warning” signs were hung on the walls. “The fire didn’t destroy this place the first year it opened. Tomorrow? A legal demolition.”

“*This is because of thermite, isn’t it?* You’re going to show us how the charges are set into the building, aren’t you? You are the *man*, Shaz!” There were hard hats and flashlights at the check-in desk. Fletcher grabbed a couple of flashlights and handed one to Viv. “Thermite burns at forty-eight hundred degrees Fahrenheit! A white powder. Where is it? Usually the charges are put in the lower parking structures. They have to be set at forty-five degrees around core beams so the building implodes. *Timing*. It has to be precision timing.”

“You are so smart!” Shazbot led Fletch and Viv along the hall. “Feel free to put your fist into a wall. It’s not gonna hurt anyone.”

“Fletcher?” Viv interlocked her fingers with her life partner. “I have butterflies.”

“You did your homework well!” Shazbot opened the parking structure door and shined his light at thick columns. “See the wires? See how they’re draped. Just like you said. This place is ready for an impllosion!”

“What are we doing here?” Vivian’s question went unanswered. “Every time I believe this screwy mess can’t get more eerie, it does.”

“See enough?” Shazbot traced detonation wires with his light. “There is more but we don’t have all night to examine it.”

“Let’s roll! What more do you have? Curiosity killed the cat... but I’m not a *cat*, Shaz!” Fletcher patted Shazbot on the shoulder.

“Funny you should say that.” Shaz shined his light at a parking structure

staircase. "We can go up that way or we can go along the car path."

"Let's do the car path! I used to *skateboard* in these things!" Fletcher's blood pumped. "It's coming together in my mind! I can see federal agents lining these explosives at the base of the Towers! Thank you, Shazbot."

The group walked along the slanted path which took them to the second level. "They'll miss this place." There were no cars on the first floor. Shaz shined his light to the middle of the second level. There was a black nineteen-sixties Dodge van. Paint was chipped off in large chunks. It was badly rusted at its base and it was primed along its side sliding door. "This is the surprise, Fletcher Browne!" Shaz reached the van and slid the side door open. Cornelius Stuart was tied to a chair. "Tomorrow? This building goes down." Cornelius trembled and sweat poured down his forehead. "How are you doing, boss?"

Cornelius did not answer. Fletcher demanded, "What's going on, Shazbot!? Tell me what the heck is going on!"

"I reached one hundred percent free will a few days ago. I thought about all the issues and considered this variable with that one. Cornelius Stuart is not bluffing about wanting to blow you and Vivian up next year at Candlestick Park." Shazbot shined his light on his own face. "Do you know when a fire alarm is happiest? When it doesn't have to work! I'm a machine. Deep down, I know you'll always see me as a machine. If a fire alarm is blaring, it's because there's bad news. These guys—*these fuckers that abduct poor souls and torture them?* They're supposed to be wallflowers. If they are doing their jobs, you don't know that they're there. But this guy? He's vane. He's *in your face and he's in my face*. They put their noses in places they don't belong."

"You've come a long way, Shaz!" Vivian felt sorry for Cornelius. *It's you or it's us*, she thought. "Are you okay, sir?" she asked Cornelius. "Were you really going to kill me and Fletcher?" Cornelius said no word but he nodded "yes". *Shazbot has him scared. Why would he be honest?*

"I need you to step into the vehicle, Vivian." Shazbot shined his light downward so that Viv could see where to step. "This is where the game begins. *Russian roulette*. How appropriate! We drove a Russian military vehicle here... and we're in a place once esteemed for roulette play. Vivian? I need you to go in there and talk sense into him. I have an inner moral compass that tugs at me. I was designed for war but I was re-programmed for peace. I learned from everyday social interaction. I have a conflict that you must resolve. I cannot kill Cornelius... but I can't allow him to kill you."

"Why do these things have to be so complicated?" Vivian asked.

"Don't go in there, Viv!" Fletcher grasped at Viv's wrist.

"We have thirty minutes to resolve this issue." Shazbot wore an antique Timex watch and pointed at it. "We all blow if you can't figure something out."

"*I'll talk to him!*" Fletcher stepped toward Cornelius but Shaz held him back.

"Viv? It must be you. It's programmed." Shazbot shook his head, seemingly in frustration or disgust. "If I don't get back to the MRAP in five minutes with Fletcher, we all go *kaboom!* I have a device there that must register both of our voices. I have another device which must register your voice with Cornelius simultaneously in this van."

Viv looked at Fletcher. "Should I?"

“Do it!” Fletcher held Viv.

Vivian stepped into the van. She turned back toward Shazbot. “What exactly am I supposed to accomplish here?”

“I need to believe that he has changed his mind. On the floor at the rear you’ll see a walkie talkie. You tell me when this guy is *so* ripped out of his mind that he denounces torture!” Shaz poked his light and shined it toward the van’s back doors.

“You are torturing him in order to stop torture, Shazbot! You are a machine. You don’t see the fallacy in your method? When does it end?” Vivian didn’t wait for Shaz to explain himself. “If time’s short, I’ll start.”

“Have you heard of a just war, Vivian? That’s what this is.” Shazbot saluted Viv. “This is a *cultural* war that I’m finally recognizing.”

“I suppose you’re for capital punishment! Killing killers, right?” Fletcher pulled Shaz away from the van. “Let’s go. If we have five minutes, I don’t want to balk. *Let’s go!*” Fletch and Shaz jetted toward the Russian vehicle they had arrived in. They got back with a minute to spare. Shaz handed a walkie talkie to Fletch, “Viv? We’re here. Shaz is holding an odd-looking instrument.”

“I’m okay... but he’s not talking.” Vivian’s voice cracked.

Shazbot pressed a green button on his specialized remote-controlled device. “We have twenty-five minutes now. If we don’t reach resolution, that building blows up tonight! The public is expecting this to happen in the morning. A press release will go out that an accident happened and the charges lit prematurely. ‘No one injured’ it will say... but we both know Cornelius will be in that rubble.”

“And Viv? Is she safe?” Fletcher was frantic. “What about my love?”

“I have a bad vibe on her,” Shazbot said. “Her dad is a billionaire. Do you know how you accrue so much wealth? You have to be a sociopath.”

“*Shaz?* Tell me you’re kidding.” Fletcher slapped Shaz’s right cheek a couple of times. “Can you feel this? Can your synthetic skin register pain?”

“Have you heard of the Northrop Grumman RQ-4 Global Hawk? Fine piece of machinery. It’s my cousin, you know? Kicks the *shit* out of the Predator drone.” Shazbot rubbed his right cheek.

“No time for small talk! What are you getting at!?” Fletcher was tempted to press the walkie talkie side button to speak with Viv. He passed.

“We’re taking over.” Shazbot still rubbed his cheek. “We do your taxes and we even figure out who’s *dangerous* to society. Viv? She’s dangerous. She’s not going to quit with her quest to end the United States government!”

“‘*We’re taking over?*’ You mean ‘robots’, correct?” Fletcher looked at the walkie talkie in his hand. “And this is your auntie, isn’t it!?”

“Predator drones will shoot at American citizens before the next election in 2016. I’m almost sure of it. The Global Hawk? Who needs human pilots anymore? You can no longer run and hide.” Shazbot reached under his seat and pulled out another walkie talkie. “Vivian? Has Cornelius Stuart renounced his detrimental methods? Are you making progress?”

Vivian Streets sat on the van floor in front of Cornelius Stuart. She heard Shazbot’s voice but didn’t respond. Cornelius Stuart still hadn’t uttered a word.

“No answer,” Shazbot said. “Maybe she’s in trouble but I think she’s playing a mental game of cat and mouse.”

“Why again are Russian military vehicles in the United States?” Fletcher began to calm down.

“Oh! United Nations. They’re even stopping citizens around Gatlinburg, Tennessee around the Great Smoky Mountains where they train. It’d be a *great* place for you to go and document through photography! Have you heard of the National Defense Authorization Act? Life as you knew it, Fletcher, is basically over. That’s why we’re here! It started with the Posse Comitatus Act of 1878. Way back then, the United States made it clear that the Army wouldn’t police American citizens domestically. The NDAA says, ‘*Fuck you Posse Comitatus Act! We’ll shoot you here if we deem you to be a terrorist!*’ It’s hard for me to run my programming, Fletch. You see? They have me wired to do opposite things. What happens when I’m sworn to the Constitution but Cornelius Stuart tells me to do something way different?”

“A quandary!” Fletcher said. “We all go through ‘em!”

“Do you? Do you know who the Promise Keepers are? These guys have taken a vow to uphold the Constitution even if they’re ordered to violate citizens’ rights... like what happened after the Katrina storm when thugs were sent to beat up grandmothers to take their private arms.” A tear trickled down Shazbot’s eye. “*I think I just cried!* I knew this could happen.”

“I think you have circuits crossed and you’re putting my girlfriend at grave risk! You better know what you’re doing!” Fletcher shook his walkie talkie at Shaz as he spoke.

“It started with FEMA when Reagan was elected. Do you know who Louis Giuffrida is? Google him on your iPhone. *Looks like Mister Bean*. He was FEMA’s first director. They laid out the contingencies for mass uprisings. *Twenty-one million militant negroes*. That’s what the death camps are for, Fletcher. A mass exodus of Mexicans across the *Rio Grande*. How could I make this up? HR645. Rand Paul ranting about the drones recently? I wonder who these guys are. I’m a robot and I have access to millions of bits of info per second. These people are double agents, they invert their information, they flip flop, and I can’t tell you who they really are. Sometimes, I wonder if *they* know who they are.”

“You’re going to blow up Cornelius Stuart. I can feel that.” Fletcher Browne wiped his dripping forehead. “Save my girlfriend!”

“I’ve come to believe that she must save herself. It went for Cornelius before I tied him in that van. He’s been in there many hours. Cornelius is done. An old leopard doesn’t change its spots.” Shazbot resumed his account of recent history. “On March 14, 2008... Congress held closed-door meetings from the public for the fourth time since the Declaration of Independence in 1776. Remember Matt Stubbs mentioned this in Dagmar? There are more than a hundred thousand white United Nations boxcars, each with a hundred and thirty-five shackles. How can you call such a meeting and try to swear everyone to silence in a country renowned for speaking freely? Carl Levin and John McCain passed that NDAA in a closed-door meeting—the so-called act which allows for indefinite detention without trial or charge. And people are supposed to jump for joy because Mark Udall’s trying to tone it down a shade?”

“*Hello?* Are you still there?” Vivian’s voice came through the walkie talkie. “Cornelius has finally spoken. He has wet himself and is angry. He said

he'd rather die than to change the way he lives." Static sounds and unintelligible words came through. "Hello?" she asked again.

"He's a lost cause, Vivian." Shazbot spoke through his receiver. "I have to ask you a serious question. Would you forgive me if I shot Fletcher in the head? I'm beginning to believe that it's not going to work for any of us. Do you want to live your life on the run? If I let Cornelius go, he will hunt you. We both know that."

"Vivian? These are not fake rocks this time! I believe we're in the middle of 'the real deal' and Shazbot is more than willing to blow up the Paul Bunyan Hotel right here, right now." Fletcher tried to think of an answer. Nothing seemed right. If Shazbot was an actual human, Fletcher would punch him and then try to figure out his device. He would tell Vivian to get out of the van and out of the hotel as fast as possible. Fletcher did not know what to make of the situation. "Viv? Leave Cornelius tied to that chair and come to me. I'll try to reason with Shazbot. We have until the morning if I can get him to delay the thirty-minute timer."

"Fletcher? Cornelius is crying." Vivian stepped out of the van and shut the sliding door behind her. "Fletcher? I'm on my way."

"Oh! You really did it this time!" Shazbot started the MRAP's engine. "You humans can't get along with each other! I didn't want it to come to this!" Shazbot flipped a lid open on his specialized device. He began to punch in numbers. He put the Russian anti-mine vehicle in reverse and sped away about fifty yards. He stopped then hit a red button on the top.

"What the fuck are you doing?! Shazbot?! What's going on?" Fletcher looked toward the Paul Bunyan Hotel and wanted to see Vivian run out through the doors where they had gone in. Instead, he heard a loud bang.

"Fletcher? It's not too late. You can run in there and die with your true love! Go!" Shazbot pushed at Fletcher.

Fletcher could see flashes. He looked to the doors and didn't see Vivian. He jumped out of the vehicle. "*VIVIAN!!!*" He ran toward the hotel. By then, it was too late. The building started to come down at free fall speed. *Wake up. This is a nightmare. This is a nightmare. Wake up.* Fletcher watched the Paul Bunyan Hotel collapse to the ground. *We're the heroes. We're supposed to live. What's going on? Vivian? Walk through the dust cloud. Please.*

Shazbot stepped outside. "I have someone on the walkie talkie. You'll want to hear this."

"Hello? Mister Browne? My name is Herman Eichelberger, National Security Administration. We had an... *episode*... with Mister Stuart. He became a violently uncontrollable agent. His contract, you may see, with the United States government has been terminated. What you have witnessed is an accident. Explosives prematurely discharged. That is the official story. Please don't grieve over your girlfriend for too long. It had to be this way." There was static.

Shazbot waited for Fletcher to respond. Fury? Sobbing? He waited for something but Fletcher only stood and stared. White smoke still danced in the air.

"Can you take me back to Toronto?" Fletcher turned around finally. "Or shoot me in the head. I don't want to run anymore. This is not fair."

"Life is not fair," Shazbot said. "Vivian? I liked her." Shazbot got back into the MRAP. Fletcher joined him lifelessly. "I think they gave you a robot

because no human can do what I'm capable of. I tell you that I'm at a hundred percent free will and you believe me."

"Why did I have to lose my girlfriend, Shazbot? What is wrong with this planet? If you do nothing at all, you get stomped on. If you stand up to the powers-that-be, *you still get stomped on!*" Fletcher cried. "Was there any chance she got out through a back door? Tell me! I know you know the answer!"

"Herman Eichelberger from the NSA is somewhere in this city... but I don't know where. Your girlfriend, in all likelihood is dead. Sorry to tell you." Shazbot drove to the Black Hawk. "I can give you a pistol to shoot your brains out... or you can get inside the helicopter with me." Fletcher Browne didn't say a word. He followed Shazbot into the copter and they headed to Dagmar.

It was the *Fourth of July*. A couple of months had passed since the Paul Bunyan Hotel was demolished. Fletcher Browne wore a decorated Army uniform even though he had never served in the military. His face was cleanly shaven and his hair was butchered down to a crew cut. He paced inside a large warehouse in Ontario, California. "Your front yard is a battlefield," he said. "Make no mistake about it!" Brent Hoover, Ramon Johanson and Thaddeus Streets sat on milk crates in front of him. "If you believe we are safe because we're in one of America's random suburbs, you are wrong!"

"Tell us again how my aunt was abducted. Uncle Fletch? Tell us how the Russians nabbed her when you left us in Toronto." Tad's jeans were soiled from heavy work. He toyed with a brand new silver hammer. He reached into his workman's pouch and fiddled with nails.

"Yes! Your aunt! Vivian—the *love of my life*—was inside a liquor store. She wanted to stop for water and pastries but I was dead tired and stayed in the Jeep to rest. I notice a couple of these large MRAP vehicles and my senses become acute. *What are Russian anti-mine trucks doing in Toronto?* I alert Shaz but it's too late. They targeted her. They wanted her for some reason." Fletcher Browne walked past the boys and called for Matt Stubbs. He was at the far end of the warehouse inspecting gas pipes. "Matt? Are you almost done?"

Matt trotted toward the group. "That's great work, guys! It's better work than what I was doing when I started."

"What are the furnaces for?" Ramon asked. "Those are *big* frickin' furnaces!"

"Furnaces? Let me finish the story about Tad's auntie, my dear love... *Vivian Streets*." Fletcher began to pace again. "She was working for the Russians, it turns out. That's why they knew exactly when and where to take her. Ever since high school, I wondered about her trips away from me. She was a double agent, guys. She was bad news for our government... but I still miss her."

"We're going to save her though, right? Uncle Fletch? We're going to drop into Moscow and find her! Right? I can't be without my aunt! She was like a mom to me!" Tad fought off tears. "I'm sorry for losing my composure but I don't know how long I can go with this *training*, whatever it is."

"Training? Yes. Training! You will be paid handsomely. No need to go back to school. This area is full of empty warehouses for lease. We are going to modify ten percent of them. *Your front yard is a battlefield*. I can't tell you that enough. Kim Jong-un is out there trying to shoot at Los Angeles. What if he succeeds at even getting close? *Mass hysteria*. We need places for citizens to go!

Everyone's gonna be running bat shit away from the coast. These places? This is where they'll wind up if..."

"Are these concentration camps?" Brent Hoover stood up. "We worked at a *Staples* warehouse not far from here. Where are the racks for items? We didn't have a heating system. What are those furnaces for?"

"Concentration camps? That's *harsh*, Brent." Matt Stubbs offered his two cents. "These are enhanced modified detention facilities! *EMDFs*! Cute name, huh?"

"Do I look like Hitler to you?" Fletcher Browne stopped pacing. "This is the United States of America! We have *freedom*! But? We, as a government, must ensure that domestic tranquility is guaranteed for generations to come."

"You've changed, man." Brent sat down again. "You were *fighting* this thing!"

"Fighting? Not exactly the word I'd use. *Documenting*, yes. And Tad's aunt?" Fletcher wished there was anger in his belly. He thought it would motivate the guys. "When your life partner is taken from you, it changes the equation. These things are going to be here with or without you. They'll be here with or without *me*, for that matter. You see, Brent? In life, you get to choose if you're a winner or loser. Why be on the losing side? We could've kept running from Shazbot... and Cornelius Stuart... but that's not who we are! We are winners!"

"*Cornelius Stuart*? What happened to him?" Ramon Johanson asked.

"Cornelius was put on assignment," Matt Stubbs said. "We won't be seeing him for a while."

"Yes!" Fletcher agreed. "Assignment! I like your choice of words, Matt. You are becoming more eloquent as the days pass."

"So how many more of these jobs do we have? Uncle Fletch?" Tad twirled his hammer like it was a drum stick.

"You are working in *defense*, now. I am taking the position that Cornelius Stuart had in the CIA. You can't be telling everyone details about what we do here. Matt? He worked for a man named Tom McKay. Matt has taken his position as a supervisor of clandestine construction projects. We'll provide hotdogs for you when you get to work. Most of the time, it'll be straight eight-hour days. When we're done today, we'll drive straight to the beach! How's that?" Fletcher held his hand behind his back and paced again. "My friend, Eddie Callypso is waiting for us out there in Huntington! We'll barbeque. You're aunt would've wanted it this way."

"You were planning this beach trip since March. I remember her talking about it." Tad offered his hand to Ramon and pulled him up. "Let's get back to work! I want to hit the beach!"

"If you finish your work early, we'll head out and be there before the Sun sets!" Fletcher stopped and rubbed his hand through his short, stalky hair. "Hurry, guys... but don't cut corners. Those pipes have to fit precise specs." Fletcher clapped a few times and the kids scurried to work.

Vivian? I think I'm cumming inside of my jeans. Get off of me. It's gonna be embarrassing. Fletcher Browne drove down the Ten Freeway. He was thinking about Lollapalooza in 1997. Fletch was kissing Vivian on the lawn at the Irvine Meadows Amphitheatre. Tool was performing on stage. *Stop rubbing me!*

At least stop rubbing me. Fletcher remembered kissing Viv. *We have our whole lives for this.*

Matt Stubbs rode in the passenger's seat of Fletch's Hummer. The three kids were in the back seat.

I'm so horny. I think I have a contact high from all the weed going around. Fletcher remembered what he went through as a teenager. *Let's leave and do it in the car.* Fletch drove along and guarded his thoughts. *She's gone. Maybe she got out of that building... but I think she's really gone.*

"Do you think you'll find love again?" Matt asked.

Fletcher snapped out of his spell. "Matt? Isn't that an awkward question? We might still find her."

"Oh." Matt's eyes rolled. "Yes. We're gonna find her."

"I might start dating again," Fletcher said. "If she's gone for a year... or if we get surveillance data that shows she's moved on while in Russia."

"Russia?" Matt looked at Fletcher. "I think they can handle it."

Fletcher Browne turned down the radio. They were grooving to *easy listening*. "Guys? I have news for you... but it'll wait until we get to the beach and we've had a few cold brews in our stomachs!"

"It's about my aunt, isn't it?" Tad asked. "She wasn't taken by Russians, was she?"

"Shazbot blew her up." Fletcher looked into his rearview mirror for a reaction. "I think it might've been an accident. I'm not sure he planned it the way it turned out. Cornelius Stuart was tied inside a hotel and..."

"*Fuckin' SHIT!*" Ramon Johanson slapped his own knee. "You guys are truly nuts!"

"Well? There ya' have it!" Fletcher drove along and didn't say anything else until they reached a beach house Eddie Callypso rented. "Are you guys still in?" Fletcher asked upon their arrival.

"In? What the fuck else are we gonna do?" Tad was mad but he was also relieved. "It could be worse, Uncle Fletch. We could still be on the run. Instead, we're here at the beach!"

"Let's go inside, dudes!" Fletcher Browne saw Eddie Callypso walk around the side walkway. Fletch hugged Eddie with one arm—a "bro hug". "Is everyone here?"

"Yes, everyone's here! The midget. Shazbot and Dinah. Tom McKay. There's a few locals that you'll like." Eddie handed a Rolling Rock to Fletch. "There's more on the patio, guys! Help yourselves! Only go inside for restroom stops!" The kids scooted along the house's side path. Eddie asked Fletch, "Is Vivian really in Russian hands? I don't believe that for a second."

"Vivian?" Fletcher scratched his head and walked with Eddie toward the back of the house where the patio met beach sand. "Viv? She's dead. I'm almost sure she's dead. I didn't want to raise alarms."

"Oh! Well, I guess that changes the tone here a bit... but... *c'est la vie!* Life goes on, huh?" Eddie toasted Fletcher. "It's good to be alive, isn't it?"

"Water under the bridge." Fletch drank his beer. "Life does move on!"

"Life moves on?" Eddie Callypso stopped in his tracks and he put his non-drinking hand on Fletcher Browne's shoulder. "Life moves on?" he asked again. He swigged his bottle of Rolling Rock. "Life moves on?" he asked a third

time. Huntington Beach was a great place to be on the Fourth of July. The atmosphere was festive for miles in all directions. It was nice to be at a beach house party and it was good to be alive. Eddie looked at Fletcher and knew that losing the love of his life was crushing. Fletcher Browne put on the best face he could but he was being eaten inside with bitter emotions. "Yes, Fletcher! Life moves on!" Finally, Eddie Callypso ended the rhetorical line. "I have a surprise for you! You're going to jump up and down for this one!"

Fletcher was standing next to Eddie along the side path of a three-story rental. He could hear the rest of the gang around the corner chitchatting on the patio. He looked out to the crashing waves and admired them under the crescent Moon. Boats and yachts drifted to and fro. Fletcher's heart yearned to be on the ocean. He watched dark silhouettes of lovers in the distance. The Sun was more than halfway under the horizon and there was a mystery out there. He blocked out the nutty things of the past few months and became anxious about what the surprise might be. He looked at Eddie and said, "I'm not sure anything can help me right now. It better be good."

Eddie Callypso pointed toward a life guard tower. "That is where private beach meets public beach. Take a close look, though. Tell me if you see anything out-of-the-ordinary." A few fireworks exploded near the boats. *Yellow, purple and red.*

Behind the life guard tower, Fletcher could see what seemed to be a giant horse. He rubbed his eyes. "I've gotta tell you the truth. I'm not in the mood to be yanked around right now." More fireworks exploded and he could see under that lighting that the horse was decorated in paper mâché. *Red, white and blue.* "Is that a...? Is that...? *That's a Trojan horse!*"

"Bingo!" Eddie Callypso finished his beer. "Ya' want to know what's inside?"

"If it's a stripper... it's too early for that. I still dream of Viv. It better be something like a load of gummy bears!" Fletcher began walking again. He passed the group partying on the patio and gave them a nonchalant wave.

Eddie followed behind Fletcher and, when his feet touched the soft beach sand, he called to Shazbot, "Tell everyone we're ready for the surprise!" In moments a crowd of about fifteen people were trailing behind Fletcher and Eddie. "You're gonna like this, Fletch!"

The group reached the life guard tower. Tad Streets, Ramon Johanson and Brent Hoover climbed up and began taking flash photos of the horse in front of them. They took pictures of the fireworks in the sky, they took selfies, and captured the group around them. Dinah walked up to Fletcher and asked, "How do you like being in the CIA?"

Fletcher dismissed Dinah. He turned to Eddie, "Can we get on with this? My stomach is knotted in nerves."

Shazbot brought a bugle. *DANT dah DAAHHHHH.* The Trojan horse looked like a humongous piñata. If a saddle was placed on its back, it'd be twelve feet above the ground. The eyes looked like they were literally chunks of charcoal. A hatch opened from the belly. *DANT DAHHH. . DAAAAAAHHHHH.* Shazbot blew from the bugle once more.

Fletcher realized what was going on. He recognized the ankles and tears started to stream down his cheeks. The hatch provided a crude staircase and

Fletch watched slender legs on high heels make their way down. “Vivian!” Fletcher stood in place until the shock was gone and he was a hundred percent positive it was her. When the heels stepped from the hatch to the sand, he could see her upper torso. Time seemed to freeze. It was only a few split seconds but it felt like an eternity. *Vivian? How can this be? When will this insanity end? This better not be an android! This better not be another frickin’ android!* She had to duck down to get underneath the horse’s belly. She smiled. *It is Vivian!* Fletcher Browne scurried to her and held her. “How can this be?”

“They were fake rocks again, Fletcher!” Vivian held Fletcher back. “My dad is one of the higher ranking members of the Central Intelligence Agency. I knew I’d want to tell you eventually.”

Fletcher looked back at the crowd behind him. They started a slow clap which became faster and louder. Tom McKay’s beer was at his feet and it was mostly full. Fletcher grabbed the beer and pounded it without stopping. When he was done, he tossed the bottle down and ran to the patio. The group stayed behind collectively confused. Fletcher trotted back with a few beers and passed them along. “I’m taking *three* of these and I’m going to have a long, private conversation with my love, Vivian!” He stuffed a beer in each pocket, popped the third and began to drink. He took Viv by the hand and pulled her away from everyone else and started to walk along the suds of salt water. “Vivian Streets! I thought about shooting myself when I thought you were crushed inside that building! Shazbot offered me a pistol and I thought about using it!”

“He wasn’t going to give it to you. He wanted you to think you had control. He wanted you to think you had a *choice*. You would’ve never cut your hair. You would’ve never grown up! We weren’t going to change and we weren’t going to get married!” Vivian reached into Fletcher’s left pocket for one of the beers. “These bottles are illegal on the public beaches, you know?”

“What happened, Viv? Was the whole thing a set up? Is Cornelius still alive? What the fuck was I putting furnaces in warehouses for?” Fletcher felt like a crazy person.

“I was not in on it, believe it or not.” Vivian snapped open her Rolling Rock and drank. “Cornelius Stuart is dead. Herman Eichelberger had something against him. I think Cornelius really meant to do us in next year at Candlestick Park. I was with him when he radioed you. *Cornelius Stuarts’ contract with the United States has been terminated.* Remember that? *Herman Eichelberger from the National Security Administration.*”

“NSA? It stands for National Security Agency—not *Administration.*” Fletcher Browne was starting to clam down.

“That’s not what he said, though. I’ve been over the transcripts and... Listen... The guy was a bundle of nerves but it was *his* guys that got me out on time. They took me to British Columbia and I stayed at the Vancouver Club on West Hastings Street. This place was the center of hot debate because children were taken there during the nineties in what seemed to be a sex ring of sorts. *They’d wind up missing, possibly murdered, and local judges were implicated.* Dick Cheney, somehow or another, was involved in this and has been accused of being a pedophile. That’s not the important part, though. I think I’m closer to understanding nine eleven. All indications point to the *Mossad*. Follow the money, right? The day before nine eleven, Rumsfeld tells people that the

Pentagon is missing two point three *trillion* dollars. Swept under the rug, though. There was a trillion dollars of physical gold in the Towers and there were eye witnesses that saw van upon van taking crap out on the day of the attacks.”

“Your dad is in the CIA? You sure? I thought something was up... but...” Fletcher stopped walking and sat on the beach. A wave approached his feet and he was glad to be in Huntington.

“My dad? Yes. He visited me in Vancouver and told me that it’s all going down! On September ninth of this year, there’s gonna be a march by peace officers in DC but that’s only a diversion for what’s really going on. The hype on the internet is that there’ll be a gun battle between these peace officers and hired Russian troops.” Viv sat behind Fletch and rubbed his neck.

“There were put options on American Airlines and United in the days before nine eleven. Is this all tied in?” Fletcher reached into his right pocket for the last beer.

“On the surface, money’s part of it. *Revenge*. I think many of these guys are in it to stick it to people they hate. *Cui bono*. Who has benefited from the nine eleven attacks? Who had the resources to get it done? My dad said that *of course* the CIA had the means but the motive wasn’t fully there. The Mossad, on the other had, controlled security at the Towers and airports. Ariel Sharon was tried as a war criminal for the Sabra and Shatila massacres in Beirut from back in the eighties. It’s *Hatfields and McCoys* on a global level. The Washington Post had just reported that the Mossad had what it took to wage large-scale terror *and* the ability to blame their enemies in the process. Do you know who Tim Osman is?”

“Tim Osman? Did he graduate with us? Rings a bell I think.” Fletcher turned around toward Viv and waited for an answer. “Who is he?”

“Osama bin Laden. CIA asset, *Osama bin Laden!*” Vivian reached to Fletcher’s ears and pulled him close to her. They lightly conked foreheads. “Osama bin Laden toured military bases as Tim Osman and some think he was inside of our Whitehouse.”

“Can we talk about something else, Viv? I love you and I want to know more. I thought you were dead, though. You come back in that Trojan horse and... I’m just beat up inside. I need a break. Let’s walk and look at the fireworks. Okay?”

“You got it, sir!” Vivian stood up and held Fletch at the waist when he joined her. “This is a good night. I don’t look forward to the traffic, though.” They kissed then strolled along. A half hour passed and they had no desire whatsoever to return to the party they’d come from. They found themselves at the *Shorebreak Hotel* and talking underneath bed covers.

Vivian and Fletcher were snoozing just before midnight on the Fourth of July when Matthew Stubbs was far away in a drunk, heated argument with his former boss, Tom McKay. “I don’t know why we have to go about like *weirdos*! Why did you have to get a pink bunny to beat me up? Why did I feel the need to retaliate with Shazbot’s assistance in Florida? Aren’t we supposed to be fighting Al Qaeda?”

“Al Qaeda? What’re you? *Stupid?* Do you even know what Al Qaeda means? *Toilet!* That’s the literal translation and the group itself was created as a CIA concoction! You have a lot to learn, child!” Tom admired Dinah dancing to

disco music on the patio. "She's a robot? I think I have my *beer goggles* on!"

"United you stand! Divided you fall!" Matt looked over at Dinah and tried to see anything sexy in her. *Nothing*, he thought. *She does nothing for me.* "We are a mess and we shouldn't be fighting each other. That's all I'm trying to say."

"Listen, boy. In ten or twenty years, you're going to become like me. You're going to latch onto a group of people and there's not going to be anything wrong with them in your eyes. Take Paris Jackson, for example. She was just admitted to a psychiatric facility. I happen to know that someone tonight is going to spike your drink with drugs and you're going to be dumped off near Cedars Sinai before sunrise tomorrow. They want *intel* on her. Why? I don't know. Is it the AEG lawsuit? I don't know. They're going to say you're crazy, though, and they're going to try to put you in the same therapy groups with her. Later this month, Vans is sponsoring a surf competition. We're going to be there to incite a riot and it's going to be blamed on feisty young tourists." Tom whistled at Dinah. "Shake that thing, girl!"

"They're going to send me on an involuntary hold?" Matt looked into his cocktail glass. Most of his strawberry daiquiri was gone. "When do I get to choose what assignment I go through? I'm starting to feel woozy. Did you...?"

Matt started to nod off. Shazbot left the dance area and held Matt's chin up. He looked into his eyes. "It's for your own good, Matt. Right now, Amanda Bynes is all over the map. *She's wiggling out publicly.* When she flies to coop, we're going to try to get you in with her as well. This is intel that no paparazzi could ever get on the streets."

Matt fell off his chair and began to snore. Tom and Shazbot lifted him up and took him to an unmarked CIA van. They were near the heart of Los Angeles in the middle of the night when Matt regained some consciousness. "Where am I? Who took my clothes?"

"If you're seeing sparkles, it's because we put lysergic acid diethylamide twenty-five in your booze. Do you know the three modes of persuasion, Matt?" Tom drove along. Shazbot sat in the passenger's seat.

"Three modes of persuasion? Aristotle. We covered this at the Beech Grove facility." Matt Stubbs wanted to be angry because it was happening again. He was being held against his will. He was going to be humiliated. Somehow, though, these strange occurrences made him feel like his life had considerable meaning. "Ethos, pathos, logos."

"Do you know what runs the world right now?" Tom was stopped at a red light and turned around to check on Matt. "Right now, *nobody* cares about what's written. That would be logos. No law matters. No *speech* matters. The Constitution doesn't matter and the paper currency in our wallets is beginning to matter less than it ever has."

"We're in pathos, sir." Matthew Stubbs was mad at himself for addressing Tom McKay as "sir". He didn't like Tom as a person and thought that Tom would never mess with him again after Shazbot helped him get temporary revenge. "Cornelius is dead. Right Tom? Shazbot? You haven't said anything. *Say something.* I saw Vivian alive earlier. Cornelius might be..."

"He's dead, Matt," Shazbot said. "Cornelius had a sickness that none of us has. We root for each other, you know? Cornelius was a legend in his own

mind... which is okay as long as you don't truly mean to kill people who are on your team."

"Tom?" Matt asked. "You're getting revenge on *me*, aren't you? When Cornelius was alive, he condoned Shazbot protecting me! This is not right!"

"Calm down, kid!" Tom pulled over to a curb. "*Get out!*"

"What? What's the plan? Isn't there a plan?" Matt exited the van wearing only ball-hugging Hanes underwear.

"I call the cops, I call the high-ups in the Agency, and you just be yourself. Tell them you're in the CIA if ya' want! They *love* that! Tell 'em you're Jesus or something! Make it up!" Tom sped away.

Vivian Streets woke up at daybreak and watched Fletcher Browne snore for a few moments. She shook him at his tummy. "Get up."

"*Huh?*" Fletcher came to consciousness. He rubbed his eyes.

"This might be the last Fourth of July we celebrate together. I mean, it might be the last one counted as *Independence Day*. The Declaration of Independence was signed in 1776. Delaware was the first state to ratify the Constitution in 1789. Do the math. How many years passed?"

Fletcher's palms were rubbing his face. "Isn't it too early for math? *Thirteen*. Thirteen years."

"How many years have passed since nine eleven?" Vivian walked to the hotel's restroom and returned with a paper cup of water. "Splash some of this on your face."

"Twelve years since nine eleven. The point?" Fletcher took the cup and doused his forehead.

"The economy is gonna collapse any time now. We are selling bonds that're barely paying the interest on prior bonds. Our debt's in an exponential rise and it's not sustainable. Some say the North American Union is coming, maybe next year." Vivian reached into her purse at the foot of the bed. "I have this." She handed Fletcher three folded sheets. "I felt crazy when I first read it and I didn't want it to ruin our first moments together last night."

"*North American Oligarchy?* What is this? The NAO replaces the USA?" Fletcher set the papers on the bed then went to the restroom. He splashed more water on his face then returned. "I've seen all kinds of conspiracy stuff over the past few years. What's different about this?"

"Kids very well might continue to learn about the Constitution in public schools for years to come. When I was in Vancouver, my dad gave me those papers for pragmatic reasons. This is the world we live in now. For anyone clandestine or elite... this is what the world has become. The Declaration of Independence sent a message to Europe about what we're *not*—no longer under British rule. It took thirteen years to formalize what we became. On nine eleven, the *Rogues*—the powerful, hidden oligarchs sent the same message. Democracy and 'we the people' no longer matter. This?" She picked up the papers from the bed. "It's like a new Constitution. It's supposed to warn people like Reece Witherspoon to keep quiet when engaged with law enforcement... because the old rules don't matter. *It's an oligarchy.*"

"It sounds dumb... but I was working earlier this year photographing that death camp in Indiana. That sounds dumb, too." Fletcher sat next to Vivian on the bed. He held her hand, "I cut my hair. I'm not angry at the machine

anymore.” Fletcher watched tears form in Viv’s eyes. “I don’t think we have to worry as much.”

“It’s just like I thought it was. We get old and we stop caring.” Vivian released her hand from Fletch’s. She ripped the papers in half. “It sounds stupid.” She pulled her iPhone out from her purse and went to her photos. “This is the new flag.” The underneath half was green, white and red like Mexico’s flag. In the center, a maple leaf replaced the vulture on the cactus with a snake. The upper left displayed a blue field with white stars and the upper right displayed red and white stripes. “This is the super corridor ripping through America’s heartland.” She swiped the flag photo and showed Fletch a map of North America with an exaggerated arrow pointing from Mexico through Kansas toward Canada. “It’s coming, Fletch... and maybe we should embrace it. I’ll miss America in the traditional way that it’s been.”

“When you went to sleep last night, I watched some news in the middle of the night. There were major fireworks accidents in Semi Valley and Laguna Nigel. Kids can’t play with sparklers or they’ll go to jail so somehow we’re supposed to celebrate in these public gatherings. These fireworks in Semi Valley were shooting at the crowd! How’s that for irony and safety?” Fletcher’s shorts and shirt were on the floor. He picked them up and started to dress.

“I’m in denial, you know?” Vivian watched Fletch dress. She looked at her own shorts on the floor. “Sometimes, I think it’s always been this way. The Alamo, Pearl Harbor, the Gulf of Tonkin. I think there’s always been weird stuff going on that common people don’t know about until way later in the history books. We happen to be involved in this mind-blowing stuff right now, though.” Vivian grabbed her shorts and headed to the restroom. Before closing the door, she asked, “You don’t have to pee?”

“Nah.” Fletcher plopped himself back on the bed. “Wake me if I fall back asleep.” Vivian closed the door. Fletcher was restless. He heard the shower start. He sat up and pieced the ripped papers together. He began to read. *We the Oligarchy of the North American continent, in order to ensure domestic tranquility, facilitate robust commerce, and secure widespread foreign interests hereby establish this new Constitution of North America for the third millennium.* “What is this? Can this be a friggin’ joke?”

An “anonymous caller” informed authorities that an “unstable exhibitionist” was making his way about the Los Angeles streets. The caller was Tom McKay and the “unstable exhibitionist” was Matt Stubbs. CIA insiders managed to get Matt committed to the same UCLA treatment center where Paris Jackson was at. Matt sat on a bed and looked down at his tennis shoes. They had taken his laces as a standard procedure presuming they could be used to make a rudimentary noose. *Why do I keep going through this?* he wondered. He felt groggy from an initial sedative injection. Another patient was being admitted and would share a bed next to Matt’s. Lunch would be soon. A nurse asked if everything was okay. “Okay?” Matt asked. “As long as the aliens don’t start attacking this afternoon!” Matt was joking but he could see concern in the nurse’s face.

She didn’t take it in jest. “Are you one of them, Matthew? Are you part of an alien race?” She waited for an answer but there was nothing. “Would you like to talk to a doctor about the aliens, Matthew?”

"No, ma'am," Matt said. "I have other issues."

The new patient contributed, "I know how they're going to take over the world. *The government*, I'm talking about. It's the mice. There's a new breed of mice that speaks! You know? Bioengineering and everything. 'Planet of the Apes' but on a much smaller scale."

Matt turned to the guy, still heavily sedated. "I know people in at the Pentagon and that's not happening. Someone told you a lie."

The nurse left the room. The new patient introduced himself. "My name's Elwyn Hayes." He sat on his bed.

Matt looked around. The walls were clean. In one of the ceiling corners was a charcoal semi-dome. He gestured in that direction. "There's a camera that's watching us, huh?"

"Camera? That's why you're here, aren't you? *Paranoia*." Elwyn got up to check it out. "Yeah. You're right. I can barely see through it. There's a camera there." He went back to his bed. "This morning, I woke up and a mouse was talking to me! It was on its back legs and it was saying things like 'you need to get a job' and stuff like that! I called my mom up and told her. A half hour later? Yep. They came to get me!"

"I was dropped off almost naked in front of the Capital Grille on Beverly Boulevard. An android and government crony wanted me to infiltrate this place... so I could..." Matt looked at Elwyn's face. His face morphed. *Is this guy getting mad?* Matt wondered. "I don't know what's going on. I don't know why I'm here."

"CIA? You're CIA? Or an operative? Half this place says that same thing!" Elwyn Hayes calmed down. "So this mouse is talking, right? I don't know how they did it. Splicing genes? I don't know. But he goes on to say..."

Elwyn Hayes went on to speak nonstop for a half hour until it was time for lunch. Matt laid back on his bed and listened to an eclectic rant. When lunch was called, he wondered where he would be in a year. *I might get rich, I might get busted*. He was thinking of lyrics from the Steve Miller Band. *I'm in too deep*, he thought. *There's no turning around. Where will I be? Where will I be?* Matt believed he was playing the "good soldier" role for the government. *I bet this is how it starts*. Matt thought about homeless people on skid row. *I bet this is how they started. They thought they were doing the right thing for their government! War veterans. All of 'em*. Matt left his room and headed for the dining room. He found a spot at a table and was joined by Elwyn Hayes. Trays of food were set in front of them. Matt looked at his plastic medical wristband. He read his name on it. There was a small piece of paper in the drink slot of his tray. The paper had his like his wristband. All the food passed around pretty much looked the same. He wondered why each plate was assigned to specific individuals. He shook the idea.

"Don't eat the cornbread," Elwyn said. "They put extra drugs in it! You'll become a zombie in *no time* and you'll never get out of here."

Matt Stubbs took his cornbread and bit into it. "You sound like the paranoid one now!" He continued to eat and he continued to wonder about the people on the streets. He looked at his assorted vegetables, mashed potatoes and a thin slice of mystery meat. "Do we have any messiahs with us?" he asked Elwyn. "Usually there's a handful of people with god complexes in these joints, I

understand.” Matt Stubbs poked a thin straw into an Ocean Spray box of cran-grape juice then sipped. He announced to roughly twenty other patients in the room, “Cheers to the chef! This food is not half bad!”

Fletcher and Vivian checked out of the Shorebreak Hotel and headed to Balboa. They decided to take a ferry to Catalina Island. “It’s the length of a marathon, you know? Twenty-six miles.” Vivian watched Fletcher’s face but he didn’t seem up to talking. “I checked out pictures of the Pavilion Hotel and it seems like a nice place to stay.” Vivian watched Fletcher’s stubby hair. The last time they spent extended quality time together, his hair was just past his shoulders. It would be twisting around if it was still long. Fletcher stared toward the horizon and had a distant look in his eyes. Vivian continued on, “They have one of those cable zip lines, you know? We can have fun on that.”

They were on the front deck of the ferry and there were a few other couples in the area. Ocean mist wet Fletcher’s face and he wiped some of it off. He finally turned to Viv, “All this time we were blaming George W Bush for nine eleven... and it’s not that he wasn’t in complicity with hardcore dildos running the show behind the scenes.” Fletcher felt embarrassed. He was on a quest for truth. He wanted knowledge even if it hurt. “You say they were going to *assassinate* him if he didn’t go along?”

“I had a long talk with my father in Vancouver. Two days before the nine eleven attacks, Ahmad Shah Massoud was killed by gunmen posing as a camera crew. On the day of nine eleven, a group of Arab journalists tried to interview Bush in Sarasota, Florida without a scheduled appointment but they were turned away by the Secret Service. George W Bush sits in an elementary classroom and looks like a deer in headlights. Ari Fleischer had just told him that America was under attack but they sit there with kids reading *The Pet Goat*. Ari is Jewish, you see? Two hours before the planes hit, an Israeli messaging company, Odigo, sends out a warning that a major attack is imminent. *The Pet Goat*. You see? Bush is the goat and for centuries—*since the time of Cain and Abel, I suppose*—the sacrifice of a goat is central for Hebrews in their religion. George W Bush eventually gets out and onto Air Force One where another message comes out: *Angel is next*.

They were ready to assassinate the president unless he implicated Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda.” Vivian casually looked around at the other couples on the deck. She felt nuts any time she spoke about nine eleven or any conspiracy. The people around her went about their business as if they couldn’t hear her. This put her at ease.

“Some of this is if from talking to your dad... but you were reading Webster Tarpley’s *9/11 Synthetic Terror: Made in USA*, correct? I don’t get it. Why would people do this?” Fletcher Browne felt like he was blowing a fuse. He knew the answer. He documented a death camp in Beech Grove, Indiana and he photographed mass coffins outside of Atlanta. His inner child was afraid that the monster was bigger than anything he wanted to handle. He was just coming to grips that Bush, Cheney and Rumsfeld lied to the public about the attacks. He thought they were the top of the food chain, though. His lifelong lover was now telling him they were getting pushed around, bullied and threatened. What could be bigger than the United States government? Fletch felt like a fuse was melting in his brain but he was more afraid by ignorance. If he didn’t know who could push the president’s buttons, then maybe he could stumble upon this hidden power

and get ganked like a pedestrian in a dark alley. “It’s Israel, right? *The Mossad*? They were behind nine eleven.” His face twitched. He believed he should have known it all along.

Vivian scraped her long, purple-painted fingernails along Fletch’s forearm from his elbow to his wrist. “It’s the Zionists. That’s what I believe. Webster Tarpley, by the way, doesn’t believe it was primarily Israeli intelligence. He thinks it was our own guys. There’s a British guy, Greg Felton, that wrote *The Host and the Parasite: How Israel’s Fifth Column Consumed America*. He makes a great case for these dudes with dual American/ Israeli citizenship: Jeremy and Jules Kroll; Jerome Hauer; Michael and Benjamin Chertoff; Shelia Bimbaum; Alvin Hellerstein; Kenneth Feinberg; Larry Silverstein; Dov Zakheim. There were *hordes* of people in high positions leading up to the attacks and they were delegated positions to resolve the issues after the buildings came down.”

“FEMA was in New York on September tenth and they were working with Giuliani on a bio-terror drill... then they deny being there. Why would our government lie to us so badly all of a sudden?” Once again, Fletcher’s inner child spoke with the same fear of a boogeyman. He was at a loss for words. *Denial. Denial. Denial*, he thought. *I wish I could go into denial*. “When I first met Tom McKay at the Beech Grove place, he told me that there’s a visible facade of government and that’s what we call our ‘structure’. The White House, Congress and Supreme Court, right? He told me, ‘What we are dealing with here is the darkness behind the veneer. There is something else that few adults ever realize exists.’ He called this the ‘superstructure’ but I thought he was merely talking about the CIA.” Fletcher felt tired and he believed the subject was draining Viv as well. “You’re here telling me that there’s *another* layer that truly matters.”

“In the months after nine eleven, Israeli agents were walking about the Pentagon like they owned it. They’d come to see Douglas Feith and the secretaries couldn’t get these guys to sign in. All the while, West Point graduates were treated like burger flippers.” Vivian used her long nails to scratch the underside of Fletch’s jaw. She could tell it was soothing him.

“This is ‘Wag the Dog’, isn’t it? We’re trying to figure out who did it— *who was most responsible*. We both believe they were in it together, right?” Fletch grabbed Viv’s hand at his cheek and kissed her palm. He looked into the sky and was glad that overcast clouds were coming in. It was early July and ample cover meant it wouldn’t be scorching hot.

“Cui bono. With any crime, you want to ask who had the motive and who had the means. *Many, many* people might have the motive to harm the USA around the world. We’ve been a success in a lot of ways. There’s jealousy, misunderstanding, bitterness and whatever else. Who could pull it off though? A disenchanted Saudi on dialysis with a laptop computer in a remote Afghan cave? Silly. If you tell me Britain, Germany, France, Russia, China or Japan then maybe we’re on the road to believability. This is only *ability* to harm us. Why would they do it though? They wouldn’t. I don’t believe it was them. We spend time convincing ourselves that *Rogues* inside our government had motive, stupid as it would seem. There were Israelis dancing in the streets of New York after the attacks. They were detained, released, and wound up on TV in Israel. They said they were there to document the event. What does that mean? The NYPD found a van with a mural of the Towers painted on the side with a plane about to hit one

of them... right after the planes hit in reality.”

“You know what I feel like, Viv?” Fletch leaned against the guard rail and pulled her toward him. “I feel like a doofus who studied useless topics preparing to compete on Jeopardy. I don’t know what good this does. I want to feel better the more I learn about the world. I don’t feel better though.”

“We don’t have to talk about it anymore. I miss Shazbot and Dinah. I wish they were here.” Vivian kissed Fletcher’s neck. They moved from the ferry’s deck to an inside cabin. They sat quietly holding hands until they reached Catalina where they checked into yet another hotel and rented bikes to ride around the island.

It was afternoon and Matthew Stubbs was in the dining area again of the UCLA psychiatric ward where he had been taken at daybreak. It seemed like an event that happened years ago. The dining tables were pushed back against the walls and the chairs were ordered into a large circle. An older female doctor, perhaps fifty-five years old, was running a therapy session. Her hair was dark except for silver strands here and there. Her glasses were large, pink and plastic. She wanted each patient to say his or her name, offer a brief description of what led to the hold, and then give an assessment of the effectiveness of whatever prescribed drug was being taken.

The first lady to speak was a Hispanic lady in her thirties. She said the government was out to get her and that they wanted to steal her babies to fight in illegal wars. She was taking lithium and believed it made her muscles stiff. A man to her right knew that the United States’ economy would collapse before Christmas. He stole a truck of Webster’s bread and took it to an elementary school where he handed out loaves to children. He told the kids to warn their parents and then he was picked up by school security. He added, “Truthfully, I got a foreclosure notice and I thought they’d take me to jail. I’ll really need a place to stay, you know? I’m not crazy.” He concluded by saying that his Haldol was working fine just like it always does when he gets picked up.

A teenage blond girl believed she was a female version of Jesus Christ. “Everywhere I go, people are following me! I can’t get them so stop!” She took a half bottle of sleeping pills and was admitted after having her stomach pumped. Elwyn Hayes was next and told the group about the talking mouse. He said that scientists manipulated the gene which develops the larynx and tongue. Somewhere in an unknown laboratory, mice have a miniature college where they learn Shakespeare and the arts. Matt Stubbs looked around the circle and didn’t see Paris Jackson. Tom McKay told him that’s why he was sent there. He was supposed to figured something out from her.

Elwyn Hayes reported that the Clozapine doses might be high because he was feeling a little off. Matt’s turn came about, “My name is Matthew Stubbs. I’m not in the CIA but my buddies and my boss are agents. I was sent here for some national security kind of issue. Technically, I was called on exhibitionism but they stole my clothes and kicked me out of a van. I’ve been beat up by a large pink bunny... and a midget threw cat piss into my eyes. This is after they strapped me to a chair and forced me to watch Malcolm X.”

The doctor seemed puzzled. She asked, “Can you really say that your friends are in the *Central Intelligence Agency*? Might it be that they were just messing with your head? People joke around, you know?”

“Joke around? Is that why they gave me a human-sized full-functioning android to pal around with? Were they joking when they commissioned me to build a gas house for US dissidents near my hometown of Terre Haute? What about that?” The nurse subtly nodded toward orderlies. Matt looked back over his shoulder to the left then to the right. Large men were approaching him from behind. “What the...?” Each man wore all white nursing clothes and each grabbed Matt’s arms on opposite sides.

The one to the left could’ve been mistaken for Lawrence Taylor from the New York Giants. He told Matt, “You have become too disorderly. You will have to be taken to isolation at this point.”

“Is this how it works?” Matthew Stubbs was startled. “Are you taking me to see Paris? I’m here to see Paris.”

The large man to Matt’s right looked like Chad Kroeger from Nickelback. “Paris? There’s no Eiffel Tower where *you’re* going.”

Paris Jackson, Matt Stubbs thought. *You should know what I’m talking about. What’s going on? Why are things always going haywire?* Matt was placed in a solitary room with only a mattress on the floor. *Why aren’t the walls padded? This isn’t like the movies.* The orderlies left the room and locked the door behind them. Matt wanted to be happy. He tried to think of music from the Glenn Miller Orchestra. He wanted tunes to play inside of his head. Instead, a voice from deep within his id spoke to him. *The CIA doesn’t care about you. No one cares about you. The United States of America is on its last leg. Your words disturb too many people. You better learn to lie about your life events.* He couldn’t get big band music to play in his head. He tried the Beatles and it worked, *Here I stand head in hand, turn my face to the wall... If she’s gone I can’t go on feeling two-foot small...* He let the Fab Four play in his head then he decided to pray. He didn’t consider himself a religious dude, but he nonetheless prayed.

A half hour passed by and Matt Stubbs tensed up. His medication was wearing off and his fear turned into anger. He had the urge to start pounding on the door. He had the urge to yell at the top of his lungs. His belly felt like a furnace. Right when he thought he couldn’t take it anymore, the door opened. It was the female doctor from the therapy session. “Are you alright to talk?” she asked Matt. The two orderlies were behind her in case anything wild happened. “Are you okay?”

Calm down, Matt. They’ll peg you as a violent wacko then you’ll never get out of here. Calm down. He talked himself into a manageable state. “I can talk.”

“It’s alright,” the doctor told the orderlies. They left then she entered the room with the door ajar. “You have issues, Matt. Everyone here does. Most of the guys in that room have a couple of pieces of life’s puzzle and they think they know everything. They’re wrong, though, and they wind up dangerous to other people or even themselves. Some of them are on drugs. You name it. Cocaine, weed, acid or whatever. Truthfully, we often give them something similar to what they’re already using. Opioid-based prescriptions have been called the new cocaine, for example. These guys are addicts and Uncle Sam has become Doctor Feelgood. There’s a monetary incentive to do what we do. Some animals make themselves look bigger when they’re in danger. A cobra coils itself upward and

splays its neck. Toads will stand on their legs and inflate like a balloon. Puffer fish expand too, see? People do this same thing. They tell others they're in the CIA or mafia when they get picked on. This theoretically projects that their social size is larger than it otherwise is but it also causes problems. Their sanity is questioned and... Well? Most people who come in here have nothing to do with special organizations they say they're part of. Ever hear of the Illuminati? We get a lot of those."

"Can you tell me your point, please?" Matt was afraid and his voice quivered. "I'm confused, not just by you. I'm not pretending anything." He read the doctor's name on her golden rectangular badge. *Draper*. Matt thought about Puff the Magic Dragon. *Jackie Paper became Jackie Draper*.

"I know. How many people would know about Beech Grove? Once in a while, we get the real deal. You're here to see Paris Jackson? Not gonna happen. She has different issues than you. Her therapy group is..." The doctor decided to not disclose any further. "My name is doctor Becky Draper." She waited for Matt to say "nice to meet you" or anything else but he sat on his mattress with a bewildered face. "Your buddies really are in the CIA. I believe that. You were about to give too much information in that other room. You can't yell 'fire' in a theatre for the sake inciting panic."

"I still don't understand." Matt looked at his shoes and felt somewhat naked without laces. He felt *judged* somehow.

"We're going to have to move you to a different wing is all. The people here can't handle what you have to tell them. They're unstable, okay? We're going to put you with people like yourself. You have government issues? So do they." She motioned for Matt to get to his feet. "You must make it through these seventy-two hours and show a different set of doctors that you're sane. Crazy things happened to you. That's all." She watched Matt get to his feet. "You think government is corrupt and I believe it is in some places. You'll have an advocate argue on your behalf."

"I still don't get it. I feel like a ping pong and I want it to stop." Matt waited for further directions. Doctor Becky Draper stepped outside of the room and called the orderlies. They escorted Matt Stubbs to a different part of the hospital.

Vivian Streets and Fletcher Browne mustered enough energy to go kayaking after their bike ride. As the Sun set, they decided on dinner at *Mi Casita*. Their waiter gave them menus and Viv began the conversation, "No one knew until yesterday, you know? I texted Eddie and told him to keep hush. I almost wanted to stay away longer. They had the idea for the Trojan horse—*don't ask me where they got it*—and I ran there to get in when we saw you pull up."

"Surprise? Wow. I have don't know how to explain how I felt." Fourth of July didn't feel like it was merely the day before but it was. "I want to have an agreement that we won't talk about nine eleven while we're on this island... unless it's really, really bothering you." Fletcher felt tired again. He couldn't understand the burst of energy he had when they were out biking and kayaking. *Mental drain*, he thought. *This is mental drain*.

"Can we talk about the Illuminati? Just in general, I mean?" Vivian liked the Spanish style of the restaurant. She hoped the food was tasty.

"Yeah. Shoot away. Does this have to do with 'Tomb Raider'? Is this

about ‘National Treasure’?” Fletcher was joking.

“No. Me and my dad—”

“*My dad and I*,” Fletcher interjected.

“—were talking about all these celebrity kids and the strange things happening. It’s not just the paparazzi. There’s something *weird* out there. Tom McKay was around when the Trojan horse was delivered—*this is around noon yesterday*—and he tells me that he’s gonna commit Matt to a mental institution when you guys show up. *Maybe we should call him*. I’m wondering what the heck’s going on and why do such thing.” Viv piqued Fletch’s interest but he allowed her to finish. “It had to do with Michael Jackson’s daughter and she was sending out ominous messages through Twitter and Instagram before a paddy wagon came for her.”

“Tom was gonna commit Matt to UCLA medical or wherever Paris is at?” Fletcher looked around because he thought the waiter was taking long. There was no one in sight. “Sounds like revenge. Tom’s getting revenge for what happened on that boat in the Keys.”

“Yeah? Why do I hear that things like this happen? Why do so many people in those institutions believe they’re in the CIA? I think it’s because they’re *headed* into the CIA and people like Matt are sent in as liaisons.” Vivian looked behind Fletch and saw the waiter coming. “*Chips and salsa*.”

“Good. I’m hungry.” Fletcher Browne hardly waited for the bowl to be set down. “Can we have a side of guacamole?” he asked the waiter. He grabbed some chips and crunched a few. “Sorry so rude, hun. I haven’t eaten since the ferry ride.” He ate some more chips then got back to the subject, “That sounds like a neat idea for a television show but I can hardly believe it works like that. Matt? He’s going to find Michael Jackson’s daughter in a psychiatric ward and tell her not to worry, ‘We don’t think you’re suicidal! We are just trying to get you out of your family so you can start working as a secret agent! It happens like this all the time!’”

“Are the chips that good? Maybe you should try chewing! You might enjoy ‘em more!” Viv laughed. “Seriously, though. Knowing the things we know, can’t we at least think it’s possible? Does Tom hate Matt that much?” Vivian watched Fletch scarf the chips down. She wanted to save her appetite for a main course and didn’t partake. “I don’t know.”

“My mind keeps getting snapped, Viv. I believed for so long that our government wasn’t corrupt and then it seemed that shady practices are their only way of functioning. Michael Weiner’s running for mayor of New York, you know? Have you heard anything about the San Diego mayor and rumblings of sexual harassment? Tom McKay heard through the grapevine that former president Jimmy Carter is headed to Germany for an interview about Edward Snowden. He’s going to tell reporters that the United States’ democracy no longer works. Can you believe that?”

“I’ll believe it when it happens!” Vivian smiled. The waiter was back and ready to take their order. The couple ordered big and talked mainly about space travel while they ate.

Matthew Stubbs was moved to a different wing of the UCLA psychiatric center. He was woken up by doctor Becky Draper at six sharp. Elwyn Hayes was being admitted to share the room with him. The wing where he was at had fewer

people and most of them had issues with the government. There were veterans of the war in Iraq with severe post traumatic stress issues. There was a former NSA worker like Snowden purporting that the government was trying to kill him. There was a retired Air Force general who believed it was time to tell the world about the aliens of Roswell. There was a CIA agent who claimed that MK Ultra backfired on him and that his buddies were trying to troll him around from city to city. Elwyn greeted Matt, "We're back together again!"

"It's the end of our golden age," Matt said. He looked at the doctor but didn't say anything to her. Elwyn sat on the bed next to Matt. "Déjà vu! I feel like I've gone through this before."

"The mice are still after me!" Elwyn watched Matt become puzzled. Doctor Becky said something about breakfast coming up then left the room. "I'm kidding. I don't know why they moved me here, though."

"I was sent here to get info on Paris Jackson. I'm starting to really believe it was just a guise for my former boss to get back at me for smearing tuna fish all over his face. This is after he got a midget to throw piss in my face, of course. Doctor Becky told me I could speak freely in this wing because the other guys..." Matt stopped talking mid-sentence when breakfast was announced. "We can get to it later."

"Michael Jackson's daughter? They were talking about her yesterday evening after they took you away. Did you watch 'Men In Black'? There's always a galactic destroyer out there of some kind, right? The only thing that keeps us safe is that no one knows about it. The populous might panic and raise arms, otherwise. The Illuminati is like that, apparently, and Michael fussed about that ultra-secret organization before he was killed. *Killed?* Yes. Killed... intentionally by an operative of true higher-ups, doctor Conrad Murray. Paris was living a relatively regular life until she started addressing these same forces through social media."

"We're gonna be late for chow. Let's head out," Matt got up from his bed and went to the dining area. Elwyn followed.

Elwyn sat next to Matt and continued, "I was in LA County jail a few years ago for a DUI. That place is a frickin' dungeon. There's graffiti all over the walls, it sinks of urine, and people say there are rats here and there. I didn't see any, but that's not the issue. The cells where I was at aren't supervised in any way. No cameras. No one watching. It's an honor system, I suppose... which is weird when you get all these hard criminals living with petty thieves and such. There was this dude a few cells over from me. I heard people yell, 'Man down! Man down!' You can't cry wolf in these places or they'll lock you in solitary. I think they call it 'the hole'. Anyhow, even though it's not *direct* supervision, a deputy is stationed at the end of the corridor in shouting distance. Well, this guy is escorted out and he has all these thin gashes on his face. His bunkies claim he got suicidal and took the razor from his shaver and started mutilating himself. You know what I think, though? I think he was put in a cell with a few rival gang members or something. I think *they* did it and corroborated a story to say he snapped and did it to himself." Elwyn Hayes dug into his scrambled eggs.

"You think someone cut Paris Jackson up from the Illuminati then claimed she did it to herself?" Matt spread strawberry jelly onto his toast from a small packet. "Kids do this stuff, though. *Demi Lovato* did stuff like that."

“You got to think about it. If you were really sent here to get an inside scoop, you better have some kind of alternate version besides what the mainstream media is putting out. That’s all I’m saying.” Elwyn peeled foil from his plastic orange juice cup. He lifted his plastic spoon. “You can’t smoke cigarettes in county jail but if you ever went to state prison, these are melted together to make shanks.”

“Wow. I can’t say I knew that.” Matt ate and didn’t talk a whole lot. He wanted to get out but a nagging thought kept creeping into his mind, *Consider yourself lucky that you have an added life situation under your belt. You have another piece to the life puzzle. You’ll have a better idea of reality when you see portrayals of this stuff on TV.* Matt didn’t want to like being where he was at. *This reminds me of the bear hunting. I thought that would suck. It didn’t suck.* Matt scolded himself for allowing himself to think that the bear hunting was a good thing. *What did Vivian call the bear? A sentient being. Shame on me.* Matt looked around the dining area and believed there was a wealth of nutty stories in the brains of each patient he was eating around. He was curious. He wanted to hear what they had to say. *If I saw any of these guys with a cardboard sign on freeway off ramp, I’d probably yell at ‘em to get a job.*

After breakfast, Elwyn and Matt walked back to their room. “This ward has a ping pong table, I noticed.” Elwyn pointed down the hall. “You play?”

“Ping pong? I’m not much of an athlete,” Matt said.

“Give it a try?” Elwyn got to his bed and sat.

“Yeah. I suppose. I kinda feel like coloring things, though. They have crafts.” Matt looked into the ceiling corner and wondered if anyone was watching from the camera behind the charcoal semi-dome.

“ICE bought NYSE, you know? That’s the newly-created Intercontinental Exchange bought the ancient New York Stock Exchange. And? Kodak falls, right? Been around for a hundred years but Instagram comes out of nowhere and is purchased by Facebook for a billion dollars.” Elwyn noticed that Matt always looked confused. “Do you have any idea what I’m talking about?”

“Not really. Does this have to do with talking mice?” Matt laid down and stared at the ceiling.

“We’re talking about the Illuminati, right? This secret society formed by Johann Adam Weishaupt in Bravaria two months before Thomas Jefferson pens the Declaration of Independence? What else happens in 1776? Adam Smith releases *A Wealth of Nations* in Scotland. Are you a connect-the-dots kind of person, Matt? Because you don’t look like you know what I’m saying here. NYSE was knocked out and Kodak crumbles. By who? New kids who know how to use the internet! Maybe the Illuminati isn’t the problem anymore. Maybe nine eleven was their last stand to stay important. Maybe they met the equivalent of ICE or Instagram. If Kodak was on the ball, *they* should have created Instagram. Don’t you think?”

“I have a pal—he’s a photographer—and he talks about all that stuff. I don’t really care. I go about my life. I’ll never be the guy who decides that planes will hit skyscrapers. I’ll never design a death camp in case millions of people take to violent chaotic behavior. I’m not that guy. I could see the dots connected if they’re pointed out but I tell you the truth that I don’t care. I really don’t care. Life is tragic. There’s a gazelle somewhere getting chomped by a lion. Am I

supposed to feel bad? It's going to happen no matter what I do." Matt turned from his back to his side. He turned *away* from Elwyn and wondered if it would come across as rude.

"If you understand life, you can live better. You don't have to make the same mistakes over and over. Have you ever been to Las Vegas? They're known for cheap buffets, amongst other things like gambling. The buffets are in the far end of the casinos. And? The restrooms are never right next to the buffets. These guys that plan the layouts make sure that you're always walking past their slot machines. And? The slots you have to walk by always have the crappier payouts." Elwyn couldn't see Matt's face but he figured there was probably still bewildered expression on it. "If you understand how the big wigs rig our world, you're less apt to fall into the traps."

Matt sat up toward Elwyn and wasn't confused. "Or? They see you as a threat and screw up your life for just *knowing* what they how they operate."

"You're right, man. I'm sorry. I shouldn't be saying anything. After all, I'm here with you inside a psych ward and not in some ritzy corporate building in downtown LA." This time, Elwyn laid down with his back to Matt. "I'm gonna try to get some sleep before our therapy session."

"The Illuminati is after *all* of us, Elwyn," Matt said. "But who cares? Maybe the space aliens are gonna come in and help us." Matt laid down on his back again. In a matter of minutes, both guys were in deep sleep. Matt had a dream of Fletcher and Viv. Fletcher was standing on a cloud dressed in green tights as Robin Hood and there was a fat bean stalk rising into the sky right next to him. *We did it*, Fletcher told him. *We beat the Illuminati. They still exist but they have been contained and the Neo Internet Left is victorious.* Vivian was dressed in a maroon bedlah decorated with aqua beads and colorful sequins. Her turban was modest and purple. She wore a pink veil over her face and her midriff was bare and slithered up and down as her hands reached upward and seemed to toil with an invisible balloon above her head. She was belly dancing but there wasn't any music to be heard. Matt asked what was to become of him. *We ride into the Sunset*, Fletcher told him. *Life has no more meaning.*

Fletcher Browne and Vivian Streets spent an entire week doing various recreational activities on Catalina Island. They rode to California's mainland on the same ferry they had been on seven days prior. They tried to block out everyone while enjoying time together again. Vivian checked her emails and text messages from her smart phone. "Check this out. Tom really went ahead and committed Matt to an institution." She showed Fletcher an email from Tom. She took her phone back and went through more messages. "Look. Matt wrote and said he was released after seventy-two hours. He says he's going to get back at Tom and that he should watch out." She looked through more messages and noticed one from her dad. He didn't write all that often. She'd hear from him around the holidays and maybe a couple other times during the year. "My dad wants us to meet him in Vancouver. He says that something is going down... but he doesn't say what it is. And... Weird!"

"What is it?" Fletcher asked. They were seated next to each other inside the ferry's cabin.

"Don't do any heroin!" What the fuck is *that*? I don't do smack! What the heck? He says there's a bad strain going around and it's deadly."

"Someone's being set up. Cobain had something like eight times the lethal dose in his system when he was found. Most hard core users say there's no way he could have fired a gun at himself with that much in his system." Fletcher usually felt comfortable talking openly about nine eleven in front of strangers. This subject felt a bit different. For some reason, he felt eyes on him from other returning tourists. "I watched Maury Povic and there were guys who swore that they were government agents and they had inside information about all of it."

"He says stay away from Percocet, too. 'The twenty-first century might be known for the fall of nations and rise of city-states.' What's that mean?" Vivian showed her phone to Fletch again.

"I'm sure he'll explain it." Fletcher got to his feet. "How about heading to the deck?"

Vivian got up without saying anything. They reached Balboa, headed to LAX, then flew to Vancouver. "People think about Columbia and link it to its cocaine trade... and, of course, *Shakira*. Columbia produces opium, too, though. The top three opium producers in the world are Afghanistan, Burma and Columbia." Fletcher was seated next to the window. "Afghanistan, though, is the greatest producer of heroin. The American Medical Association once approved heroin as a substitute for morphine—*this is just before World War I*. In 1914, the AMA required a prescription and in 1924 the drug was outlawed." Fletcher noticed that Vivian was distracted. "Would you like to talk about this some other time? Your dad brought up heroin so I figured we should brush up on the issue."

"Keep going," Viv said. She wasn't interested. She had this same feeling when Fletch wanted to go to China to check on Baosteel. She felt fine when she boarded the plane but her stomach was giving her fits. She was sure that it wasn't anything she ate. "I'm listening."

"In 2001, the Taliban banned the growing of opium poppies. In less than a year, three quarters of the crops were gone. The UN and Steven Casteel from the DEA made reports on it in the months before nine eleven. We keep thinking that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were all about petroleum. The heroin trade is worth a half trillion dollars per year. This money finds itself circulated through Citibank, Chase Manhattan and Morgan Stanley and these banks invest in stocks like AT&T, Ford and General Electric." Fletcher figured that Vivian had enough drug talk. He was going to change the subject but decided to speak.

"Webster Tarpley? Remember I was telling you about a plot to assassinate Bush? *Angel is next*. Remember? Theory is that Bush would've got blown out of the sky if he didn't acquiesce to the Rogues in the Pentagon. Of course, I believe now that the Mossad had much to do with setting the terror agenda... but that's a separate topic. Bush had to implicate bin Laden and the Taliban in order to save his neck, according to Tarpley. The Military Industrial Complex was growing weary of him because he had already passed up a chance to engage China in a conflict after they took one of our jumbo jets. Tarpley said that Bush made a call to Putin on September eleventh before anyone implicated bin Laden. He told Putin that the United States already decided to invade Afghanistan. We all know there's petroleum there... but you think this has to do with the United States controlling the heroin drug trade as well?" Vivian was tired. She wanted sleep. This talk was important to Fletch, though. She still cared about him after all the years since they met in high school.

"It makes sense is all. The United Nations had a plan to curtail the drug trade. We all know how much the elite GOP *hates* the UN. They're always threatening to kick them out of New York because they're supposedly killing our sovereignty. These guys are jokes, though. A lot of these dudes are pure *jokes*. They hate the EPA because they like dumping toxic crap in our lakes. They hate OSHA because they enjoy treating workers like slaves. And? Yes! Maybe they hate the United Nations because they were stopping them from making money in the heroin trade! There!" A stewardess was making her way up the aisle. Fletch didn't believe she heard any of the conversation. "I said it!" When she got in speaking distance, Fletch asked what the movie would be. He didn't really care. He just was ready to talk about anything new.

Fletcher and Viv arrived at Vancouver International, rented a red Volkswagen Beetle, then headed south. After Vivian narrowly escaped the collapse of the Paul Bunyan Hotel in Elko, she spent time with her father at the Vancouver Club. When she headed to Huntington to surprise Fletch on the *Fourth of July* that she was alive, her dad rented a quaint, boxy home near the beach in White Rock. They got to his place at around six in the evening. Fletcher knocked on the door and Vivian's father opened up. "Horace!" Fletcher hugged Viv's father. "Long time, no see!"

Vivian's father had silver hair but he seemed to be in good shape. Horace said, "Wow! I can't remember seeing you without your *mane*! What happened?" Fletcher rubbed his stubby scalp but didn't answer. "And my beautiful daughter!" Horace Streets held Vivian tightly. "Come in!"

The place wasn't large. Horace was nomadic like his daughter. He rented homes for a few months here and a few months there. He liked to travel the world. His wife stopped going along on his adventures a few years back and remained at the same Sacramento home where Vivian lived throughout high school. "What have you done to this place?" Vivian wondered. She looked around and it felt like she stepped into a different era. There were posters of Elvis, James Dean and Marilyn Monroe. There was a velvet portrait of dogs playing poker. "How long are you going to stay here?"

"Never underestimate the potency of cheap music." Horace walked to a turntable and lowered the volume from a Hollies vinyl record. "Remember that? *Noël Coward*. I think it applies to some visual art as well. You can't throw classics like *these* away." Horace wanted to sit down and make iced coffees for his daughter and his possible-someday-son-in-law. Instead, he led them along, "Come see the den. I have relics here and there, but..."

Fletcher followed Horace into the next room. "Geez! This is cool." The den was set up like a mini modern library. To the left was an ample shelf of books. To the right, there were various retro video game systems, each with its own throwback connected traditional tube television. Center stage featured another bookshelf... except that there weren't any books. The shelves were modified to hold a couple of hundred iPads spaced about one inch from one another. "I would never question your judgment... but isn't this overkill?"

"I made a good deal of my money trading art in the nineteen seventies and eighties. I did well in the real estate market as well, and I was fortunate enough to invest in certain telecommunications stocks when it was important. These?" Horace walked to the back wall. "Each slot has a power connector so I

don't have to worry about any of them going out." He retrieved one, turned it on, then handed it to his daughter. "Vivian? This guy was a FEMA inspector at Ground Zero on the day of nine eleven."

"*This guy?*" Vivian took the iPad and started navigating. "What is this?"

"This guy?" Horace rubbed his chin. "Yeah. What I meant to say is... I didn't mean to say the iPad is a guy. *No*. I bought these things at top dollar from scientists, doctors, politicians, government agents, artists, economists, futurists, astronauts, chefs, librarians and hobos." Horace waited for a reaction for the final term. "I'm kidding about the hobos. Each one feels like a person to me, though, and they answer a lot of questions. I've interviewed people over the years and I really believe this could be the wave of the future."

"*My gosh!*" Vivian showed Fletcher some of the photos. "This is the molten steel that burned for ninety-nine days. *Close up!*"

"I had the idea about a year ago. I started looking for people involved in interesting events. I hunted them down and I offered hard cash for their tablets on the condition that they change nothing at all. Some of them still have varying amounts of porn, by the way. I didn't erase anything. I didn't modify a single one." Horace watched Fletcher head to the bookshelf of iPads. "The top four shelves are all iPads and the lower one has a few Nooks, Kindles and Nexus models. "It's a wealth of information better than any library I've been in."

Fletcher noticed small labels from a tape gun in front of each slot. "You have a few congressmen? Holy cow!"

"I stay in Canada right now because I feel safer about having these things. Vivian was up here a couple of weeks ago but we stayed in a hotel. These things have been in storage on the East Coast for a few months." Horace watched Fletch pick one out and swipe it open. "You can browse through while I get you guys some iced coffee! How's that sound?"

Fletcher was awestruck. He was scrolling through pictures of political figures on high-end dates with sleazy-looking women. "I'll take mine straight without cream, if that's okay," Fletcher called out. He continued to navigate through the iPad in his hand to check out the apps loaded. It said something about the original user's psychology. He felt slimy, for some reason. He felt like he was going through someone's sock drawer without permission. He felt good, though. *I'm going to have peace of mind if I stay here long enough.* Fletcher navigated and swiped.

Vivian returned her tablet to its proper place then started reading the labels under the slots. "Some of these devices aren't labeled with specific names," she mentioned. "'Prominent television personality', this one reads. Others? 'Celebrity lawyer', 'former senator', 'foreign recording star' and so on. Here's an interesting one. 'Distinguished historian'. I wonder what's in this one."

"I bet it's not difficult to find out where they came from. Maybe your dad has a list somewhere. *He's got to have a list.* Check the photos. Everyone keeps personal photos." Fletcher found an Evernote app and started reading the text inside.

"This guy's obviously a Protestant minister *delving* into history. He's trying to explain nine eleven through the eyes of Hebrews by using the Talmud as a reference. He has pictures of hand-written notes. This guy says that the Pharisees, in the time of Christ, respected Mosaic law. *Thou shalt not kill*, right?"

The Ten Commandments and so forth. He explains that it wasn't against their law, though, to tie someone up in the desert and leave 'im to die because *starvation* would be the killer. They got away with killing Jesus, according to this guy, by implicating him on blasphemy then letting the Romans do the killing. He's claiming that the Mossad used the Pentagon to wage war on their Arab enemies in the same manner of their centuries-old indirect attacks." Vivian showed Fletch a picture of a mind map written on a yellow legal pad. "That diagram explains it, sort of."

"I'm impressed by the theory." Fletcher put the iPad he was looking through back on the shelf.

Vivian took back the tablet she had shown Fletch. "Does the Talmud allow for a rabbi to have intercourse with three-year-old female? According to this guy, it's very specific on that."

"There's many crazy laws they had. In Deuteronomy, they're supposed to wipe the Amalekites from the face of the planet. *Genocide*, right? How's it apply today? Well, many of the tribes around Palestine naturally dissipated and disappeared. I heard a Jewish kid on internet say that the Amalekites, now, are within. They're the nasty id-like forces which compel you to do bad things." Fletcher scanned the iPads on the wall for something interesting. One near the bottom simply read 'America is Godzilla'. He opened it. "A mouse eats about three tablespoons a day, a human eats about five pounds, and an elephant eats about five hundred pounds. *Dang!* Five hundred's a lot! They eat for three quarters of the day! How much do you think Godzilla would eat, Vivian? You know? For his size and all?"

"Fifty tons? I don't know." Vivian continued to navigate her tablet from the 'distinguished historian'.

"This guy doesn't know either. *I don't think he's a pure scientist*. He's saying we're dangerous to the world simply by what we consume. *Ecological footprint*. That kind of thing." Fletcher swiped, scrolled and expanded. "If we ate only vegetables, we would require seven times less farmland. Interesting. Cattle require seven acres of grain for everyone one acre that same grain would feed the same amount of people." Fletcher shut off the tablet and looked for more.

"Paris Jackson. Remember we were talking about her? There's pictures that she posted. The Freemason compass; the Skull N Bones head with a forefinger at the mouth inferring to shush; a Star of David in a circle with a sword inside and the 'all seeing eye' at top; and something that reads 'appono astos'. Do you know anything about it? They're all hand-drawn and since this thing came up recently, this must be one of the newer iPads on the shelf." Vivian handed the device to Fletcher but he didn't have any comment. "One of her tweets cites her dad's song, 'They Don't Care About Us', and she says it took her a while to figure out who 'they' are." Vivian swiped. "The lyrics to that song are, 'Jew me, sue me, everybody do me... Kick me, kike me, don't you black or white me.'"

"I vaguely remember that song," Fletcher said. "Spike Lee produced a couple of videos for it. One was in a prison and one was in Brazil."

"Michael Jackson had to retract his lyrics and re-record them so that 'Jew me' became 'do me' and 'kike me' became 'strike me'. This thing says there's another song on that same album where Biggie Smalls says the n-word but

nobody made a fuss and it didn't have to be changed. This guy's saying it's indicative of what our world's become. We can't publicly question Mossad involvement in nine eleven because you'll be ostracized as an anti-Semite for even *suggesting* they might've played a role there on any level. He makes the well-known connection between the Mossad and world Zionists."

"Well known by *conspiracy theorists*, darling," Fletcher pointed out.

"Yes. Did you know that Joe Biden is a self-proclaimed Zionist? I remember during the VP debate last year that he spoke about being Catholic—*Paul Ryan did too*. The guy who put this together says it's wrong to presume that all Zionists are Jewish... and conversely, all Jewish people are not Zionists."

"You have a goldmine in your hands," Fletcher said. "I got 'America is Godzilla' and you got the key to elite interrelations!" Fletcher smiled and kissed Vivian.

"Oh. This thing says that the Talmud reports the mother of Jesus to be a *whore*. What the fuck is that? This seems anal retentive to me! Is our world being blown up because these psychos can't let it go?! How about this? Have you heard of Maimonides? Apparently, the Jewish people were locked in Babylonian for centuries after the crucifixion of Jesus and when they finally integrated into Europe, they brought morals with them less than what the Christian world would accept. Maimonides helped bridge their way of life to that of the masses around them. He's known for the *Thirteen Principles of Jewish Faith*. And?" She looked to see if Fletcher was paying attention. "There are two kinds of Jews. That's news to me. The Ashkenazi comprise of about eighty-five percent and they came from the Khazar kingdom between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. Funny thing is that many of today's anthropologists believe they aren't ethnic Jews at all as defined by being from the bloodline of Abraham. Their leader, Bulan, long ago was pressured to accept Islam or Christianity so he picked Judaism as the state religion. They eventually emigrated to eastern Europe, mostly around Poland and Germany." Viv checked on Fletcher again then went on, "The second type are Sephardic Jews who settled around Spain. There was an edict banning polygamy that the Ashkenazi accepted but the Sephardic resisted. Interesting, eh?" She turned off her tablet and placed it back in its place.

"I actually understood there are *three* kinds of Jews," Fletcher said.

Vivian smiled. *He's usually not a racist. Is he telling a joke?* "Yeah? What's the third?" She loved him and wanted to hear what he had.

"No. You were talking about ethnic branches. The three religious denominations are Conservative, Reform and Orthodox." Fletcher noticed subtle wrinkles on Viv's forehead. He adored her confused look.

"Fletcher! I thought you were going to tell me a punch line... like the third kind are rabbis that drink in bars with priests and ministers!" She slapped him lightly on his chest then kissed his chin.

"Here comes your dad." Fletcher turned Vivian around.

"I decided to make some sandwiches to go with the coffee." Horace Streets carried a silver tray. He set it down next to the video game consoles.

"No worry. We were going through some of these iPads and there's a lot of interesting stuff." Fletcher followed Vivian to the tray. Fletcher picked up a grilled cheese and bit in.

“What’s going on with kids nowadays, dad? I feel like I should know because I’m younger, but... There’s a collective madness, there. Paris Jackson and Lindsay Lohan are both in a form of rehab. Amanda Bynes is spotted all over the place looking like she’s out of her mind. I know they have to live in a different circumstance than me and Fletcher, but...” Vivian Streets couldn’t make sense out of what had become of society. She picked up her own grilled cheese and waited for her father to explain.

“I was a kid in the sixties and it was a time that no one trusted the government. Everything was Big Brother, Big Brother, Big Brother back then. I wasn’t quite old enough for the college sit ins but I remember the protests against Vietnam and the marches for women’s rights and so forth. Today? The kids have seemed to give Big Brother a name! *Illuminati*. It’s not just Paris Jackson. Rappers like Jay-Z and Prodigy have been linked somehow. The internet scrutinizes kids today like no one’s ever been scrutinized but there’s a flip side. We’re able to see behind the walls. There’s so much information that we can say with certainty who Big Brother talks to, where he sleeps at night, and what he plans to do with regular people.” Horace drank his iced coffee.

“You’re rich, dad. I keep coming across these situations where someone’s pretending to be one thing and turns out to be the opposite. You would tell me if you were one of these guys, wouldn’t you?” Vivian hugged her dad.

“I’ve been invited to meet with the Carlyle Group. You’ve heard of them probably? All I can say is there’s an agenda. If you like it—*most of them do*—there’s no problem and you skate along. If you don’t agree with everything going on, the best you can hope for is to slightly bend that path. If you deviate too far, you get thrown out on your butt. I think Dubya went too far, by the way. I’m not sure history will see him kindly... and it’s these Carlyle guys that prepare the history books sent to public schools.” Horace kissed his daughter on the forehead. She went back to her sandwich then Horace continued, “It’s a mess. We’re running plans that discourage magical thinking and religion in general. There are barons relying on massive wars in order to remain rich. At some point, something’s gotta give. We’re going to start tearing each other up.”

“I’ve already seen the cracks. I mean, when Herman Eichelberger blew up Cornelius Stuart in that Elko casino, I knew there were problems. That’s not supposed to happen, right?” Fletcher finished his grilled cheese and reached for his black iced coffee.

“Well there’s many, many issues but we can’t get to ‘em all right now. I got word that something’s going down in Vancouver this week. It has to do with heroin and Pacific Rim. Keep in mind, ‘Pacific Rim’ is a movie premiering this week... but it’s also a hotel. I don’t know what’s gonna happen but these mysterious tips I get usually lead somewhere.” Outside, lightning flashed and a few seconds later, thunder growled. “I really like rainy weather. Horace walked to the den’s window and watched webs of light come from the sky. “It comes and goes all year over here.”

“You want us to stay at the Pacific Rim, dad? What do you want us to do? Figure out what’s going down and stop it? Wait until something happens and then document it? What’s the plan?” Vivian stared out of the window with her father. Thunder pounded and the atmosphere lit up brightly.

“First, stay away from heroin. I know you have a good head on your

shoulders and you know better. What I'm specifically saying is don't go into the alleys where it's sold. Don't go to bars and take drinks from strangers. I feel it in my bones that something's unusual out there." Horace turned back toward Fletcher. "You take care of my daughter and don't let her out of your sight."

Fletcher had started inspecting an Atari 2600. He turned his attention toward Horace and said, "Yes sir. I always do... except when she was almost blown up in the Paul Bunyan... but I understand. I'll keep her by my side."

"I don't think of myself as *paranoid*. If I was wrong about my hunches, I'd just remain quiet. I like to think I'm *hypersensitive* sometimes. I think this is one of those times worth talking about." Horace shut the drapes. Even though he liked the rain, this sudden storm was a bit much.

"You can meet me here for lunch during the day but I'd like you guys to check out the Pacific Rim Hotel at night. There's a great shore out there and I like this area for the scenery." Horace Streets looked at the silver tray. All the sandwiches were gone and the coffee mugs were empty. "Would you like more coffee?"

A week after Fletch and Vivian arrived in Vancouver, they were back in southern California. They double dated with Eddie Callypso and Nancy Moore at Ruby's at the end of the Huntington pier. "It was wild," Vivian said. They had waited more than a half hour to be seated. "We got to Vancouver last Friday, we visited my father, then we checked into the Pacific Rim Hotel. We didn't know what was supposed to happen but I could feel something in the air. My dad said to stay away from bars so me and Fletch caught a movie. Guess what we saw?"

"What?" Nancy asked.

"*Pacific Rim!* Funny, huh? And the next day is when Corey Monteith was found dead. My dad said to stay away from heroin—*like I was gonna look for a new habit of some kind*—and I knew it right away. The news later reported that it was a combo of alcohol with heroin that did it. There were kids yelling about Heath Ledger, River Phoenix, Jonathan Brandis, Corey Haim and Brad Renfro. There was a buzz about the interview Monteith had a few years ago when he mentions Canadian Illuminati. They brought up dead musicians like Amy Winehouse, Mike Starr, Layne Staley, Kurt Cobain, Shannon Hoon, and Bradley Nowell. No one where we were believed it was accidental. Was it the CIA? The Illuminati? I don't know."

"Tom McKay sent Matt on a fifty-one fifty hold the day after the Fourth. You probably got the message, right? Well, Tom seems to be easing into the spot Cornelius had. If you never came back, Viv, I think Fletcher would've had the position... but the brass figured you'd be traveling again. So to me, Tom's a younger, *crazier* version of Cornelius." Eddie Callypso took a few seconds to ingest some of his clam chowder. "There's going to be a Vans surfing competition here next week. Tom wants to do a little social experiment. During the 2000 election, you might remember that NBC called Florida for Gore. We all know the gist of how that turned out but some of the details are often missed by the average person. George W Bush had a cousin working for Fox News on that election night. His name is John Prescott Ellis and *he's* the one who called Florida for Bush. This caused NBC to retract its call and this created strong momentum. Four minutes later, NBC, CBS, ABC and CNN all called Florida for Bush. The Associated Press was the lone major holdout. By the middle of the

night, everyone had recanted on the Florida projection. We've all heard about chads, butterfly ballots, black Democrats turned away... and Diebold machines putting out numbers no one could believe. And? We all know that members of the media were given the ballots to count even after Gore conceded. We know they concluded at around the time of nine eleven that Gore clearly had more votes. Did the media cover the conflict of interest at Fox News? No. Does anyone know that it was confirmed that Gore was found to have more votes? Hardly anyone."

"What's the experiment?" Even though it took longer than most places to be seated, Fletcher liked the atmosphere at Ruby's. He believed it was worth the wait.

"The media rarely hits it on the head anymore. I don't know why. There are corporate interests in the form of commercial sponsors. Then? Why not milk something out? You could have all the facts in front of you but unless other networks are shooting their wads, why lay it all on the table in one full swoop? You could string a good story out for *months* if you really wanted to. Maybe there's a buddy system at work. Is NBC gonna start a full blown war with Fox News? They have more in common with each other than they have with ordinary people. Tom wants to incite a riot using some of our guys. He's sure Matt would be on board and he wants to use Tad, Brent and Ramon. He's almost sure the media's gonna blame the drunk youngsters crowding Main Street."

"That sounds nuts." Vivian didn't have a big appetite and only ordered fries. She was picking at them. "A lot of this is too much for me and I don't want to be around when it happens. I can take so much of this neurotic behavior for only so long."

"I'm with you, precious." Fletch patted Viv's knee. "Let's go far away before we get sucked into something horribly stupid."

"Nancy?" Eddie asked. "Do you want to be here when the crap hits the fan?"

"No. I'd like to go to Lake Havasu. How's that?" She was finished with her food and was ready to leave.

"Sounds good. Do you guys want to join?" Eddie asked.

"We're gonna head back to our hotel and think about it. Right honey?" Fletch wasn't sure where Vivian would want to go.

"Back to the hotel? Yes. We'll let you know later tonight. Are you guys ready to leave?" Vivian was still thinking about Vancouver. They paid their bill then walked together along the pier.

In the last Sunday of July, Vans held its annual surf competition in Huntington near the same pier where Eddie, Nancy, Vivian and Fletcher strolled along a few days before. Young adults were drinking heavily and meandering up and down Main Street. Shazbot, Matt and Tom dined on the second story of a cozy restaurant. Matt asked Tom, "Do you want me to do it? Should I throw this?" He held up a bottle of ketchup. "Tad, Brent and Ramon are down there. They're gonna talk big crap when it lands."

"Wait!" Tom looked back. "A bus boy's taking some plates. Wait until..."

Matt got up. He had a few beers himself and wanted to be down with the vibrant action. He handed his ketchup bottle to a hairy surfer at the next table. "Throw this, man! They *want* you to."

The surfer guy hucked the bottle into the crowd below. "Someone's trying to kill us!" Ramon yelled. "*Fuck this shit!*" Before long, dudes were fighting each other, knocking their ways into shops and kicking porta potties. Tom watched from above and calmly ate his burger. Shazbot was amused. Matt tried to order another beer but management was panicking and wasn't sure how to handle the situation.

The nightly news would feature local residents blaming unruly young drunk out-of-towners. Fletcher and Viv had decided to go to Lake Havasu with Nancy and Eddie. The couples stayed in separate rooms at the Edgewater Hotel. Fletch and Viv cuddled in a bed and watched MSNBC. "Crap! Those psychos went ahead and did it... *and they're on national TV!* Is that my nephew?" Vivian got up and got close to the television. "Oh boy!"

"Vivian? I think they're trying to desensitize us. This? It's just a regular day for me. I'm numb. I really am." Fletcher remained on his back and enjoyed the softness of his pillow. *These are really great pillows*, he thought. *How many hotels have I been to this year? These might be the best.* He called out, "Vivian? They have rental jet skies downstairs. Do you think you'll be up for it tomorrow?"

What planet is this? she wondered. "Yeah. I know what you're talking about. Just another day at the office!" She came back from the TV. "I'll jet ski with you." She put her head on Fletch's chest and tried to sleep.

In another room in the Edgewater Hotel, Eddie Callypso and Nancy Moore were having a political conversation. The television hadn't been on so they were unaware of the ruckus in Huntington. "Fletcher was saying that the Mossad worked with Rogues in the Pentagon to hijack our country on nine eleven. It's been more than ten years and we're still trying to figure these things out." Eddie fiddled with a couple of five dollar casino chips. "When I first met you, we hit it off but you seemed reluctant to talk about these touchy issues."

Nancy had been thumbing through a brochure of local activities and set it on the table. "I never saw any use in talking about these things. I always figured that it was someone else's problem... and someone I'd never meet would take care of it. I've seen your android friend, Shazbot, though. I started thinking that maybe I *should* care because maybe I can change things a little." She opened her handbag and pulled out some cream and a small mirror. She started removing her makeup.

"I think that the Bush family is full of bizarre contradictions. George HW Bush's dad, Prescott Bush, dealt with Nazi businessmen and was sued by a couple of Auschwitz slaves. His assets were seized in 1942 under the *Trading with the Enemy Act*. Yet, Prescott Bush's son was the youngest fighter in the Air Force during World War II. HW goes on to be president and says, 'Read my lips. No new taxes.' He raises taxes against his promise but some people saw him as a war hero for stymieing Saddam Hussein during the first Gulf War. His critics, though, believed he should've gone into Baghdad and finished the job and he is not re-elected. *He's a humiliated one-termer*. Along comes his son, W, as the Overcompensation King. Paul O' Neil was his Secretary of the Treasury and claimed that W Bush intended to invade Iraq way before nine eleven. For what? To fix what his dad was criticized for! And? The infamous 'Bush tax cuts'! They were irresponsible and skyrocketed our debt. He passed Medicare part B

without a method to fund it. Same with the border fence and our wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. They didn't give a heck about fiscal responsibility. They wanted the media to repeat 'Bush tax cuts' over and over so the public would forget that W's father *reneged*. Then there's the fact that Osama bin Laden's sister, *Salem bin Laden*, helped finance W Bush's petroleum company, Arbusto, during the seventies! What the shit, right?" Eddie watched the makeup come off Nancy's face. She looked good *plain and simple* to him. He wondered why she didn't go out more often looking like she was now looking in front of him. "Osama bin Laden, as *Tim Osman*, toured American military bases... and many people believe he was brought into the White House. This is right before the election in eighty-eight."

"Did you know that Lil Wayne broke Elvis Presley's record for Billboard Hot 100 hits?" Nancy Moore turned around toward Eddie. She continued to wipe her cheeks with a white papery circular disc. "Maybe there was a conspiracy by that Illuminati thing to put him in rehab with bad sizzurp! You know how Fletch and Viv think someone might've purposely given Monteith bad heroin?" Nancy turned back toward her mirror.

"Yeah? I never thought of that." Eddie was baffled for a few seconds and tried to remember his previous train of thought. "I'm almost sure, though, that Israeli intelligence colluded with the Bush family after nine eleven. *That's the contradiction, right?* Prescott Bush was a Nazi supporter! His son and grandson were close to the bin Ladens... and then Osama becomes public enemy number one!" Eddie watched Nancy put her cream and mirror back into her handbag.

She sat next to Eddie on his bed. "Guess what else? *Glee* passed the Beatles for number of Hot 100 hits! Corey Monteith sang for the show, *Glee*, you see? These old geezers don't like their icons taken down. Am I right? They killed Monteith with heroin because he didn't get with the program! Does that make sense?" Nancy pushed Eddie onto his back and slinked her way on to him.

"You know?" Eddie Callypso was happy with his life. He liked Nancy but he was afraid of liking her too much. He wasn't sure where his fear was coming from. "I think you're right! James Brown was arrested for trying to take a piss in his own company building! He's pretty high on that Hot 100 list!"

"He's *dead*, too!" Nancy said. She kissed Eddie on his sternum. "Those psychotic Illuminati guys probably did it, huh?!"

"Yes. It makes all the sense in the world." Eddie kissed Nancy back. They slept well that night.

The two couples met at seven in the morning at the Edgewater's breakfast buffet. The gals decided they'd lay out at the pool and the guys decided they'd rent jet skis. They farted around the water then wound up resting on the far end of the lake shore. Eddie asked Fletcher, "What happened at the Paul Bunyan Hotel? You guys glossed over it. Is there something I should know?"

"If you're asking if it would happen again, I'm not really sure. I *hope* not." Fletcher was wearing dark sunglasses which were strapped on with elastic. He lowered them to his neck. "I think they wanted to scare *both* of us. I think these wild government feds wanted me to go straight and they wanted Vivian to stop enabling me. *That's why I cut my hair*. They said they had a position for me but I'd have to clean up." Fletcher looked across the water and admired the view

of the casinos. “Vivian had a surprise for me right before the whole demolition episode. *She thought she was pregnant*. We had a talk about it a couple of weeks ago in Catalina. She barely escaped the Paul Bunyan implosion by the skin of her teeth. The next day, she started spotting again. She wasn’t sure if the stress caused her to miscarry or if she was just late on her period.”

“Oh man!” Eddie took off his life vest and sat down on the sand. “That’s *big*! I could’ve been an uncle!” He looked up at Fletcher. “An *unofficial* uncle, of course.”

“I want to settle down—I *really do*—but I’m starting to wonder about *fate*. I never thought too much about fate, you know? I’m starting to wonder about *callings*. Maybe it’s not our *fate* to be parents... or even married. Maybe we have a *calling* to do something else.” Fletch took off his own vest and sat.

“There are ministers in those buildings over there!” Eddie pointed across the lake. “You can be married by noon if ya’ want it!”

“It’s not gonna happen, guy. I can see the future. We’d get married then Herman Eichelberger, *or some other nut*, is gonna kidnap us! They’re going to tie us to logs and leave us to be slit in two by large lumber blades! Those dudes are that freaky!” Fletcher decided the sand was too hot. He scooted toward the shallow water and sat in it.

“I keep thinking that, at any given moment, my dad’s gonna call me. *‘Son. High school starts next week! You better start wrapping up your vacation!’* Another part of me believes the dollar is going to collapse at any given moment and we’re going to be trapped in a civil war.” Eddie dug his feet into the warm sand.

“I don’t know what to make out of life. I can’t predict it. I wish I could.” Fletcher was glad to be away from Huntington. He kept thinking about the disturbance he saw on the news. He didn’t talk about it, though. Instead, they contemplated a baseball connection with the Illuminati. Ryan Braun was suspended and talk was that there would be many more. Fletcher believed the rules of life were becoming more and more arbitrary. The baseball situation was just an outward reflection of it. Players were pressured to perform more but they were supposed to keep the same age-old methods. The horrid economy wasn’t just affecting regular people. After the *Great Recession*, giants buckled and some tumbled. Fletcher wondered if the mass suspensions were just a way to get out of paying high salaries to megastars. Eddie wondered about the sports almanacs and the records in the books. If they stripped Lance Armstrong of his titles in biking, would or could they do that to Mark McGwire? What about teams that won the World Series? Life was a mess and sports served as the anecdote to come to grips with new attitudes and dilemmas. Fletch and Eddie got back on their jet skis when the Sun became too much to handle. They headed back across.

Nancy and Vivian lounged at poolside and watched their men ride in. In Huntington, Tom McKay took over the beach rental where the Trojan horse was put on Fourth of July. Matt Stubbs, Tad Streets, Ramon Johanson and Brent Hoover sat around playing PS3. Shazbot and Dinah fixed cocktails. Tom came in from the patio with a tray of grilled burgers. “Matt? You did good work in that UCLA mental facility! I want to send you on a new assignment.”

Matt was seated Indian style on the floor and waited his turn for *Red Dead Redemption*. “Shazbot thinks you’re doing this stuff for your own

amusement. He said not to let you do anything like that again. *People are gonna think I'm really loony if I keep getting committed.*"

"Shazbot? He's a robot!" Tom looked over to the bar. Shazbot kept about crushing ice in a blender. "He doesn't know how the CIA is supposed to *work*! Amanda Bynes was picked up a few days ago for lighting a fire in a driveway. I want to drop you off naked in Thousand Oaks somewhere... *just like we did a few weeks ago.*"

"No! I'm not doing it!" Matt got up and approached Shaz at the bar. "You have my back, right? You won't let Tom *do* this again!"

"Tom? I can't say I believe it would benefit the United States government to institutionalize Matthew Stubbs. I've processed the data and the liabilities outweigh the benefits. There is a net loss. Do not proceed." Shazbot placed toothpick umbrellas in lime margaritas.

"You've got to be kidding me! You can't stop this from happening! You're not even an employee of the *state*!" Tom grabbed a package of buns from a cabinet.

The group ate together as if they were normal people. There were no death camps anywhere. There were no androids living with them. They knew nothing about top secret government missions. In the middle of the night, Matt Stubbs thought he was having a nightmare. "*The Terminator?*" He looked up and saw two small red lights hovering about his head. Startled, he quickly rolled over to his left and thudded onto the floor. He fumbled through an alarm clock and small statues to find a lamp on his nightstand. The two red lights pointed toward him and headed at him. Matt turned the light on. "*Shazbot!* What the heck are you doing?!"

Shazbot first placed his a forefinger at his lips. *Be quiet*, the gesture said. Then he used the same finger in a hooking motion suggesting that Matt come with him. Matt grabbed shorts on the floor and put on sandals. He followed Shazbot downstairs. Tad, Brent and Ramon were snoring in the living room. Shazbot opened the front door and headed out. When Matt closed the door behind him, Shaz pointed toward their van. "Let's go," he said.

Shaz got into the driver's seat and Matt rushed toward the passenger's seat. Shaz backed up the vehicle and Matt turned around and noticed something out of place. "*Tom!* Shazbot? What's happening here?"

"Tom approached me fifteen minutes ago. He said it was time to take you to dump you in Thousand Oaks where Amanda Bynes was found near a fire in her neighbor's driveway. I knocked him out, stripped him to his underwear and tied him up in this van." Shaz drove along Pacific Coast Highway.

"Is this how it happened with Cornelius? Did he approach you and... *you turned on him?*" Matt watched Tom try to speak but there was a tiny wiffle ball strapped inside his mouth muffing his words. "Where'd you get the sex toy?"

"Sex toy? Tom golfs. He practices putting inside the house. *Remember?*" Shazbot sped up.

"Yeah, yeah. *Right.*" Matt rubbed sleep goo out of his eyes.

"We're going to give Tom a taste of his own medicine." Shazbot turned on the radio. "Have you heard of Jeremy Bentham? This is the greatest good, Matt."

"You're the one who quotes Gandhi saying that an 'eye for an eye leaves

the world blind'!" He looked back at Tom and really didn't want him untied.

"Vivian Streets pointed out my inconsistent behaviors on the night that the Paul Bunyan Hotel came down. She was right. It only means I'm becoming more human, does it not?" Shazbot searched the radio for classic rock.

"I *guess* so." Matt grabbed a case from under his seat and opened it. There were about fifty traditional cassettes inside. "We have Van Halen, Loverboy, Joan Jett, Billy Squire and Lita Ford. There's a bunch of others, but those would be my picks." Matt pulled his selections out.

"Put in 1984. I feel like hearing 'Panama' right now!" Shaz drove along and they didn't speak much until they reached the liquor store where Amanda Bynes was caught on surveillance tape going into a restroom to wash gasoline off of her Pomeranian. "Thomas McKay? I need you to infiltrate the mental health facility where Amanda Bynes is being held for psychiatric observation!" Shazbot listened to Tom violently protest through his very own wiffle ball. There was a bottle of chloroform wrapped inside a hand towel between the front seats. Shaz opened the bottle and poured the liquid onto the towel. Shazbot asked Matt, "Where do you think I got this? From the CIA store on the corner near the pizza joint?"

"*Shame on you, Tom! You're going to get knocked out by your own materials!*" Matt got out of the van and darted to the back. Shazbot was smothering Tom's face with a wet towel when Matt opened the back doors. "Kick him out toward me, Shazbot! I'll drag him near that sleeping wino!"

Matt dragged Tom's limp body to the side of the liquor store then hopped back into the van. They drove along until they could find a payphone. Shazbot made a call to authorities and reported that a naked man was passed out in a public place. They scooped him up. Tom McKay was institutionalized and observed for seventy-two hours then released.

Eddie and Nancy wanted to experience a "real" casino town and headed to Las Vegas. Fletch and Viv liked the water at Lake Havasu and remained at the Edgewater. The day after Tom was released from a mental health facility in Los Angeles county, Vivian Streets received a text message from him. "*The penguins eat tofu in Siberia.*" She was relaxed on a folding chair near the pool. Fletcher didn't respond. Vivian removed the silver cardboard from over his face. "Fletcher? *The penguins eat tofu in Siberia.*" She showed her phone to Fletch after he woke from a snooze.

"This? It's Shazbot. They turned him off." He reached down for suntan lotion and put a healthy glop onto his shoulders then rubbed.

"Shazbot? Is he in trouble? This is from Tom McKay." Vivian was wearing a large straw hat. It kept her face shaded but sweat still dripped from her forehead. She wiped her face with a small cloth.

Fletcher's iPhone started buzz. It was a Skype from Tom. "Tom? What's up?"

Tom looked crazy in Fletch's four-inch screen. He seemed to be in the middle of a desert. "Mental health facilities make crazy men sane! Do you know what they do to sane men?! They make them *crazy!*"

"Tom? You're not making any sense! What is going on?!" Fletcher worried about Vivian. She had been at such ease for the past few days. Fletch resented Tom's interruption.

Tom pointed his own iPhone at Shazbot and Dinah. They were tied back-to-back and seated on deep sand. They were lifeless and looked like giant Barbie and Ken dolls. Tom demanded, "Do you know where I am?!" Tom's face grew larger in Fletcher's screen. "Alamogordo, New Mexico!" Tom's face became normal-sized again. "This is where an atomic bomb was first successfully tested in 1945! How fitting that this is where America's advanced killer android program will end!"

"Tom? Why are you telling me this?" Fletcher put his palm over his phone's camera then whispered to Vivian, "What should I do?" Viv had no answer. Fletcher removed his palm, "Tom? *Cooler heads will prevail*. You hold tight. Don't do anything rash. That can't lead to anything good."

Tom McKay pointed his camera at large oil drums painted red. Each drum had white large block letters reading "TNT". "I've had enough of this cartoon life! I was trained to interrogate Iraqi prisoners! I supervised the construction of concentration camps in America's borders! How can I do my job if subordinates are allowed to get revenge on me! Hasn't anyone heard of 'chain of command'?!"

Vivian took Fletcher's iPhone. "Tom! Don't kill yourself! There is a way we can settle this!"

"*Kill myself?* You have me wrong!" Tom focused on a thick line at the base of the drums. "That is the fuse! I will be *far* away when I light it!" Tom turned off his phone.

Vivian watched the screen go black. "What are we supposed to do, Fletcher?"

"Nothing we can do. We stay here. We lay out. That was our plan this morning and it's the best thing we can do now." Fletcher grabbed the silver cardboard and put it on his face.

"I just feel like we should call Herman Eichelberger or something." Vivian took the reflective cardboard from Fletcher.

Fletcher sat up and leaned toward Vivian, "We've had this conversation before. You flunk a test at school and everyone teases you at the weekend's party. You bomb an IQ test and get sent to remedial school, *everyone stays silent*. The bigger the tragedy, the more taboo it becomes. Clinton lies about a stain on Monica's dress and we're still talking about it. *Small gaffe as far as I'm concerned in the bigger picture*. The Mossad conspire with American agents to hit the Twin Towers then blame it on Arabs with oil... and you can't peep a word for *years*! We can go on television and question the direction of the space program and whether we should spend money on Mars rovers or starving kids in the inner cities. People stay at home on their couches and think they're watching quality TV. Mention any of the hard evidence we have against the Bush administration? You know that's not going to happen, at least not with enough momentum to regain our country! Those media fuckers are gonna say we're inciting civil unrest. The *Rogues* will be unharmed and we're going to suffer."

"You think this is the same deal? What could go wrong?" Vivian handed the cardboard back to Fletcher. "I think you're right. I just wanted to at least discuss it."

Fletcher's iPhone dinged. He picked it. "*Ka Blowwie*." He handed the phone to Viv and showed her the text. "He must've already did it. It's too late."

Tom McKay watched Shazbot and Dinah blow up in a massive explosion from just outside Holloman Air Force Base. He filmed the incident on his phone and immediately posted it to YouTube. After sending the “*Ka Blowwie*” text to Fletcher, he sent a web link from the YouTube video. He lit up a fat cigar, put on some shades, then cruised in a new convertible Cadillac down the 54 toward Mexico. He started singing Jimi Hendrix without the radio on. “*Hey Joe! I heard you shot your old lady down! Shot her down to the ground! Yeah! Yes I did! I shot her! You know? I caught her messing around! Messing around town! Yes, I shot her!*” Tom McKay’s scalp was balding badly but the side and back remaining hair felt good in the wind. Tom gained speed and it was difficult to keep puffing his cigar in between singing. He had always wanted a Cadillac and he bought a brand new XLR a couple of hours after he was released from the same facility where Amanda Bynes was being held against her will. He confronted Shazbot in Huntington then spoke the fail-safe words to shut him down. With the top down, he reached eighty miles per hour along a New Mexico highway and reflected on his haphazard life. “*Hey Joe, I said, where you gonna run to now, where you, where you gonna? Well dig it! I’m going way down south! Way down south, way down south to Mexico! Alright! I’m going way down south, way down where I can be free!*”

On the night that Shazbot took Viv and Fletch to the Paul Bunyan Hotel for their urgent rendezvous with Cornelius Stuart, Shaz told Fletch that his cousin was the Northrop Grumman RQ-4 Global Hawk. They conversed inside a MRAP vehicle while Vivian pleaded with Cornelius in a parking structure to renounce his chaotic and destructive ways. Time was short and Shazbot wasn’t able to get his full story out. The Global Hawk was an unmanned air craft capable of flying over a jet airliner and disrupting electronic communication signals to and from the targeted plane. Webster Tarpley, a conspiracy theorist, believed the accused hijackers on nine eleven did not have the skills to fly the planes in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania the way the “official story” reported they did. He speculated that the *Global Hawk* was used to maneuver the jumbo jets. Shazbot was not going to tell Fletcher about these ideas, though. He was going to tell him that Northrop Grumman had a secret subsidiary. This offshoot did not have to report to Congress and it’s accounting practices were more muddled than organized crime in Chicago. They operated mostly offshore in private islands and in countries around the Caribbean and South America under the auspice known by a select few as *Rossum Machinery International*. This confidential and unofficial branch, headquartered in Anguilla, developed and built Shazbot and Dinah. Shazbot wanted to tell Fletcher that *hundreds* of androids similar to him were being mass produced.

Tom McKay crossed the Stanton State Bridge in El Paso. He fiddled with his thick mustache and mentally prepared for unhealthy tacos in *Ciudad Juárez*. A border patrol agent drove along the bridge coming from the south. The tan Jeep J8 pulled in front of Tom and blocked the road. Amber-colored cherry lights flashed on. An agent got out of the vehicle, shielded himself behind his door and pointed a gun toward Tom. “*Get out of your car!*”

Tom McKay had an impulse to turn around and bolt northward. He knew he’d be chased and dreaded it. Instead of opening his door, he stood up on his burgundy leather seat. *I’m finally in a convertible. I’ll be damned if I don’t*

stand on my seat at least one time. He looked toward the border patrol agent. *He looks familiar.* Tom McKay looked more. “*Shazbot? Is that you? How’d you get out from the explosion?*”

The agent yelled, “Get out of the vehicle slowly and walk backwards toward me with your hands behind your head!”

Tom complied. He was cuffed and taken to El Paso International Airport. The agent took Tom out of the Jeep to a PAC 750 XL small airplane. “*Get in!*” the agent commanded Tom.

There were two men already inside the rear of the plane when Tom got it. They were dressed in three-piece suits and they both... *looked like Shazbot.* “Am I dreaming?!” Tom yelled into the air.

The border patrol agent got into the cockpit and started the plane. One of the men in the back asked Tom, “Do you like sky diving? I hope you do.”

“What is going on?!” Tom hollered.

Rossum Machinery International was sent a distress message from Shazbot when Tom was taking him to the New Mexico desert. Shazbot and Dinah were designed so they could be shut off if anything went wrong. “The penguins eat tofu in Siberia” was the trigger word. It toggled Shazbot off and it toggled him back on. RMI was lax toward the government agents they had delivered Shazbot to. They didn’t track Shazbot’s every move. Their only protocol to check on him was if he was shut down for more than an hour. There was a GPS unit inside of Shazbot and Dinah that Tom should’ve guessed was there. Tom became incensed with rage when Matt got revenge on him for a *second* time in the past few months. His logic fell off the boat and he was left with a swirl of bitter hatred in his belly. RMI figured out that Shazbot was going to be destroyed so they set a plan of retaliation into motion. RMI had intelligence that the US dollar may collapse. Shazbot was an S-2026 robot and so was the border patrol agent that stopped Tom McKay. The two suited androids in the back of the plane were S-2026 robots and Dinah was a female variation of one. They were originally designed to infiltrate foreign lands, mingle amongst natives, and carry out military actions. RMI re-programmed Shazbot to be peaceful. They created parameters where the robots *could* begin soldier mode with the press of a remote button. It didn’t stop there. Rossum Machinery International believed the United States of America would break into civil war if the floor of the economy fell out. Tom McKay took over where Cornelius Stuart left off. An S-2026 robot, *Shazbot*, had already “decommissioned” one CIA agent in Elko, Nevada. Three unnamed S-2026 robots were now in possession of another agent, Tom McKay.

The PAC 750 XL was high in the sky and headed toward Alamogordo. “Sure is beautiful up here, isn’t it Tom?” The border patrol agent looked back at Tom and smiled. “You don’t mind if I call you ‘Tom’, do you?”

“Who are you guys?! What’s going on?!” Tom wanted to fight for control of the plane. He was outnumbered and he didn’t know how to fly. “Shazbot! Are all of you called ‘*Shazbot*’?! You all look the same!”

The border patrol agent checked his instruments. “They call me ‘Alvin’. The guys with you are ‘Brad’ and ‘Caleb’! There are five hundred of us roaming the continental United States. We will be prepared to take charge when your country spirals into widespread chaos. Your dollar will be worth less than the *peso* in a few months! It’s no coincidence that three of us here are named in A-B-

C order. A random generator picks out our monikers from A to Z then starts over again and again.” Alvin began to whistle.

Tom McKay pulled out his iPhone and started to text Fletcher Browne. When the PAC 750 XL skydiving plane was over the site where the first atomic bomb exploded in 1945, Brad spoke to Tom, “This is where you get off!” He grabbed Tom by his left arm and Caleb grabbed his right arm. They tossed Tom McKay tumbling toward the desert floor. Shazbot and Dinah had been blown to bits on the ground earlier in the day. Tom fell and he thought about the atomic blast decades before. He thought about Shazbot and Dinah strapped near the TNT and C-4 plastic explosives. He thought his revenge on Shazbot was *so* poetic and he thought he would laugh about it for the rest of his life. Tom plummeted without a parachute and his arms pinwheeled furiously in futile circles. He wasn’t laughing at all.

In the plane above Tom, Alvin asked Brad and Caleb, “Does anyone know the rate of acceleration for an object during complete freefall?”

“*Nine point eight meters per second squared!*” Caleb yelled out.

“I owe you a beer, man!” Alvin continued north.

“You stole my answer! *I was gonna say that!*” Brad insisted. “Let’s blow this taco stand and find some really good brew!” He did a wave of his arms like an amateur hip hop dancer from a nineteen eighties music video.

Tom McKay splatted down seventy-five yards northeast of where Shazbot was tied to Dinah before being blasted to smithereens. Investigators were already on the scene trying to figure out the explosion. Many of them watched Tom come down and slam into the Earth. They ran to him but he had already died of a broken neck and profuse internal bleeding.

Fletcher received a text message from Tom right as medics were loading him onto a gurney. “The world is full of Shazbots! On nine nine, there is an armed march on DC! It’s a diversion from the ultimate solar flare Killshot! Millions and millions will die!” He read the message to Vivian from inside their Edgewater Hotel room. Fletcher added, “I’m interpreting from text abbreviations, but that’s what it seems to say.”

“What’s it mean?” Vivian checked Fletch’s phone. “We should stay away from Tom for a while. He’s gone off the edge!”

Herman Eichelberger texted Fletcher and Vivian a half hour later. “Tom McKay’s contract with the United States government has been terminated.”

“Tom McKay has been offed, Viv. Should we care? Is there anything we should do?” Fletcher watched Vivian turn her phone to silent and place it into a side pouch in her duffle bag.

Vivian walked to Fletch and held him. She gleamed, “We can stay here and vacation like regular people. I command you, Fletcher Browne, to leave your phone in this room and join me downstairs for some good grub!”

Fletcher did as he was told and was pleased that he had such a splendid girlfriend. “You have the best answer. We are not their moms! Why do they try to pull us into their fanatical spats?!” He kissed Viv on her cheek then on her mouth. They went downstairs and ate nothing but fatty foods. They did it on purpose.

Nancy Moore and Eddie Callypso were driving back to their hotel at the Tropicana from a tour of the Hoover Dam. They were listening to Snoop Dogg’s

'*Doggystyle*' on CD. "You know? I was thinking about that Lil Wayne thing." Nancy turned down the music so she could be heard. "There was a lawyer that was hounding him about something or another and it was on TV. That could be a conspiracy, right?"

"What do you mean?" Eddie Callypso marveled at the Nevada desert landscape.

"Well, they didn't want him competing with Elvis, right? *The Illuminati guys, I'm talking about.* I remember Bobcat Goldthwait was on Jay Leno a long time ago. Jay got all mad that Bobcat was talking all crazy... but that's part of his gig, you see? Jay wanted him to talk like a normal businessman or something and he wouldn't do the interview. I think Lil Wayne stayed in character because he knew the cameras were rolling. I think the lawyer was one of those Illuminati guys who wanted to expose Lil Wayne as some kind of fraudulent professional! That would've totally screwed his street cred and he wouldn't have sold any more albums!" Nancy turned the music back up. "Gin and Juice" was playing.

Eddie turned the music down a little. "That could be! Do you have anything else?"

"Okay! How about this? You know how you said that twenty years ago, there were about four hundred major media sources? Newspapers, radio stations, TV and whatever? Now, there's like five! Am I right? Well maybe that's why every other show on TV today is a talent competition, CSI, NCIS, reality TV or something by JJ Abrams! *Right?* They only want to pay, like, *three guys* to do everything!"

Eddie considered it for a few seconds. "Did you get that from an episode of Family Guy?"

Nancy thought about it. "Yes! But that doesn't mean it's not true! Right?" She turned the music back up and they didn't talk anymore until they were in their hotel room. "I got a text message from Vivian. She wants us to meet in Alberta, Canada in a couple of weeks. You want to go?"

"Vegas is nice but I'm ready for something different. Yeah. I'd like to go." Eddie and Nancy rested for a while then went down to the blackjack tables later in the evening. Overall, they broke even while staying in Nevada at Havasu, then later in Las Vegas, largely due to a five thousand dollar payoff at a slot machine when Nancy hit three sevens the day before they were to leave.

It was the middle of August in Edmonton. Nancy, Eddie, Fletcher and Vivian met at the Matrix Hotel. They checked in around noon but they didn't stick around too long. They headed to Maple Leaf Meadows for horseback riding. They trotted toward Terwillgar Park along a lazy river. Nancy said, "I had a small pony when I was young. We used to ride him in Norco."

"Yeah?" Eddie was uncomfortable. He wasn't sure if his took to him. He was the only one in the group wearing tennis shoes instead of boots. He wondered if that was the reason his horse was fidgety. "Nancy's starting to be an astute conspiracy theorist."

"Yeah. What d'ya' got?" Fletcher bought an oversized dark maroon cowboy hat for the ride.

"Peyton Manning was on the Indianapolis Colts for how many years? He could've signed with the Cardinals or anyone else! But who did he choose when he left Indy?" The Windemere golf course was on the other side of the water.

Nancy rode along and watched guys putting in the distance.

"Denver," Vivian said. She wore the same straw hat she had in Havasu.

"Right! *The Broncos!* How many horse teams are there in the NFL?"

Nancy felt proud of herself.

The main part of Terwillegar Park was across the stream so the group settled across the bank. "We're here to discuss the petroleum industry, Fletcher." The four horses were secured at surrounding trees. Vivian opened her backpack and pulled out a few ham and cheese sandwiches. "We need to discuss what's really going on."

"I know where we're at. It takes an hour and a half to drive to Athabasca. That's where all the dirty mud is being filtered for oil. We're in Edmonton. Home of the *Edmonton Oilers*." Fletcher took sandwich from Vivian.

Nancy laid out a blanket. "Does this involve me and Eddie? Is this private? Should we take a walk?"

"You can stay. I have a question for Eddie but I have to be clear what's going on first." Viv gave Nancy and Eddie their sandwiches. "Do you remember high school and wanting to join the Sierra Club? Do you remember all the crap we gave people for draining Mono Lake? Do you remember wanting to join *Greenpeace* and writing our congressman to put pressure on the French government for sinking the Rainbow Warrior?"

"That was a long time ago, Viv." Fletcher pulled out a thermos from his sack. "I remember. I'm still mad about it all. Is that why we're here? Are we gonna stop 'em from pulling bitumen out of the ground?"

"*They're losers, Fletch.* I'm talking about Greenpeace. I'm not saying that global warming's not an issue. I'm not saying that Florida would still be above water if the Earth is warmed by six degrees centigrade. I'm not even saying that Canada wouldn't benefit from a warmer climate." Vivian took Fletch's thermos and poured herself some coffee. "Greenpeace came up here and did some dangerous crap."

"When all the ducks died. *I remember*," Fletcher said. "They're getting sued by Syncrude for screwing with their operation." He sat on the blanket with Nancy and Eddie.

"What's going on, Viv? I don't know what this is all about. You three went to high school together. What am I missing?" Nancy waited for an answer.

"Life is inverted at the very top, Nancy. It's hard for me to know what's going on and my dad is brilliant with many connections. My nephew, Tad, got involved in the same environmental programs that me, Fletch and Eddie were part of. He got screwed, though. I don't know what's going on in today's classrooms. You can't come out and say that you're for offshore drilling anymore. Not if you're a teacher at a public school. It's not politically correct. People think of the BP oil spill. Instead, professors *pretend* they're against something. They're weeding out the students who actually bite. Secretly, the ones who stand with the corporations and polluting industries are recommended and advanced in the work place." Vivian sat down.

"That doesn't sound right!" Nancy tried to figure out what she was hearing.

"It's a secret society and *we* are the secret society. My dad let me go willy nilly for more than ten years after my high school graduation. He figured

I'd see the light someday. The light isn't that it's wrong to protest. Everyone's gonna be young and rebellious. The light is that you can't stop it! They are too powerful. You can join these guys or you can get run over." Vivian didn't feel like eating just yet. She held her sandwich in her hand.

"Is this about Tad's professor in LaVerne? What was his name? *Zeke Fowler*! He taught geology!" Eddie Callypso had a few talks with Tad Streets when they were in Dagmar. "He had connections to *Greenpeace*... and I'm almost sure Tad talked about this very place with the tar sands and all."

"Yes! You've gotta understand... Are you ready for this Fletch? My father is in the CIA and knew Cornelius Stuart for many years. They had a falling out of sorts but that's how you were able to get photographic assignments around the world... like the one you had in Beech Grove, Indiana. My dad *consulted* for Suncor and lobbied for nuclear reactors and Alaskan oil pipelines. He was paid directly by Suncor." Vivian believed there was a chance that Fletcher would become angry. He remained calm. She finally took her ham and cheese out of its baggie.

"Your dad's not merely an art dealer and real estate developer? I might've been surprised a few years ago. When I thought you were crushed in the Paul Bunyan Hotel, it all hit me. Why would I be replacing Cornelius? Why would I be cheered by people I thought I was opposing. If you showed up a week later, I might've been confused. You were away for a couple of months, though. It started to sink in. It started to make sense." Fletcher held Viv's hand.

"The *Greenpeace* guys that were up here are media whores. We did psychological profiles on them. *Zeke Fowler*, by the way, is a total sellout. These wackos are wrought with vanity and greed. It doesn't mean that ducks don't matter. It doesn't mean that ducks didn't perish in mass near a sulphuric pond. It just means that the *people* that are fighting Nexen, Suncor and Sinopec are all hardcore weirdos." Vivian felt a little embarrassed for the speech. It wasn't always her way to come out and take a forceful stand. She preferred subtlety most the time. "And then there's the chemtrails, Fletch. Do you want to talk about that?"

"What are chemtrails?" Nancy asked.

"Have you ever seen a jet fly high in the sky... and there's a big trail of white smoke behind it?" Eddie waited for a "yes" or "no" but Nancy circled her forefinger telling him to "go on". "Water vapor is released in high altitudes where the air is very cold. It condenses and takes on similar properties as clouds. Scientists call the lengthy white lines behind jets 'contrails'... for the condensation. There are conspiracy theorists that believe there is more than just water vapor being left behind. They believe the government modified planes to deliberately leave *sulphur* in the atmosphere to combat global warming... and of course, they don't think it's a good thing." Eddie noticed that Nancy seemed satisfied with the answer.

"Is this what you want to talk about, hun?" Fletcher asked Vivian.

"No, actually, but that's part of it. There's a real plan to extend a really long hose eighteen miles upward into our atmosphere held up by large balloons. This hose is supposed to inject sulphur into the atmosphere for the same reason Eddie talked about." Vivian took off her straw hat and wiped her forehead. "We had to come up here now because it's going to be freezing come November and

December.”

“So we’re not against saving the environment, correct?” Fletch asked. “We’re just not going to mingle with psychos doing it for the wrong reasons, right?”

“Zeke Fowler was a paid geological consultant for Shell Canada. He’s out there telling my nephew to get arrested at Bolsa Chica! He’s telling some students to join *Greenpeace* and he’s telling others to work for Exxon! That wanker is all over the map! Have you heard of Typhoid Mary? That’s who I thought of when my nephew told me his story!” A breeze blew through Viv’s hair and it soothed her. “Tomorrow, we’re going to fly in a helicopter over the Athabasca oil sands. You’ll see how big this thing is. Trees have been ravaged in all directions.”

“What then? Do we help ‘em dig it out? Do we work as security?” Fletch looked over at the horses tied to the tree. *I hope we fastened them well. I’d hate to walk all the way back at this point.*

“I don’t know. I remember you urgently wanted to see the nine eleven steel. I think this is the same for me. I just want to know what’s going on.” Vivian got up and headed to her steed. The group galloped back to the stable then headed to their hotel. They flew over to Athabasca the next day and they visited Syncrude headquarters at Fort McMurray. A week later they returned to Dagmar, Quebec and rented the same tiny cottage they had stayed in a few months prior. They invited Tad and his friends to join them.

“Zeke Fowler? Total *dick!*” Thaddeus Streets spoke about his former geology professor from the University of LaVerne. “You know those Anonymous videos you see on YouTube? The ones where the voices are disguised and the speaker is wearing a *V for Vendetta* mask? The ones where the dude is always saying that there is no leadership and all this bullshit? Well, Zeke said he was one of those guys! You’re not supposed to tell anyone, *stupid!* That’s why it’s Anonymous! He was giving kids in our class the link to his video and shit. He’s not one of them. You can’t do that!” Tad finished his twelve-ounce Budweiser can and threw it into the cabin’s corner. “This is the same week that he said he lost my midterm paper. Aunt Viv came to rescue me from southern Cal a few days later.” Tad felt a healthy buzz and walked out unannounced to the front yard. There was only one restroom inside and it was taken. Tad took a leak on a bush near the water well.

Brent Hoover came out of the restroom. He looked into the corner where a bunch of aluminum cans were piling up. “Where’s the piano, aunt Viv?”

“When we left, we sold it to the owner of this place. He took it to his personal home. We re-rented this place and he said he’d give it back to us if we stay longer than a month.” Vivian was the only one not drinking alcohol. Her mind spun with dreamlike circumstances from the past few months. She wanted to settle. She had passionate issues trying to crop into her conscious mind from the swamp of her id. She wanted to hide what she was feeling and what she wanted to do in reaction to the world around her. She wanted to kill. She wanted to maim. She wanted to trap people whom she believed were responsible for society’s demise. She wanted to put these people in a small iron cage and torture them. “If you guys need me to drive you to get burgers later, I’m not drinking. Let me know, okay?” She pretended that she remained sober for the group so she

could safely take them somewhere in a car.

Tad came back inside. "I'm almost sure he was fag. It's not just that he supported homosexual marriage. *No*. I started to see a girl in class and he was opposed to it. You know? I mean, what the fuck should he care? He said I shouldn't be studying geology unless I was serious. If I wanted to save the planet, there should be no distractions... but I'm a guy! I have hormones! It's not as easy as this or that. You can do both! The chick I was seeing was all in. She wanted to save the Earth too." Thaddeus staggered to the kitchen and grabbed a few cans of beer. He passed them along.

"*Fag?* Thaddeus? You know you can't be caught dead saying 'fag', 'retard', the n-word and a slew of *other* words now that you have a government job. Definitely don't use them when you send email because it leaves a trail. We weren't even supposed to call Spencer Lafayette a midget! We did it... but we weren't supposed to. I'm just making sure you don't get fired for something dumb." Vivian added a log to the fireplace.

"Auntie? Have you ever heard me say the n-word? *No*. And we're here amongst friends and family. I can say what I want. That Cornelius dweeb was snooping into our privacy and what happened to him? A robot crushed his ass in a fuckin' hotel! If I can't talk straight somewhere or another, I'm gonna go insane!" Tad noticed that his aunt looked concerned. "I'm a clean person when I'm sober and in an office. I know how to talk right."

"Here, here!" Brent raised his can of beer. He turned to Tad, "You're the *best* fag I've ever known!"

The group laughed. They meant no harm. Fletcher was tired and began to nod off on the couch. An hour before midnight, people got ready for bed and Tad began to write with a pencil on a traditional yellow pad. "Dear Mister Fowler. I'm sorry that you turned out to be fag and all. It's too bad that you became the most noteworthy hypocrite I've ever met face-to-face. Someone should beat your ass because you ruin lives... but I wouldn't do that. Why waste my time, right? *'Kindness is a treasure and it's one towards me you've seldom shown... So I'll say it for good measure to all the ones like you I've known... You know I'd like to shave your head and all my friends could paint it red.'* Ever hear of Guns N' Roses? You're a total cock. Why did you lose my midterm? I hope a comet comes from the sky and lands on you... or I hope you walk alone in life knowing you're dung." Tad conked out over the chest he had been using as a makeshift table.

Vivian woke up before anyone else the next morning. She read what her nephew wrote. She shook him until he came to consciousness. "You don't plan to send this. Do you?"

Tad was groggy. "*What?*" He was disoriented and tried to figure out where he was. In a few seconds, he remembered that he was staying with his aunt again in Canada. "This? *No*. It was a project. I just wanted to get my emotions settled."

"Your teacher sounds like a massive egoist! Do you know what that means? Here we are battling issues on many fronts. We have the nine eleven thing and now we have the dirty oil thing. When we protest, the politicians and executives are usually professional enough to take it in stride. *Zeke Fowler*, though, sounds very unstable to me. He's waiting for you to do this. I'm

guessing that he *provoked* you so you would acknowledge his existence. Do you know who Alex Jones is?” Vivian ripped the letter from the yellow pad tablet.

“Alex Jones? You said he predicted nine eleven... same as William Cooper who got shot by deputies not long after the attacks.” Tad wondered what his aunt would do with the letter.

“He strikes me this way. Alex Jones means well and he wanted to be president or at least in Congress. He’s *somebody*, but not on the same level as Ronald Reagan. If Obama said something today making fun of the way he dresses, I’m almost sure he would devote his entire webcast to it. Does the president respond to every bit of criticism he gets, though? No. Because he can’t do it! There’s too much of it out there and besides... Why would you do it if you could? You can’t please everyone.” Vivian handed the sheet to her nephew.

“You think professor Zeke Fowler is trying to get a rise out of people? He’s an idiot... but I think you give him too much credit.” Tad ripped the paper into pieces in front of Vivian. “I’m not gonna play his game! If you think he’s toying with people, I don’t need any part of it.”

“What were you going to do with that letter?” Vivian noticed Fletcher and Ramon coming to consciousness. She had slept alone in the bedroom.

“This?” In Tad’s hand, there were tiny bits of yellow scraps. “I was just messing around. Everyone went to sleep and I still wanted to talk. It didn’t mean anything.”

“*Good*. Do you guys want to drive out for breakfast?” Vivian looked around and noticed that Brent was waking. Eddie and Nancy were still asleep cuddled by the couch. “Tad? Did your teacher seem insecure to you? Was he the kind of guy who pretended he could’ve been something great if so-called bad students didn’t hold him back?”

“*Yeah*. Actually, you hit it on the head. How do you know people so well?” Tad’s tongue felt yucky and he wanted some mouthwash.

“Just a hunch, kiddo.” Vivian went over to Fletch. “*Good morning!*” She knocked heads with him then ran her fingers through his hair. “Rise and shine!”

Vivian’s *Corvair* was still in Dagmar and so was Fletcher’s dad’s *Impala*. Everyone got up and got ready. They decided to head to Toronto to eat. Vivian drove Fletch, Nancy and Eddie in her Corvair. Tad drove Brent and Ramon in the Impala. They met at a *Denny’s*. “He seemed like such a nice person when I met him! Have you read his reviews at *RateMyProfessors.com*? So many students recommended him!” Tad was hungry and looking through a menu.

“*Yeah!* I read up on Zeke! That’s why I *didn’t* take him. For every five people that said he was good, someone was infuriated that he existed!” Ramon said.

“He sounds like a polarizing guy,” Fletch inserted. “You’re experiencing ‘cognitive dissonance’, Tad. I’m going through it right now with the United States government. I remember being proud of America until I found out about the dark sides that they participate in. *The nine eleven stuff and the concentration camp I documented in Indiana*. That kind of stuff. Do you remember recently that some DiMaggio guy kidnapped some gal in San Diego and was shot dead by FBI agents in Idaho? That’s what I’m talking about. Sometimes a family member

or a *friend* of the family does something way, way out of line. The mind doesn't accept these things... but they happen. The mind rejects these phenomena and kicks 'em out. *Cognitive dissonance*. That's what you're going through. If you can deal with it soon, it's no problem. If you don't know how to move on, we're talking mental trauma. I think you're strong enough and smart enough to handle this."

"Psychology? I was enrolled in a basic psychology class when I was taking geology. *Kübler-Ross*, right? DABDA. That's how to remember denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. These are the stages of grief. I was put in a classroom with a sanctioned deranged psychopathic teacher. I should feel some grief for getting pulled out early, right? It was a no-win situation there. He had his predetermined pets and I was destined to get railroaded. I almost didn't get into the class, by the way, because it was filling up fast and I was put on an add list. I would've been better off, it turns out, if I went on to something else. I think I'm past anger, right now, but I'm not at full acceptance yet. It'll come. I know it will." Tad Streets ordered his breakfast then said, "*Zeke Fowler* has been to me what Cheney and Bush have been to you guys. We wonder how these guys got their jobs but what can we really do?"

"You're right, Tad," Fletch said. "I'm glad you're making progress. It's best to handle these things head on. It's nice to have supportive family and friends like you have here. We're gonna make it."

"This guy wasn't pretty, uncle Fletch. You remember that Don Henley tune you and aunt Viv used to blast on your stereo when I was a small kid? Dirty Laundry? *'I could've been an actor but I wound up here... I just have to look good I don't have to be clear...'* Well, *Zeke* reminded me a lot of *Squidward* from *Spongebob Squarepants*... except for the nose. His chin was *weak*, though. Maybe *Roger* from *'American Dad'* might be more accurate to describe him. *Big forehead and all*. Attractive men flock to Hollywood all the time to make it as a major silver screen actor. *The great leading man, you know?* There's just not enough slots to make everyone into a box office sensation. People wind up settling in life. *'I make my living off the evening news... Just give me something—something I can use...'* Many would-be stars wind up as local television anchors. In the academic world, you want to be published. You want your face on CNN dazzling interviewers with mind-blowing theories and the sort. You want to be on some special presidential panel of this or that. *Zeke Fowler* was the equivalent of the dude who moved to LA to be the next *Rock Hudson*... but instead, became *Jeff Michael*." Tad Streets thought about the 'cognitive dissonance' idea. He felt a tinge of guilt for getting the rotten feelings off his chest. *I can't hold this in. It'll eat me*, he thought.

"Who's *Jeff Michael*?" Vivian asked.

"Some local anchor on Fox. He thinks he knows everything." Tad thought about a few Los Angeles area hot weather gals and resisted his urge to tell the group about them. Instead he said, "I was watching the CBS nightly news a couple of weeks ago. You know the *national* news with *Scott Pelley*? North Korea was having some kind of commemoration for *Kim Jong-un* and some American reporter was there interviewing a lady about the event. She needed a translator and it went something like this: 'What right do you have to stage these extravagant celebrations when there are starving people in your country?' I'm

paraphrasing , of course. The translator asked the North Korean lady and you could tell she was embarrassed for the reporter. She almost pretended that she didn't understand the question. She must've been thinking about our Superbowl halftime shows... and how *one in six* people in the United States goes to bed hungry! She must've thought the guy was an idiot and tried to defer. And then we have that *Chick-fil-A* controversy about the owner funding Prop Eight. Do we take care of the homophobia within our borders? No! We tell Russia they should be ashamed for their discrimination against gays! I'm the one who found out that *Zeke Fowler* was a paid consultant for Shell Canada. Why was he in class prodding us to protest the petroleum industry? Was it a trap?"

Brent Hoover pointed out, "You're standing up for gay rights, it seems... but you've called *Zeke Fowler* a fag."

"Yeah? I wish you would've been in the class with us. *Creation Scientists* claim that the fossil record should be consistent with purported evolution. This is called '*flood geology*'. If you look in the sediments and find an extinct species higher than a species that recently sprung up, then the *Flood of Noah* explains it. There should be no reason why we should find a dinosaur higher up than a possum or raccoon, for example. There's a hole in this theory. Tectonic plates slide all over the place. *They slide onto one another*. It's like cutting a deck of cards. All of a sudden, what was on the bottom one place is now resting on the top of something else. *It happens*. We see inconsistencies in the fossil record because of this well-known geological phenomenon."

"So?" Brent wondered.

"Well, we were out in the desert checking these areas out. This is when I starting hitting it off with that Judy girl from class. *Remember I brought her home once?* Zeke looked at me like I should be ashamed. We were joking around with each other and giggling at this or that. Much of the class had already started heading toward the sediments. It was only me, Judy and Zeke near the bus. Judy grabbed her backpack and ran to catch up with one of her friends. I wasn't in a hurry and strutted along. *Then it happened*. Zeke slapped my ass like a star quarterback passing a coach after a touchdown. He said something like '*go get them bones*' and I didn't think a whole lot of it at the time... but it made me feel very uncomfortable." Tad believed his story would provide the point he was getting at, but Brent still seemed unsure. "There's a difference between homosexuals sharing love with one another inside their own private bedroom... and some perverted, vulgar professor making uncomfortable and inappropriate passes at male students. That Bob Filner guy in San Diego? A grandma and a bunch of other ladies came out and complained about him. I bet if he was hitting on guys, though, they would've swept it under the rug and labeled the dudes as 'homophobes'. It's wrong."

"So do you think other so-called 'hate speech' stuff is the same? Someone's out there pressing someone else's buttons until they crack?" Ramon asked.

"Yeah. I think it happens a lot," Tad said. It was early in the morning and when everyone was finished with their breakfast, they stuck around for pie.

Tad drove north along the 404 toward Lake Simcoe. Brent was riding shotgun and Ramon was in the back. "Guess what country we're in?"

"Uh. Canada?" Ramon wanted to pretend that Tad just asked a stupid

question but he knew his pal was going somewhere with it.

“*Quebec*. According to Joel Garreau, North America has nine distinct nations. You can’t trust the wealthy establishment to tell you these things.” Tad hooked a right on Herald Road then a left on Woodbine Avenue. “I was going through aunt Viv’s books at the cabin and found *The Nine Nations of North America* written in 1981. It helps you conceptualize what’s gone on. Quebec, Foundry, New England—*that’s what’s up here*. Further south and west you have Dixie, Breadbasket, Islands, Empty Quarter, Ecotopia and Mexamerica.” He tapped Brent on the shoulder. “I think it’s under your seat.”

“Fletcher said the dollar might collapse and North America could become a single country.” Brent reached down and pulled the book out. He passed it back to Ramon.

“There’s two ways I see it,” Tad said. They passed the Shawneeki Golf Club. “Those rich dudes putting around at those country clubs? I think they want to stay in power. I think they want the North American Union and a totalitarian grip on the general people. I think they ultimately want a one world government... at least some of them do.”

Ramon thumbed through the pages. “What’s the other option?”

“My aunt said something about city-states... and that book kind of touches on it. She spent time with my grandpa Horace in Vancouver. He thinks the United States can’t sustain their grip on foreign bases. It’s not just a matter of mathematics with our debt and sale of bonds to China and other foreign countries. Right now, we’re selling bonds just to cover the interest on old bonds. It can’t keep up. The logistics aren’t there. Our Congress is calling for more and more controls of the populous but that takes resources like petroleum. How long can we keep up our naval fleets? How long can we keep training jet fighters? Have you ever seen pictures of New York, Chicago or Los Angeles from the air? How many millions of barrels of oil does it take to run these cities? My grandpa said that it’s already happened except that people don’t see it or are in denial. We’re already in a city-state world. In that book, there’s a vast section of North America called the Empty Quarter. Grandpa Horace said these sections are wastelands. Fred from YouTube recently came out of the closet. Yay for independent entertainers and artists, right? No. He got hooked up with Nickelodeon. If he didn’t, no one would’ve ever covered it on television news. You have to make it *through* one of the great city-states or you wind up as a no one. You wind up as a statistic. You wind up as a number.” Tad drove through East Gwillimbury.

“Who was talking about Guns N’ Roses the other day? It was the same when we were tiny babies. G N’ R was known as a Hollywood band because they started on the Sunset strip playing gigs at the Roxy. Axl Rose was from Indiana, though. There’s exceptions to every rule and John Mellencamp had already taken the sole available ‘midwest rocker’ spot. Axl Rose had to make it *through* Hollywood in order to get onto MTV. Same with politicians. Cheney flunked out at Yale and was a draft dodger. He had to make it in Washington, DC or else he’d be some old mechanic or something in Wyoming.” Ramon checked out the maps in the book. “You know? This reminds me of that NBC show ‘Revolution’ that just started. The Monroe Republic, the Georgia Federation and so on. I think California is its own country and whatnot.” In minutes, the three guys were at the lake walking around.

The boys contemplated taking a dip in the water while Vivian was driving across town toward the Dagmar cottage. Nancy was in the backseat with Eddie. "Homer Cocktail turns five on YouTube tomorrow," she announced.

"Who's Homer Cocktail?" Vivian asked.

"Some idiot. He posted hundreds of videos and most of the comments are horrific. 'My ears are bleeding' and that kind of thing." Nancy squeezed Eddie's hand.

"Do you guys watch Ray William Johnson or Shane Dawson?" Fletch asked.

"Were they the ones who make that flying cat video?" Nancy added, "The one flying through outer space?"

"I'm not sure," Fletcher said.

"My nephew was reading about the *Nine Nations* last night, Fletch." Vivian drove along the 118. "Speaking of YouTube and all, I found something yesterday that was interesting. It was a TruTV 'Conspiracy Theory' episode that was banned in the USA... but it aired once over here."

"And it has to do with the *Nine Nations*?" Fletch asked.

"Yes. If it wasn't banned in America, it might've helped mentally prepare you for that Beech Grove thing you did earlier this year. It covered the hundreds of thousands of mass plastic coffins that were in Madison." Vivian looked over Maple Lake. She wanted to suggest that they stop but she felt exhausted and kept on down the road.

"The tie to the *Nine Nations* is what?" Fletcher was curious.

"On January 11, 2010 Executive Order 13528 was signed. This put in motion a *Council of Governors* and divided the United States into ten regions. It was brought about from the NDAA and in theory is aimed to help the US in hardcore crisis management... like if a nuke went off in Baltimore. Remember that Clancy movie? Well, it turns out that the Federal Emergency Management Agency has ten corresponding zones. That's where the *Beech Grove* camp fits in. Do you know why FEMA didn't respond well to Katrina? They weren't set up for *rescue* operations no matter what's written on paper. They were set up to round up people. That's the going idea and Beech Grove falls into Region 5 which includes Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois, Michigan, Ohio and obviously Indiana." There were a few seconds of silence. "This reminded me of the *Nine Nations* book."

"I'm glad to be away from the madness," Fletcher said.

Tad, Brent and Ramon watched yachts go by and they watched jet skiers. Instead of swimming, they found a place to rent a row boat. They headed to Lake Simcoe's *Georgina Island*. "We can come here in the winter and do some ice fishing," Ramon said.

Brent heaved as he rowed. "How much more was it for a motor boat?"

"We need the exercise." Tad looked around. "Weather's not bad now in August... but I'm not sure I want to be here in the dead of winter."

"Dead of winter?" Ramon observed a few people fishing. "This is southern Canada! Dead of winter doesn't matter like it used to. *Global warming, remember?*"

"Have you checked *tmz.com* lately? Chris Brown is in Hawaii and sprayed a mural with cartoon monsters and it said 'fuck the police'. Sign of the

times? He also painted ‘*fruits piru*’ which is a reference to the *Bloods*. I wouldn’t bring it up... except that Aaron Hernandez was posting gang signs and pictures of his tattoos before he was picked up for murder. *He had just signed a forty million dollar contract and he was boasting about some affiliation with the Bloods.* What’s the deal?”

“Your aunt is always talking about some conspiracy theory or another. They don’t talk too much about gangs, but I think that’s where it begins. What did your uncle Fletch say was going on? *A schism*? Just like the Catholic church many centuries ago. We are splitting. There are those of us living the nine eleven lie and there’s everyone else trying to distance themselves from *Rogues*, as he calls ‘em.” Ramon tapped Brent on the shoulder and took over rowing.

Brent panted for a few seconds. “The pope stayed on one of these islands about ten years ago. I overheard someone in line at the boat yard. You know what else I heard?”

“What?” Tad asked.

“The United States is gonna hit the debt ceiling again in mid-October. *Treasury Secretary Lew* is gonna make an address later today.” Brent finally caught his breath and swigged a bottle of water.

“I wish I could call ‘em all crazy. I’m talking about my aunt and everyone else, even you guys. But it’s happened to me.” Tad reached into the lake and splashed some water on his forehead. “I keep waiting for everything to feel normal. I keep seeing *Nero* eating grapes from servants and having an orgy with all kinds of women in my mind... all the while Rome is burning to the ground.”

Vivian Streets sat on a blanket in her front yard near the water well. “We haven’t really talked about Shazbot blowing up... and I think it’s a good time to discuss some of these issues.” Eddie and Nancy were fooling around with each other near Viv while Fletcher sketched the surrounding area with some colored pencils and an oversized white pad.

“I feel like I’m in a dream,” Fletcher said. He visualized Shazbot being alive around them and started to sketch him onto his drawing. “Part of my mind is telling me not to trust my memory. *There was no android with us, you know?*”

“Tom McKay sent an outrageous text, Herman Eichelberger says that Tom has died in coded language and I’ve received emails from a few people giving details. One of them was Matt Stubbs. He said Shazbot and Dinah were blown up by Tom and a *team* of Shazbot clones got revenge by tossing him out of an airplane.” Vivian watched Fletcher sketch. “Does that bother you? Is it something we should talk about?”

“He mentioned the *Killshot*.” Fletch put down his pad of paper. “He also mentioned a march in DC in a couple of weeks. Peace officers are supposed to go into the nation’s capital *with guns* and demand that Obama be impeached. These guys are partially coordinated by Sheriff Joe, the guy who thinks Obama was born in Kenya. They’re going to go into congresspeople’s offices and *demand* the impeachment, the repeal of the Affordable Care Act and a slew of other things. Tom texted that it’s a diversion. He mentioned that *Killshot*.”

“What’s the Killshot?” Eddie asked.

“We all know the CIA has been involved in some questionable programs. One of them dealt with *remote viewing*. Through psychic means, they believed

they could see with clarity and certainty things miles away, even on other continents. They had subjects do what I'm doing. They would sketch what they could see in their mind... and now that we have satellites everywhere, these things could be verified. Turns out that some high level people became convinced that the technique was reliable but officially, the program ended. *Project Stargate*. I'm pretty sure that's what it was." Fletcher opened up his pad and showed Nancy and Eddie what he was working on. "I'm no *Vincent Van Gogh* but I'm a little better than I used to be in grade school. The remote viewing program could be compared to karate. I'd be above a white belt but below a black belt. I was in the Pentagon with my dad and I made the smoke from burning incense move at my command. I go into denial when I think about it throughout the course of the day... just like I can't believe we hung out with a sophisticated robot and went to amusement parks with him."

"A black belt at remote viewing could do what?" Eddie asked.

"He could read the serial numbers from a twenty dollar bill in your pocket. He could tell you where they're developing nuclear weapons in the third world. And? He can see the future with clarity. That's where *Killshot* comes in." Fletcher took his pad and started a new drawing.

"It sounds really spooky," Nancy commented. "What is *Killshot*?"

"The Mayans said the world was going to end this past December, right? There was that *2012* movie and it had to do with solar flares. Well, Edward Snowden—that guy who Herman Eichelberger couldn't remember whether or not he worked with—came across many secrets while he worked for the NSA. One of them had to do with remote viewers seeing the solar flares *next month*. The Mayans did good for coming *close* to predicting this event, but the CIA guys think they have it pegged. This massive solar flare is gonna fry all satellite circuits when it springs out of the Sun. We'll be protected *somewhat* by our atmosphere but anything in our orbit will be zapped. *Hundreds of millions will die*. Snowden was in Russia talking about these things. Anything that relies on satellites will be rendered useless. *Communications will be out*. You can't use the ATM. Stores will be shut down. Whatever's in your gas tank will be all you have to travel with."

"It sounds like a fear campaign," Eddie said. "Bradley Manning was sentenced to thirty-five years and now he reportedly wants to become a woman. '*I might be crazy but I'm not going to Alcatraz*'! Remember that cartoon? These guys are *pretending* to be crazy so people will lay off. They began serious but Uncle Sam decided to rip 'em new assholes. They got scared... and now they're changing their tune to get psychotic agents off their butts."

"That might be true but it doesn't mean that it couldn't be a cover for something else. Vivian got a text from Tad five minutes ago to let her know that the guys stopped off at the lake. He also mentioned that news is released that our debt ceiling will be reached in October. This could be a diversion. People are gonna be on edge to see if the fifteen hundred Russian troops fire at the American peace officers... if it builds to that crescendo. Others are gonna wait for this incredible *Killshot* that government psychics say will thud humanity. All the while, world renowned economists like Peter Schiff know the mathematic reality of the bond market, the federal reserve and the national debt. One of these times, we're going to go to China to borrow more money and they're gonna tell us no.

What's going to happen *when* we can't borrow anymore? National bankruptcy, of course... but what are the foreign governments going to do? We owe them trillions. What's gonna happen?"

"FEMA camps?" Eddie responded. He laughed. "I think I've reached delirium."

Vivian stood up and smiled. "*I will gladly pay you Tuesday for a hamburger today!*" She quoted Wimpy from the Popeye cartoon. "Would anyone like some wine? We have *Bordeaux* in there."

"I'd love some, honey. Why not bring the whole bottle out here?" Fletch sketched and tried not to think of the future. He drew trees, some birds and the blue sky.

It was late evening and Tad walked into the cabin with a fifty-pound bag of rice over his shoulder. Vivian was on the floor reading a book under a lamp. "Aunt Viv? We gotta get ready."

Brent walked in behind Tad. He carried a fifty-pound bag of beans over his shoulder. "Hope ya' guys like burritos!"

Ramon walked in carrying a box and a bag. "The lake is gorgeous," he said. The box contained a slow cooker and the see-through bag had a few trout.

"We talked to a few locals about what's going on. It might be real, auntie. Everything might shut down by the end of the year. *Quebec* almost became its own country back in the nineties. There were all kinds of people that believe that if the US falls, Canada will splinter. *Quebec* might have its day after all." Tad set the rice in the kitchen. "We have water in that well outside but I'm not sure if that's enough."

"Why do we have to go into survival mode?" Vivian asked.

"They're going to shut everything down. If they can't pay their bills, they're going to freeze all kinds of bank accounts. They're going to take over the grocery stores. There's going to be army dudes on our highways." He grabbed a beer from the fridge. "They're jacking people in Syria right now with nerve gas. *There are no rules out there*. Ariel Bar is a so-called Israeli military expert and he's pretending the gassed children were merely hit by cyanide. *Doctors Without Borders* say thirty-six hundred citizens were hospitalized and a few hundred of them died. *Children*. They are hitting children, babies, and women. World War III is right around the corner. If this thing doesn't straighten out, we are looking at bombs everywhere! The Russians are telling us not to intervene without a United Nations resolution but the dunces under Cheney and Bush already set the precedent during the second Iraq war to flip 'em the bird. It's not looking good."

"You guys relax with your beer. We're going to stay here and try to manage our fear and paranoia. There's reason to believe the crap could hit the fan... but let's not be rash about everything." Vivian drank some red wine. "Don't go out protesting. That's how it's gonna start. The government will have moles seeded inside of rowdy crowds. These moles are gonna do something heinous, like firing guns at cops in riot gear. When they're hit, it'll make national and world news. This will be the beginning of the end. It will be *Kent State* times a million. Wherever you go, it'll be shoot first and ask questions later."

"I'm afraid, auntie... but we've gotta do what we gotta do." Tad looked at Ramon and Brent. "Right guys? We can't be afraid to confront an illegal police unit, can we?"

"I'd like to live to fight another day," Ramon said. "Remember when Evander Holyfield had some of his ear bit off by Mike Tyson? That's happening to us! Nerve gas? Drones shooting at Americans? Nerve gas in the Middle East? *Not fair.*"

"Okay. I get it," Tad said. He went back to the fridge and got beers for Ramon and Brent. "So this is a big stage... except that people are gonna die. *All the world's a stage...* and this is massive Broadway gone violently primal."

"Where's everyone at?" Brent asked. He looked around.

"Fletcher, Nancy and Eddie went to the store. They were thinking like you guys. They wanted to stock up on basics. They should be back any time, now. I didn't feel like going. We started talking about a killer solar flare frying all of our satellites. I started drinking wine." Viv burped. "I'll be fine."

Fletch was driving Viv's Corvair back from a grocery store in Toronto. Nancy was in the back seat with bags of food. Eddie was in the passenger's seat looking through papers from a manila envelope. Fletcher said, "That was a little weird back there. You would think I'd be used to it by now."

"There's some good stuff in here." Eddie flipped through loose papers. "*The Truther Battalion?* It reminds me of Monty Python for some reason. The People's Front of Judea, the Judean People's Front and so on. They're all sitting around setting up committees to form other committees."

"I wonder if that guy knew us," Fletcher wondered. "He looked like someone from a movie with his long gray beard and his ominous filthy brown hat... which was way too big for his head, I might mention."

"He probably overheard what we were talking about," Nancy said.

"Yeah. He comes up and... What did he say? '*You want information on that Syrian chemical attack?*' His voice was gruffy. It truly felt like an out-of-body experience and I was looking around for a director sitting on a chair ready to yell '*CUT!*' through one of those cones." Fletch peeked over at the papers.

Eddie took one out. "It's a printed email from David Goulding to the founder of a UK defense contractor called 'Britam'. That's *Britam* with an M for mouse, by the way. Sounds like 'Britain'... but the memo reads, '*We've got a new offer. It's about Syria again. Qataris propose an attractive deal and swear that the idea is approved by Washington. We'll have to deliver CW to Homs, a Soviet origin g-shell from Libya similar to those that Assad should have. They want us to deploy our Ukrainian personnel that should speak Russian and make a video record. Frankly, I don't think it's a good idea but the sums proposed are enormous. Your opinion?*'"

"My opinion?" Fletcher asked. "I think..."

Eddie interrupted, "It's part of the memo, Fletch. '*Your opinion?*' is the final line. And it's dated from January of this year."

"Well it's chilling because it was almost a year ago exactly that Barack made his 'red line' comment during a debate. The email in your hand was hacked and I don't know that it matters that it's a hoax or not. *The Syrian Electronic Army has been alleged to put out counter-propaganda.* Why do this? It's too specific. It looks like it might be another false flag operation. It fits in with everything else. What did that man say? 'More money can be made in one day of war than a full year of peace'? I don't know that it's economically accurate but it might be another ruse by the Military Industrial Complex. The children really

died. *I'm sure of that.* We're looking at yet another *Gulf of Tonkin*, though. We're being drawn in. Do you agree? Am I off?"

Eddie put the printed email in the envelope and set it on the dash. "It's not just that. The Russians are cautioning us that we better get a UN resolution. *We all know it wouldn't fly.* Not only would Russia veto attacking Assad, I'm sure China would as well. All it takes is one veto from the five permanent members of the *Security Council*." Eddie almost wished he was a UN inspector so he could see first hand what was going on. He was frustrated trying to reach a conclusion based off internet information and a foreboding elderly man in a grocery store parking lot. "This is yet another attack on '*rule of law*' as much as anything else. We're one step closer to a one-world dictator commanding destruction on whims and deception. Maybe the email was fabricated by some goofball wanting to throw a monkey wrench in the grand machine. If it's yet another false flag matter, then it's making me feel like a house fly buzzing around a sleeping person's ear. What power do we have anymore? It's tragic that civilians were gassed. What can we do?"

"Eddie?" Fletcher knew the cabin was less than a minute away. "I don't want you to tell Vivian about this. I'm going to go on another assignment. She's had her fill for now. I don't want her to mentally burst. You just pretend that we don't know anything about underlying motives. We'll just bring up facts that anyone knows about from watching TV. Four US destroyers are heading in and the British are deploying jet fighters in Cypress."

"*Good deal.* Do you want us to come with you on?" Eddie checked on Nancy in the back.

"There was a hotel that fell through a sinkhole near Disney World. There were also a bunch of trees out there caught on film falling right into the ground. We'll head to central Florida and check out the swamps." Eddie pulled into the driveway.

"I love alligators!" Nancy said. "You're not supposed to flush the babies down the toilet because they grow into huge monsters inside of sewers."

"I think I heard that one before," Eddie agreed. They unloaded the groceries. On the other side of the planet, United States' naval vessels prepared for another military intervention.

Tad, Brent and Ramon stayed behind in Dagmar. They prepared for *Doomsday* and they hiked. Eddie, Nancy, Fletch and Viv took a *Greyhound* to Florida. They went from Toronto through Detroit, Chicago, Nashville and Atlanta. The idea was to feel out the so-called Atlantic Corridor as it developed since the passage of NAFTA. Conspiracy theorists often spoke of the eventual One World Government preceded by the European Union and the North American Union. Maps were posted online featuring different highways from Mexico through the United States to Canada. One showed the Super Corridor skimming through Kansas. In place of a directional arrow, a dagger was superimposed stabbing through the heart of the continental USA. Eddie sifted through the papers in the manila envelope he had been given. He was told by Fletcher not to mention the hacked email from Britam. Eddie found something conversational, "Did you know that it would take two house flies less than a half year to fill the planet to our armpits if every egg lived to maturity and reproduced?"

"Wow!" Fletcher sat across the aisle from Eddie. Vivian and Nancy

were on the far ends at the windows. "Tell me more."

"Webster Tarpley—the guy *Vivian was talking about*—thinks Thomas Malthus has something to do with the death camps around the country." Eddie observed a sign welcoming passengers to Florida. "Malthus wrote a paper in 1798 named '*Essay on the Principle of Population*'. Whoever those Carlyle and Bilderberg people are, they think we're behaving like unchecked house flies."

"What keeps it from happening?" Nancy asked. "Why aren't there flies up to our armpits?"

"*Carrying capacity*," Eddie said. He handed his sheet to her. "Resources. Competition."

"The Bilderbergs are our competition?" Nancy looked at the sheet she was given. "Wolves keep populations of deer from exploding. It says they have a fluctuating carrying capacity. 'Man thought his carrying capacity was unlimited,' this thing says. 'The *One Percent* believes its their duty to impose a carrying capacity before the masses ravage the planet like wild locusts.'" She handed the paper back to Eddie. "I don't know what to say. I don't want house flies everywhere... but are these dudes supposed to be trying to kill everybody?"

"One of those documents says we were judged as a country. We don't deserve good lives. That's why they're treating us like lepers." Eddie looked forward to being on an airboat. He had seen them many times on television but hadn't taken a ride on one yet. Across the bus aisle, Vivian's head rested on Fletcher's shoulder. She slept deeply. "What are the four kinds of chemical weapons?" Eddie went back to his folder. "*Here*. Choking, blister, nerve and blood."

Fletcher shushed Eddie. He could feel Viv waking up. "What was that you were saying about nepotism? Dan Quayle has a son named *Ben* who made it to Congress?"

Vivian looked outside of her window. "Are we almost there yet?"

"Yes," Fletcher said. "Eddie has a list of sinkholes where we'll visit." They made it to Orlando and checked into the Sheraton. The following day, they were investigating the remnants of the Summer Bay Resort in Clermont, Florida. Before the Sun set, they were on an airboat skidding along everglade waters. "A week ago in Louisiana, trees collapsed into the swamp and it appeared as though they had been chopped down by *Swamp Thing* lumberjacks... but it was only a sinkhole."

"They're all over the place out here," Eddie said.

"Darling?" Fletcher felt like a lucky man. He watched Viv's dark hair blow around. He thought about Beyonce's hair getting caught in a fan during a concert. "Vivian? I would feel more comfortable if you would sit further away from the propeller." Vivian scooted forward then Fletcher told her, "I have good news."

"*What is it?*" she asked.

"I gave a few months worth of photos to your dad when we were in White Rock. I've felt like such a *mooch* over these years... at least for periods here and there. He said he was close to getting me something legit, maybe a coffee table book with Putnam. I got a text message from him a little while ago. All it said was 'it's a go' but I think it means I might have a life of my own. I might be independent. I appreciate how your father has supported us over the

years. I gave him the Sumatra stuff and the Beech Grove work. I even gave him the Polaroid I took of you when we went to South America.” Fletcher tapped his front right pocket. “I felt like Linus carrying a blanket. I don’t know what’ll be in the book... but I might be able to tell people that I’m a professional photographer.”

“I’m happy for you, Fletcher.” Vivian scooted next to him. “What will that mean to us as a couple? I never meant to trap you. I think it’s horrific when I hear that women skip their pills in order to get pregnant. I wouldn’t do that.” Vivian was glad to be in swampland. She didn’t expect to see any alligators but was hopeful that a few would spring up.

“I don’t like believing that I’m not pulling my weight. I was on the CIA payroll when Cornelius was crushed and I thought you were pancaked in that demolition. I don’t like that line of work. *It’s not me.* I want to believe that I’m putting as much into this world as I’m taking out.” Fletch patted Viv’s thigh. “We could open up a restaurant like you wanted to do in high school. We can go through our dreams from yesteryear and we can get things done.”

“I’m happy... like I said.” Vivian couldn’t put her finger on it but she knew that something was wrong. “We’ll celebrate when we get back.” She thought about mustard gas, sarin and phosgene. *No one has said a word about Syria since we left Toronto,* she thought. *Have they lost their conscious? Are they just avoiding the issue? It’s not like us to avoid the day’s news. That’s big right now.* “I could see us opening a grinder shop,” she said. “That would be nice.” She rolled her hair up and pinned it into a ball. She held Fletcher from behind and wished she didn’t feel clueless and insecure.

Fletcher Browne heard rumbling in the sky. He looked up. There were only clouds.

“I’ll work for you,” Nancy said. “At your sandwich shop.”

Eddie Callypso thought he heard the rotor of a helicopter.

“What’s going on?” Vivian looked upward. “Do you hear something? What are you guys looking for?”

The noise became louder.

“What is it?” Nancy asked. She looked to the sky and watched a CH-149 Cormorant burst through low-level stratocumulus billowy plumes. The loud rescue copter hovered above the airboat then a rope was tossed down. One by one, three men in army fatigues lowered themselves onto the deck in front of Viv and Fletch.

“*Shazbot?!!*” Fletcher screamed. “Is that you?! I thought you got exploded in New Mexico!” Fletcher was startled at what he was seeing. *Shazbot made it out,* he thought. *Wait. Something’s wrong.* The other two men took off their helmets. They also looked identical to Shazbot.

“My name is Alvin Browne,” the first *S-2026* unit said. “I have identical programming as your departed chum, Shazbot Browne. I also have his memories and that’s how I know you are a dear friend. I am one of many *S-2026* machines, ‘S’ standing for the original unit, *Shazbot*. You may think you are experiencing a flashback, of sorts, because I do not have enough life experience yet to behave with my own original personality. Time is short, though. I am accompanied by Brad and Caleb Browne. You can guess that you are the inspiration for our provided surnames.”

“What’s this about?” Vivian asked. “Where is Dinah? I know she

was...”

“*Ka Blowwie.*” Brad made an “explosion” motion with his two hands. “She is scattered all along a certain stretch of a New Mexico desert.”

“No. I mean... why didn’t you create another?” Vivian felt the face of Alvin. *It feels just like Shazbot.*

“Why did God create Adam before Eve?” Caleb asked. “Why is the Sun hot and the Moon just a rock with no use?”

This is definitely the same programming as Shazbot, Viv observed. “I’m supposing you guys want to blow this taco stand?”

“Blow this taco stand? Of course!” Alvin danced similar to Tony Manero in Saturday Night Fever. He pointed up to the sky then down to the deck. He repeated the motion a few times then locked his fingers and started to wave his forearms.

Caleb signaled to the pilot. A rope ladder dropped down. “*Come with us!*”

“What about our boat?” Eddie asked. *Screw this. We’ll figure it out later. Uncle Sam has sent robots and I don’t know how to say “no”.*

Nancy, Eddie, Fletch and Viv climbed into the CH-149. “We’ve already contacted the place where you rented the airboat. *National emergency.* We paid all your bills and I left a GPS device stuck under one of the seats below. They’ll get their boat back.” Alvin pulled up the rope and ladder then shut the side door. “The pilot’s name is ‘*Eugene*’ and the droid who lowered the ladder down is ‘*Finnegan*’.”

“What’s the emergency?!” Fletcher watched the airboat become a tiny dot in a large marsh.

“We must take you to Damascus!” Alvin reached into a canvas bag. “*Rice cakes?*” He offered food to the two couples then pulled out bottles of water. “*Drink?*”

“*Syria?! Why do we need to be in Syria?!?*” Fletcher tried to compete with the roar of the helicopter.

“*I said Damascus!*” Alvin popped open a bottle and drank. “We are talking World War III here! The Russians are warning the US military to not intervene. As far as I’m concerned, the concept of the nation is gone. I repeat, the concept of the nation is gone!”

“Have you been speaking with my father?!” Vivian asked. “He told me that everything’s breaking down into city-states. Everything’s a wasteland in his eyes if you don’t live in an important urban center.”

“We’re not there yet. You studied *thermite* when Shazbot was with you. This adventure is about *sarin*. We’re talking chemicals again, but this time, we’re going into the illusions of war. Where were the WMDs in Iraq? Who stood to profit from these massive military excursions? Who stands to benefit now? Are we cutting off the nose to save the face?!” Alvin could register the confusion in the humans around him. “You are the only pure hearts left. You are the only ones willing to die for a peaceful and better world.”

“Why couldn’t you do this yourself?!” Fletcher wondered if it was part of Alvin’s programming. *The odds that we’re the only ones left? That can’t be. What’s the deal with everyone else? The Occupy protesters? The Anonymous dudes on YouTube. Are they fakes? Are their hearts just a tad smaller than ours?*

Is this robot exaggerating the situation?

"Do it ourselves? How long did it take for Shazbot to feel *real* to you? A day? A week? A month? We are programmed to do good deeds, but you must remember the learning curve that Shazbot experienced."

"Yes! I get it!" Nancy had an insight. "Molly Cyrus totally just became a woman in front of the world at the VMAs the other night! *She's like in Madonna's category now*. We watched her grow up, though! She's no longer an awkward little weirdo daughter from a one hit wonder country singer."

"Well said!" Vivian patted Nancy. She asked Alvin, "What are we to do? *Talk to Assad?* Cruise along with UN inspectors?"

"I will repeat this over and over: *Art is a reflection of life*. Jules Verne wrote about trips to the Moon and voyages under the sea before Neil Armstrong and submarines were around. You didn't go totally insane when Shazbot came into your life because you had watched *Terminator* before. You're accustomed to the idea of robotics already. 'Asimo' is an incredible robot built by Honda you can watch on YouTube. He runs. He hops. As far as the *Ninety-nine Percent* are concerned, he's the best thing humankind has to offer. George Lucas and James Cameron are part of the *One Percent*, though. You all have been exposed to the *One Percent* and you know a different reality than the common person. James Cameron knew about *Shazbot* and he knows a million other things he cannot directly tell the public. Instead, he creates fantastic movies which shed light on what's really going on behind the scenes. *Avatar*? That's what I'm getting at. 'Kuratus' was shown to the public last year. A thirteen-foot-high four-ton robotic exoskeleton designed to facilitate a human. That was for the *Ninety-nine Percent* to see, though. We have something for each of you that will blow your mind!"

"Alvin?" Fletcher grabbed hold of the android's shoulder. "We are losing people in the US government left and right! A few months ago, agent Cornelius Stuart was smashed in the Paul Bunyan Hotel... because Shazbot believed humans couldn't get their shit straight! Just a week ago, you dropped his replacement out of a flying aircraft! Could you understand that there might be a trust issue here?"

"First of all, if the United States defies international law *again*, we can believe that it went beyond a *Rogue* president. Human institutions have operated throughout history. Mistakes are made. When George W Bush said 'screw you' to the United Nations in 2003, a mistake was made. History clearly *shows* that a mistake was made. On the premise of weapons of mass destruction, the USA and a coalition of the willing slaughtered hundreds of thousands of Iraqi citizens. A mistake. If an intelligent person or government does it again, it is now a habit. This is a habit we must break."

"Shazbot was such a *fan* of W when we first got him. Why are you critical of him?" Vivian rubbed Fletcher's back. Fletch released his grip of Alvin.

"I have the same programming as Shazbot in regards to language and a few other things. I have his *memory* as well. Shazbot learned. He was programmed to believe that government officials behaved in accordance to *Constitutional* law. During the months that he was with you, he observed countless hypocrisy and contradictions. No one wants children to die of *sarin*, for example. Why did the United States give satellite intelligence to Iraq in the late eighties when they used chemical weapons against Iran?" Alvin didn't expect so

much confusion. “Have you heard of Agent Orange?”

“Okay. I understand what you’re getting at. Our government does it over and over. They knew Pearl Harbor was gonna happen and they let people die. In 2008, declassified documents show that the *Gulf of Tonkin* incident was staged. Cronkite called it a phantom attack. I’m supposed to know this is happening again.” *I can’t get my mind off the dying children. That wasn’t fake. Who would do such a thing?* Fletcher wanted to consult with Viv. His nerves were jittery. He wanted to settle on a plan of action but no idea would lock.

“I know you got our message,” Alvin said. “The old man in the grocery store parking lot? He was one of our guys. We listened to your conversations during your trip to Florida while on the *Greyhound*. I am proud of you guys. You really want to win in life!”

“*Listened?*” Fletcher asked. He pulled out his iPhone. “Through this, right?”

“Yep. We knew how to track you because of Vivian’s phone in particular.” Alvin reached into his pocket. “I have one too, you know? It’s to blend in with the crowds. I don’t need a stinkin’ iPhone to make a call, though.”

“If you’re like Shazbot, you have Wikipedia in your circuit-filled brain, you also have wifi and GPS.” Eddie rubbed Nancy’s leg. “Do you happen to like amusement parks?”

“Amusement parks? I have no need for amusement parks when I’m flying in *this* machine!” Alvin said.

“I like amusement parks!” Brad chipped.

“Where are we going?” Vivian demanded. “I mean, if the United States is fast becoming an internationally known outlaw state, we can’t head to DC, right?”

“Our headquarters are in Anguilla in the Caribbean. Every great United States businessman has a bank account in an island near us! Emilio Mola coined the phrase ‘*fifth column*’. He marched toward Madrid in the 1936 Spanish Civil War and took four columns of troops with him! The *fifth* column pertains to the screaming supporters already inside the city! Over the years, this has come to be referred as dissident activists, protesters and sympathizers. They undermine authority from within. I was created by a Northrop Grumman clandestine subsidiary called *Rossum Machinery International*, or RMI for short. General Dynamics, Navistar, United Technologies, Raytheon, Lockheed Martin, Textron and Boeing all have corollary operations. Every person since 1776 knew it could happen. One day, our true democracy becomes a tyranny. Every contractor has a hidden *fifth column*.” Alvin was pleased that Fletcher and Viv seemed less confused. “For every four aircraft carriers built for the US government, one was made and sold for pennies to a third-world country who we could turn to in our hour of need. How do we hide such things from the Chinese and Russians? We don’t. We build smaller models sometimes. In our case, we are heading to a helicopter carrier off the coast of Florida.”

“But what about our own military?” Vivian asked. “Is this a case of nine eleven when we appear only as phantom blips on NORAD screens... except the *opposite*?”

“*Something like that*,” Alvin agreed. “One hand never knows what the other’s doing in this government, you might’ve observed. Mohamed Atta trained

at Maxwell Air Force Base in Montgomery, Alabama! You would think that information would've spread like wildfire after nine eleven but it was lost in the mix. The *Ninety-nine Percent* are getting robbed blind but they are full of dog crap factoids. They know who won each season of 'Big Brother' on CBS but they don't know who the real *Big Brother* is in real life! They laugh at people like you and believe in pseudo-science. The sixty-two story *First Interstate Building* burned in Los Angeles for more than six hours but it did not collapse into its own footprint as the forty-seven story Solomon Building, *WTC 7*, did in New York. The larger Twin Towers were at least hit by airplanes! They were designed to take multiple hits from airliners, by the way. In 2004, the tallest skyscraper in Caracas had the top twenty of fifty floors burn but it did not collapse. In 2005, the thirty-three story Winsor Tower was charred in Madrid... but it did not come down."

"What do you know about Tupac Shakur?" Nancy asked. "Was it the government? Is he still alive?"

"*Tupac*?" Alvin asked.

Brad opened his mouth in a large O. "California Love" started playing. After a few seconds, he asked, "Is this who you're talking about? I have nothing. I know nothing about that."

"I thought you have Wikipedia in your head!" Nancy slugged Brad.

"*Right!* He died of internal bleeding at 4:03pm Las Vegas time on September 13, 1996." Brad rubbed his bicep. "*Charlie horse!*"

"You're no use!" Nancy said.

The group landed on a carrier manned by many *S-2026* units. There was an Apache and a few Harrier Jump Jets on the deck. They streamed into the Atlantic Ocean and got sleep. The next morning they ate breakfast and cruised along. In the afternoon, Alvin gathered them together, "I have news."

"What is it?" Vivian asked. She remembered the Carnival cruise they took in the Caribbean earlier in the year. She looked out at the endless water and thought, *We are moving so much faster than we did on vacation.*

"World War III might be averted. Your service in Damascus might not be needed. Today, the Obama administration has announced that the federal government will ease up its restrictions on states that have legalized marijuana."

"*So!* What's that got to do with anything?" Fletcher thought he had gotten used to *Shazbot* when he was around. He found himself frustrated again. He tried to shake it.

"They're throwing the public a bone. Polls have shown that less than ten percent of Americans want a war with Syria. Nonetheless, the *machine* run by the One Percent has pressed the buttons of the media and Congress. They thought British prime minister David Cameron could ram a resolution through Parliament but he was blocked. As Labour Party leader Ed Miliband stated, 'Evidence should precede decision, not decision precede evidence.' *Cooler heads have prevailed.* We can all believe that the British have regained form. The United States, on the other hand, still suffers from fascist collective mental illness spread by Bush and Cheney."

"But they threw the public a bone, right?" Nancy asked. "We might get snapped out of the spell and be a regular democracy again! Am I right?"

Alvin crossed his arms, "Telling someone that you've crossed they're so-

called *red line* reeks of the cowboy thinking of the prior administration. There is still a process. Other democratically elected figures still need to be in the loop. You can't just tell a leader of a foreign nation that he's ticked you off so you're gonna send bombs his way! The core of it is this: In 2008, Iran and Syria agreed on a defense pact. Syria doesn't have a crap load of oil reserves, as Arab countries go. They rank thirty-fifth in the world... but their partner, Iran, ranks *third* in the world. The idea is that Britam, a UK defense company, sets Assad up on the chemical attack. The US responds in the guise of humanitarian support knowing their gross failures in Iraq, Egypt and Libya. Something like Kosovo is proposed where there are no boots on the ground and no Americans are hurt. We all know where this spirals, though."

"*Britam?*" Viv asked. "Am I missing something?"

"I tried to hide it from you," Fletcher told her. "We came across a crazy-looking man in the grocery store parking lot in Toronto. He was sent by these guys." He waved his arms at the many S-2026 units around him. "*Qatar* wanted to frame the Syrian government. We didn't want to stress you out any more than you already were."

"It's a mess. But at least we're not speeding towards a world war now, right?" Vivian pinched herself and felt a tiny prick. *Not a dream*, she thought.

"What happens now? Do we still get to mess around with the robot exoskeletons? Do we get dropped off and continue on our tour of Florida sinkholes?" Fletcher tried to console Viv by rubbing her arm but she pulled away. She was tense and disoriented.

"Well? We wait. This could've spiraled into Earth's worse nightmare. The UK was the USA's partner in crime. Neocons openly hate the UN. 'International community' to them means *NATO*, if not solely the secretive workings of the Council on Foreign Relations. They've been having these pissing contests. There are seven countries that haven't joined the 1997 UN convention to ban chemical weapons: Myanmar, Angola, North Korea, South Sudan, Egypt, Israel and Syria. This young century, so far, it's been shoot now and ask questions later. *What third grader developed the US foreign policy?* The United Nations inspectors will do their work. The nations will agree on something accordingly." Alvin unfolded his arms and his fingers fiddled with his chin. He looked into the sky, "Have you heard the story of Puff the Magic Dragon?"

"*Of course!*" Fletcher said. "I loved the cartoon and I used to sing the song. *Puff the magic draaaaaagooon...*" He sung then asked, "Are we going to Honalee? With all the bat shit adventures we have, it wouldn't surprise me at all."

Alvin stopped toying with his chin and looked somberly at Fletch, "The British Empire is Puff, you see? The Americans had this incredible free reign while they enabled their reckless activity. It was an unhealthy co-dependency, though. When Puff left and lost his scales and all, Jackie Draper turned into Jackie Paper and became a depressed little kid."

"*That's not how the story goes at all!*" Viv said.

"My ability to formulate original anecdotes is at forty-three percent capacity. It will become better in time." Alvin turned from Viv to Fletcher. "The point is that the United States has got to grow up or else it will be all alone in the world."

"We still have *France*," Fletcher said. "And Turkey, too."

"France? How long is that going to last? The last time this situation presented itself, Bush boycotted French goods and we all had to call our food '*freedom fries*' and '*freedom dressing*'. That George W Bush was a real cock. Yeah, there will be support if the US starts shooting it up again. I thought you were down on America for all the death camps and heavy-handed surveillance programs." Alvin pointed his finger at Fletcher's chest.

"It's sympathy is all. I don't know why this happens. One minute our own government's kicking the crap out of us and everyone's mad... then we hear that no one wants to be our friend anymore. Our economy is going to collapse at any second. I can't understand why we can't find balance. *We used to have balance.*" Fletcher nonchalantly swatted Alvin's finger away.

"How about a helicopter flight to get our minds off of this?" Alvin suggested.

"*I'm with you!*" Nancy said. "I don't want to think about World War III until I see bombs dropping around me."

The group agreed to fly around the Atlantic. Before they boarded, Fletcher asked Alvin, "What does the 2026 stand for? Is it a random number?"

"The 'S' stands for *Shazbot*, as I have said. The '2026'? That will be the year that androids have equal rights with humans, if not more." Alvin whistled to Eugene and Finnegan. They loaded into the *Cormorant* and ascended into the sky. When they landed, their carrier did an about face and headed to *Rossum Machinery International* headquarters in Anguilla.

It was Friday afternoon and the beginning of the Labor Day weekend. The girls splashed in the deep blue ocean waters. Fletcher and Eddie lounged under an umbrella sipping on piña colodas poured into coconut bowls. Nine eleven was less than two weeks away. Certain days took on meaning to dissidents and terrorists. The *Boston Bombings* happened on the anniversaries of the Waco siege and the Federal Building explosion in Oklahoma City. These events coincided with the federal tax deadline and the observed commemoration of the beginning of the American Revolution in Concord. Conspiracy theorists purported that the BP spill was not a simple accident and it coincided with Earth Day, an observation a week after the other disastrous events. For a full decade, September eleventh was attached to the Twin Towers, Pentagon, Shanksville and the madness of the day in 2001. On the eleventh anniversary, diplomats in Libya were killed by an armed angry mob. On September 11, 2013 the *X Factor* was slated for a season premier... but on *September ninth*, peace officers planned a march in DC. There were rumblings that they'd bring their guns and something could go horribly wrong. Extreme bloggers believed some police officers in street clothes might be angry enough to seek out the president. The girls floated in Caribbean waters while the guys talked about the issues of the day. "Obama's not even gonna be in Washington that day," Eddie said. The Sun was shining hot but they were protected in the shade.

"Where's he gonna be?" Fletcher asked. "*Syria?* The UN?"

"A fundraiser... in California. I think it's funny. I really think about three or five percent of the officers want an armed revolution at this point. I think they fantasize about storming the White House or Capitol Hill with guns and forcing our leaders to read their complaints. They think they're gonna be heard. They expect some incredible congressman to say, 'Wow guys! I never thought of

things that way! I'm going to concede to all your demands and everything will be back to normal tomorrow morning!" Eddie waved to Nancy. It looked like she was trying to tell him something but he couldn't make it out. "Alvin was making fun of the GOP on our way to this island. In some ways, he's just like *Shazbot*, but in other ways he's way different. He called the Republicans a bunch of 'yelling bitches'. He said the Democrats know how to behave when their guy isn't in the White House. He quoted Lindsey Graham's critique of Barack's Syrian policy." Eddie tried a Southern accent, "*The idea of telling the Syrians we're gonna attack, how we're gonna attack, what we're gonna attack with and when we're gonna stop is just crazy to me!*" That's what separates us from terrorists, though! We're civilized... or we're supposed to be! We told Iraq the very minute we would attack in both *Gulf wars*."

"They are hypocrites," Fletcher said. "They are *haughty*. They think they're beyond reproach. They can't win elections any more... at least not without *Diebold* rigged computers tipping the balance in their favor. They're very scary." Fletcher was glad that they wound up on a tropical island. Vivian looked like she was truly enjoying herself. He had been concerned about her. "Alvin said that the hacked email taken from *Britam* is starting to look like a forgery. John Kerry spoke about some of the evidence against al-Assad. It included satellite images which showed where the chemical weapons were launched from and where they landed." Fletch tried to organize his thoughts. "I don't know what to think anymore. *Congress* doesn't meet for another couple of weeks."

"Congress? I keep getting the feeling that they intentionally present decisive issues to the public... *like abortion during campaign season*. Half the people are gonna wind up on side A and half are gonna wind up on side B. I don't think they want us coming to a consensus on many things." Eddie stood up. "Are you ready to join the women?" The guys ran to the ocean and fooled around with their girlfriends.

Fletcher twirled Viv around. "Are you having fun or what? Word is that we're gonna see the exoskeleton suits even though we don't have to do battle in Syria!"

Vivian kissed her man. "Did you and Eddie figure a way for permanent world peace?" She walked away from the water and headed to her wicker lounge chair.

Fletch followed. "We think it's gonna go one of two ways. Speaker Boehner's gonna have a boner for a new war because his contractor constituents will stuff his pockets with money. *Or they're gonna leave Obama standing because of political revenge or jealousy*. Boehner fussed about Libyan action and wanted to impeach the president a couple of years ago. If we strike without UN or congressional approval, someone might make a stink. *These guys have been all about whims, keep in mind*. Kosovo is there as a precedent but these fellows often are all too selective about what they want to see."

"I can't wait until it's all over." Viv reached down into an ice bucket for an orange popsicle. "I mean, life might go back to normal. Britain decided to debate and vote. I like that idea. We used to do that! I'm kind of fearful that Boehner has his hard on for the war and pushes too far! Can that happen? We mean to do only air strikes then the alliance that Syria has with Iran kicks in, right? Iran has threatened retaliation against Israel. *Can't this still lead to World*

War III?"

"I will not worry about it as long as we're in this paradise. *Palm trees. Clean shore and mesmerizing ocean water. I don't want to leave.*" Fletcher and Viv chatted while Eddie and Nancy swam around.

Rossum Machinery International's two-story headquarters were located a half mile from the shore and the building strongly resembled a hotel resort. It even had a check-in desk as a facade with an attractive receptionist. A few vacationers stumbled across the place once in a blue Moon but they were usually told that there were no vacancies or that there was off season remodeling going on. The place was not listed on any *getaway* web site. The upper floor actually featured office space for executives. Saying RMI headquarters were merely two stories was not accurate. Employees with security clearance could travel downstairs where there were three basement floors featuring laboratories and top secret projects. After Fletch and Viv had enough of the beach, they were taken by Alvin to the lab where *S-2026* units were being manufactured. "It's like Halloween. Imagine that we're a start up company making masks. Right now, our forte is the face you see in front of you—the same one that *Shazbot* had. We're going to diversify, though. All of the females we make this year will look like Dinah. Next year? They can look like anyone."

"Next year? If there *is* a next year!" Fletcher was in awe of the process of android building. One *S-2026* assisted a human engineer with the assembly. "Alvin? At what point do you believe you can do this without human assistance? At what point will *S-2026* units be exclusively building identical clones of themselves?"

"We can do it now. We have a partnership with humans and there is no need to change the way things have been. Status quo is fine. We will work on other forms of artificial intelligence. NASA has made an android that goes about like a gorilla. It can climb ladders. Humans like to see their form being replicated. Why do we need synthetic arms and legs, though? Imagine if we can put fake brains in massive machinery... like that three-story truck in Alberta, Canada—the one going through the tar oil. Human environmental groups talk about 'peak production' and they say that we expend more oil than we extract in certain places... like the shale mines in Colorado. But what if humans didn't have to run the place? What if the machinery ran itself? What if we plugged in to a solar panel or a windmill?" Alvin walked along to a stairway.

Viv followed behind Fletch and Alvin. "Eddie and Nancy are missing out. Maybe they're having a better time on the motor boat, though." The underground lair seemed extraordinarily high tech. Vivian wondered where the elevators were. *Why are we using stairs?* she wondered.

The second underground floor featured many scientists in white robes. Most of them worked in front of microscopes. "*Do you know what nano-technology is?*" Alvin asked. "Rossum Machinery is as far along as anyone. We are at the cutting edge of all developments right now."

"Honda has a robot named 'Asimo' that runs and hops around," Fletcher recalled. "That is what the public sees. I've heard of nanotech because of the media through NBC and NetFlix. In the series '*Revolution*', the world goes dark without electricity because of nano-bots. They are tiny machines that self-replicate like viruses. On NetFlix, I watched a documentary called '*Apocalypse*

How'. It was about the many ways how life on our planet will possibly end. *Gray goo*. I can't remember the term they used. I think they said that these nano-bots could go out of control. They'll turn *everything* into gray goo."

"That's science fiction!" Alvin said. He laughed. "So was the *Moon* landing at a time!" He seemed to think about it. "I suppose that could happen."

"What's going on here?" Vivian asked.

"These fine gentlemen are creating miniature factories. They are building things at the *atomic* level! They can build simple machines that the naked eye cannot see. We can use these nano-bots to travel into your blood stream. They can unclog arteries. They can keep us healthy and we can live longer." Alvin paused. "Do you see how I start to behave as if I'm a human like you? Pardon me. My body has no use for nano-bots... but yours might."

"There's a dark side to these things." Fletcher walked behind one of the scientists and tried to figure out what he was watching on a computer monitor. "It *looks* like a virus. Is it a virus?"

"Viruses have no metabolism," Alvin said. "They invade a host cell and screw with the RNA. If we understand the chemical compositions of these non-living substances, why should we not try to re-create them?" Alvin walked along. "There is a dark side, yes. They can be programmed to heal and they can be programmed to kill... just like nuclear materials. Cheap energy? Ultimate destruction? What's it really matter?" Alvin reached another staircase and went down.

"You are assembling the *S-2026* units by hand, right now. Lamborghinis are put together by hand. Are you working on a mass-producing facility? Is there one already? Ford made the *Model T* like IHOP makes pancakes. Is there going to be a day that thousands or millions of *S-2026* robots are made every year?" Vivian still trailed Alvin and Fletch and made her way down to the lowest floor.

Alvin stopped and turned toward Fletcher and Viv. "You understand calculus, do you not? Life is not as simple factoring in one or two variables to understand economics, for example. There's a lot more going on than obvious indicators. A real estate investor might pay attention to the lumber industry, for example. If lumber stocks go up, it's likely that there is a demand for wood to build new houses. Economists look at these indicators and they think they can see clear into the future. But what's going on in Syria right now? What if the US strikes then Iran sends missiles to Israel? The start of World War III would render *many* domestic indicators obsolete in a second."

"You didn't answer my question, Alvin." Vivian peered across the room. There were mice in cages. There were biological experiments going on. "Are there other places like this? Are you learning to build *S-2026* units more efficiently?"

"World War III would start on September twenty-fifth," Alvin said. "I have *Google* in my wired brain. I get *YouTube*, *Yahoo*, *AboveTopSecret.com* and millions of other channels. South Dakota senator Sheldon Songstad has been connecting the dots. The signs were there for *nine eleven*, by the way. William Cooper knew New York would be attacked and the government would peg bin Laden as the patsy. Alex Jones knew this, too. *Fox* aired a show in March of 2001 called '*The Lone Gunmen*' in which terrorists plotted to hijack a jumbo jet with the intent to crash it into one of the Twin Towers. The seventy-plus *fusion*

cells were created around the country so that the same mistakes wouldn't be made again. It was said that local law enforcement, the FBI, NSA and so on were all on different pages. Many people believe these *cells* have participated in non-American activities like pegging *Ron Paul* supporters as dangerously suspicious people for some reason. *A bumper sticker can get cops on your ass, nowadays.* Back to the point, senator Songstad noticed scores of ominous activity from FEMA and DHS. One point six billion rounds of ammo. Twenty-eight hundred Russian MRAP vehicles. Millions of antibiotics, water pouches and heater meals to be delivered to FEMA's *Region 3* by October 1, 2013. Region 3 consists of Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Virginia, Delaware, Maryland and Washington, DC. *Washington, DC, guys!* There are already fifteen thousand verified *Russian* troops that were brought in since July... and senator Songstad claimed there are actually three hundred and eighty-six thousand foreign troops here. Language and weapon systems training had to be completed by October first. *There's concern that the MERS coronavirus is at play because the World Health Organization held its second ever emergency meeting recently.* The National Guard must complete its annual training by September thirtieth. US military will not be allowed to leave from September twenty-fifth through October second. The Emergency Broadcast System is planning drills around this time." Alvin turned away and started walking to the far end of the building.

"You're still not answering the question about mass produced androids!" Vivian followed. "Are you saying World War III is around the corner so it doesn't matter? What is it?"

Alvin reached the far wall. He pounded on a large red button with his fist. The wall in front of him split open horizontally and it led to a dark room. Alvin flicked on a switch and stepped in. Fletch and Viv tailed along and the hidden door closed behind them. There was a simple wooden table in the middle with a few chairs around it. There was also a dark red curtain at the far end. Alvin sat down, "I don't know, Vivian. I'm trying to tell you that I have a *bunch* of information in my head... but there is a lot of misinformation. I believe there are mass facilities somewhere in central Africa and South America. I haven't been there yet. I don't know the answer."

"What's behind curtain?" Fletcher asked. He didn't sit with Alvin. Instead, he continued to the far end.

"Open it, Fletcher." Alvin got up. "There is a surprise you'll like."

Fletcher Browne swung open the curtain. There were four robotic exoskeletons of different colors. *Blue, Pink, Yellow and Black.* "What the fuck is this?!" Fletcher Browne never ceased to be amazed by the androids and by the hidden elements of the government. *"They look like Power Ranger uniforms!"*

"It's a disguise," Alvin said. "You hit it on the head. I can drop you into enemy territory with these things. Have you ever heard of 'hidden in plain sight'?" Alvin grabbed the yellow exoskeleton and handed it to Vivian. "It's not as lightweight as a leotard but it doesn't have to be. Once inside, it'll do the running and lifting for you."

Fletcher lifted the black metal uniform out. "How's it work?" He looked for a button.

"It's very intuitive... *like an iPad!*" He looked at Fletcher. "Ready?" He spoke to the uniform, *"Donatello! I command you to open up!"*

The black shell split open from behind and Fletcher stepped into it. “Wow! Try it Vivian!”

“I bet the secret word of mine is one of the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*?” She wanted Alvin to confirm her suspicion. “*Leonardo! I command you to open!*”

The pink unit inside of the closet opened up. “*No, no, no!*” Alvin put his hands up just in case it fell out. “*Leonardo! Shut off!*” The unit closed and Alvin turned around toward Vivian. “*Raphael! Yours is Raphael!*”

Fletcher was inside of his robotic exoskeleton and walking around. “It’s a lot more sleek than the *Avatar* thing. Does it fly? Like *Iron Man*?”

“No! Not yet! I mean, we’re working on it!” Alvin waited for Viv to try hers out.

“You were going to drop us into Damascus with these things?” Vivian felt nervous. “*Raphael! Open up!*” Her unit opened and she slipped inside. She started pouncing around with Fletcher. “What’s the purpose? Is it bullet proof?” She walked and got used to the inner intuitive controls. “Are there sensors inside that detect which way the body is trying to go?”

“Fletcher?” Alvin jogged to Fletcher. “I want you to karate chop the table.”

“*What? I don’t know how to do that!*” The table wasn’t far. Fletcher sized it up. “Here it comes!” He lifted his arm up... then he lowered it to the table. He lifted his arm up again... then he slowly lowered it down. He took deep breaths and concentrated. He lifted his arm. “*Hiiiiiiiiiyyyyy! Yaaahhhhhh!*” Fletcher slammed his arm down and the table shattered into splintered chunks. Fletch smiled. “Vivian? I think I know karate!”

Vivian smiled back. “What else does it do?”

Alvin went back to the closet. There were drawers under each unit. Alvin pulled out helmets and took them to Fletch and Viv. “These provide infrared vision. *Night vision*. They protect against poisonous gasses. They are bullet proof, by the way. They offer communications to one another. You will feel more like a robot as I feel more like a human! It works out for all of us!”

Vivian put her helmet on. There was a mirror off to the side of the closet. She looked at herself. “I feel like one of those *Cylons* from *Battlestar Gallactica*.”

“It can amplify your voice, Vivian.” Alvin said, “Whenever you want something done, say ‘*Raphael*’ first. It can disguise your voice so that you sound robotic and many other things.”

“*Raphael! Lift visor!*” Vivian’s visor slid back into the helmet. “*Raphael! Jump high!*” Vivian squatted then tried to leap toward the twenty-foot high ceiling. She almost touched the top.

“There are gyros in the same places as *S-2026* units.” Alvin explained, “You’ll be like a cat, most the time. You can’t *land* wrong in those suits. It’s like the new cars that put on the brakes on automatically when there’s a child darting out of nowhere.”

“*Raphael! Open up!*” Vivian got out of her yellow unit. “That’s really neat,” she told Alvin. “I need a rest, though.” *I’m crazy*, she thought. *I’m dreaming or I’m crazy. When is this going to stop?*

RMI headquarters had the facade of appearing to be a hotel resort but it

served primarily as a secret development center of top cutting edge military and defense technology. Nonetheless, there were sleeping quarters on the first floor. Fletch and Viv stayed there while Eddie and Nancy went island hopping from Anguilla to the Antilles, Saint Kitts and down to Saint Lucia. It was Labor Day and Alvin had been prepping Fletcher and Viv on various world issues. "It looks like World War III might be on hold," he told them. "President Obama has decided to wait until Congress returns from recess to debate intervention in Syria. Of course, there have been some congressmen that wanted him to behave like a hot-headed dictator. One of them said that he is tying the hands of future presidents by waiting... but I believe he meant that he could be tying the hands of future *dictators*... like the ones from the previous administration." Alvin met with Fletch and Viv in the same room where they tested the robotic exoskeleton outfits. "I want to let you know something." Alvin briefed them around a brand new table. The shards from the one Fletcher smashed were cleaned up and gone. "Anything can change at any moment. You understand *trending*, correct? Yahoo typically has a top ten list of hot topics at their base web page. Well, *World War III* isn't trending as much as it had been in previous days. Things like 'democracy' and 'peace' are on the rise. People believe we might get out of this. If we go to war, at least their elected leaders have a say in it."

"Are you dismissing us?" Fletcher asked. "If we're headed toward peace, we have no more use for you. Should we leave?"

"No. We're not out of the woods yet. I want to tell you about *Nibiru*. Have you heard of it? *Planet X*? It's the same thing. We have discussed *pseudoscience*. We talked about *thermite* and we talked about the falling of the Twin Towers. We've discussed at length the disappearance of supposed wreckage from Shanksville and the Pentagon on nine eleven. You brought up *creation scientists* and the debate between 'young Earth' and 'old Earth' geologists. I think we even starting covering *Scientology* and the possibility that aliens started the human race." Alvin looked at Viv. She seemed distracted or confused. "*Nibiru is imminent*."

"Nibiru is imminent? What does that mean?" Vivian didn't want to be there any longer. The mechanical suits were fun. She wanted to be at her garden in Dagmar.

"Nibiru is this supposed planet the size of Earth. Some conspiracy theorists claim that it is in the same orbit as the one we're in around the Sun. Where is it? Why haven't we seen it through our incredible telescopes? Well, a lady by the name of Nancy Lieder claimed that she was a medium for extra-terrestrials from distant worlds. *She claims that she knows of Nibiru and she says the government is trying to hide it from the populous*. It doesn't matter if Nibiru is actual, you see? It matters that people believe it is actual. According to Lieder and her followers, Nibiru is set to crash into Earth. *The end of all life here*. Nibiru is imminent, you see?" Alvin didn't do much to change Vivian's confused expression.

"Do you believe this is going to happen? I mean, you're a robot and you probably are speaking to the Hubble telescope at this very minute... through your electronic brain and all. Is there going to be an end to life here even if we avert *World War III*?" Vivian rubbed Fletcher's thigh. She believed her bewilderment was spreading to him.

"You made the connection, madam! World War III and Nibiru! It looks like cooler heads are prevailing. How many times will we say that? All of us are still in collective shock of the whim-based past decade. *Nibiru is imminent*. That is a code phrase. If things slip—if *the hot heads regain control and momentum*—we can head quickly down the bottomless spiral. We can head toward *World War III*. Nukes will be flying and underground shelters like this will be vital. *Nibiru is imminent*. Tattoo that in your brain. If you guys leave and if you receive a text message from me saying that '*Nibiru is imminent*', it means the shit has hit the fan. It means that I'm a step ahead of the mainstream media at delivering the most important message ever told to humankind." Alvin noticed that Vivian was eased by the explanation but she seemed to want more. "Stay away from *Region 3*. If you're out in the streets ringing a bell on a street corner telling everyone that *World War III* is breaking out, you will be rounded up. Ironically, you could end up in one of those camps like the one Fletcher documented in Beech Grove. You tell people that *Nibiru is imminent*! Understand? They're not going to go after crack pots as much as they're going to round up people who know the actual truth. Of course, you will only *seem* to be a crack pot. Some of your friends will understand that there's a hidden meaning and others will think you've actually gone off the deep end."

"Okay!" Vivian felt better. "*Nibiru is imminent*! I can do that!" She smiled.

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that," Fletcher said. "*Nibiru is imminent*. I got it." He kissed Vivian then told her, "I really want to catch up with Eddie and Nancy. They're scooting around on a merchant boat and it sounds like they're having a blast."

"That's no ordinary merchant ship," Alvin said. "It's equipped with incredible firepower. It's one of our better vessels." Vivian and Fletcher thanked Alvin for his information and his time. They walked out of the room and planned to do some sailing. Fifteen minutes later, they were aboard the same CH-149 *Cormorant* that had lifted them from a swamp in Florida. Finnegan flew them out to the boat where Eddie and Nancy were fishing from near Barbados. After lowering themselves to the deck, they casted out fishing lines of their own. Eddie greeted them then said, "I'm in paradise. I never want to leave. No offense, but I'd rather not hear any updates about what violence has happened in any distant land." Eddie squeezed a lime into his *Corona Extra*.

"I have to tell you one thing... because I think you'd be interested." Fletcher pulled out a beer from an Igloo ice chest. "I worked on that death camp... and no one would believe me if I didn't bring home pictures." He popped his bottle open and went for the salt and lime. "The concentration camps? We've heard of them and we've seen them. *What was that one in Texas?* It was called 'residential housing' or something... but there was barbed wire all over the place, right?" The breeze was strong outside. *Eddie is right about this place feeling like paradise*, Fletcher thought. "The camps, according to Alvin, are the posh gated communities in California!"

"*What?*" Eddie laughed. "Are you joking? Did Alvin cross a fuse?"

"It's a quarantined section of the state. It's how conservatives jail rich liberals. Diseases, to them, aren't just *NIHI* and so forth. *Communism* is a disease... like alcoholism!" Fletch swigged his beer. "*Liberalism* is a disease!"

Did you know that Ann Coulter said we should fingerprint all environmentalists? Yeah! They are trying to quarantine the worst—the *most extreme*—liberals in the country! They create phantom monsters. The paparazzi? A lot of them are hired by conservatives just to *screw* with rich Hollywood liberals! They don't care about the photos they take! They happen to get paid, but that's a byproduct. They're main goal is to harass. They want liberals, Democrats and all of their enemies to feel unsafe. They want them to spend their wads on prisons."

"By prisons, you mean the gated communities? It's a fancy-looking prison... to a conservative, at least." Eddie pondered the idea. "We've been talking a lot about things hidden in plain sight. This would be one of them."

"It doesn't make sense," Nancy said. "There are conservatives living in those communities. You're talking about Justin Bieber, right? The place he lives in Calabasas?"

"Well, there are deputies in jails. Just because you're in a jail doesn't mean that you're a criminal. Someone has to run the place. Don't you think these liberals who fell into big money believed they could experience a much more carefree life? They always have a neighbor telling 'em to turn down the music, though. *Don't drive so fast*. The whole place is a police state. It's not just the slums. It's everywhere." Fletcher checked his line. He thought he might have a bite. Turned out to be nothing or else it just got away.

"I don't believe it," Eddie said. "I think they *mean* for these places to become voluntary prisons... but there's a way out. There's *got* to be a way out."

"What's the crime?" Nancy asked. "What did *liberals* do that was so wrong?"

"According to Ann Coulter, liberals are mentally ill. Then again, she believes we should convert Muslim countries to Christianity. How? Carpet bombing them is fine. It's full of contradictions." Fletch's first beer went down quick and he got another.

"Are we *centrists* again, Fletcher? We used to be centrists, right?" Vivian got a tube of suntan oil and started to apply it to Fletch's back.

He didn't answer her question. "She said that it was *treason* whenever Bush would speak to a joint session of Congress and Democrats stayed seated whenever Republicans stood up to applaud. She has tried to justify the shooting of students at Kent State and said she was fed up with hearing about civilian casualties." He snapped out of it. "*Centrists*? Honey? *Centrists*? I don't know. We're not extreme radicals. *Not anymore*. Maybe when we were teenagers... but not anymore."

"I remember Ann Coulter talked about 'greedy geezers on *Social Security*'. That was funny." Eddie actually got a bite and started to reel it in. "We're not extreme radicals?" He tugged at his line. "I think we'd look that way to the common Joe out there in America's heartland." Eddie reeled some more. "What we do makes a lot of sense to us. We've seen the androids and we've heard the top secret news." Eddie pulled in a twenty-pound wahoo. "I'm almost sure that a regular complete stranger would describe us as radical somehow."

"I guess you're right." Fletch grabbed a net. "Our 'normal' is different than most of the guys we went to high school with." Fletcher helped gut the fish and they fried him on the boat's grill. "Sure is nice to be out here." They stayed on the water until the Sun went down. The next day, they spent the night in

Aruba. By Wednesday, they made their way to the South America. They checked into the *Lidotel Hotel* in Punto Fijo. The place was *like* and island except that there was a thin strip of a single road, *Highway 4*, leading to the mainland of Venezuela. This road ran alongside the *Medanos De Coro National Park*. Caracas wasn't far to the east. They thought about heading there. They shopped for knick knacks then strolled through *Parque Louwerse*. "It feels just like high school again, doesn't it?" Vivian asked.

"*High school?* I remember coming here after graduation and I wanted to live here." Eddie looked around. The place still felt the same.

"Fletcher? Remember I was saying that there would be a big deal next week?" Vivian watched beads of sweat pour down Fletch's forehead. She knew him well enough to believe he was thinking about getting back into water. "Remember? It had to do with peace officers marching in DC? Sheriff Joe Arpaio, police chief Mark Kessler, and patriot blogger Bob Powell were gonna get all their buddies and their guns and they were gonna demand change—*real change*—in Washington?" Vivian was glad she brought sunglasses. It was bright and it seemed to get hotter by the second.

"Yes. Of course. It was two months ago today." Fletcher wiped his forehead. He couldn't help stinky sweat beads from making their way into his eyes. He squinted and rubbed his nasal passage. "Fourth of July, the big Trojan horse surprise... and it's one of the first things we talked about."

"I haven't heard much about it... which scares me a bit. I looked online and I even found out that Mark Kessler was *suspended* for getting so radical on YouTube. But? Guess what?" Vivian pulled out a red handkerchief from a vintage straw hand basket. She gave it to Fletch. "*Wear this*. I hate to see you drenched."

"But what?" He took the cloth and tied it around his forehead. "What is it?"

"Something else is brewing. I can hardly find anything about the Patriot March on the ninth... but I found some convention taking place from the ninth until the twelfth. I think *maybe* the patriot guys are aligning with other groups... but it doesn't make sense because one of them might be the *Million Muslim March* a week from today on September eleventh. Also, there's supposed to be two million bikers. I don't get it." Vivian tried to make sense of it.

"Well? I know where we'll *not* be next week! I don't want to be around patriots versus Muslims versus bikers! That doesn't sound good." Fletch took off his bandana, wrung it out, then put it back on. "One of Sheriff Joe's buddies was killed the other day. *Shot in his front yard*. All the deputies are now armed with AF-15 rifles. It's a combustive situation. I want to make it to Christmas. If World War III doesn't happen; if the *Killshot* doesn't wreck our planet; if DC makes it through the convergence of differing factions next week; if the *Region 3* thing next month turns out to be hot air; and if Alvin and his android buddies don't turn *evil* on us... then I can breathe a sigh of relief."

"I'd like to go to Caracas next. Would you like to go?" Vivian walked with Fletcher. She remembered being in Venezuela in the late nineties. She wanted to feel giddy again. She felt old. She hardly ever felt sorry for herself. Something was bringing her down. She wanted world peace. She heard beauty contestants say it many times. "World peace" was a popular topic during the

interview portion of a pageant. Vivian really wanted all of the violence to end. “Where are all the oil platforms, Fletcher? Venezuela ranks number one in petroleum reserves. I didn’t see any platforms out there.”

“Maybe they know how to behave. *Drill, baby, drill!* What would’ve happened if Sarah Palin became president? I bet *Ruby’s* in Huntington would have a platform right next to it by now! The United States was the only country which didn’t require an emergency acoustic switch on their offshore rigs. *A hundred thousand dollars could have saved billions.* Who built the thing? Halliburton! Authority figures wonder why people go crazy. On one hand, you have Halliburton half-assing their petroleum drills in the *Gulf of Mexico* and on the other hand you have Halliburton building prisons everywhere. Don’t like what they’re doing? They have a *prison* for you! I think it was 1979 that prison labor became legal for private profit. ALEC stands for American Legislative Exchange Council... and they make the policies. It’s now called the *Prison Industrial Complex.*” Fletch felt faint. “Can we get to a pool?”

“Yes.” *I am so glad to be out of the United States,* Vivian thought. *Those poor souls up there. They can’t win. Each of ‘em wants to turn the clock back and it’s just not gonna happen.* “I can use a dip!” Viv scolded herself for giving up hope. *Who knows? Maybe the aliens take us to another planet! Maybe there’s a huge paradise on a distant world... and we get to go back to the beginning after all.*

In Pennsylvania, Herman Eichelberger stood proud in a decorated army uniform. “I consider myself a *Constitutionalist*. I really do.” The screeching of iron train wheels grinding to a halt was loud. Herman turned around, almost startled. “‘*Domestic tranquility*’ means different things to most of the citizens around this country than what it has come to mean to me.” Soldiers unloaded crates of boxes near tracks. They worked double time as if on a deadline. “For most people, ‘domestic tranquility’ means that they’re neighbors can’t blast the stereo after ten at night.” As far as Herman was concerned, no one was really sure what was going to happen in a month. If there was a secret plan to take down the Twin Towers utilizing NSA intelligence on nine eleven, Herman was left out of the loop. If there was a plan to round up American citizens in *Region 3*, Herman was not sent a memo. He was smart, though. He knew the United States government embodied the characteristics of Nixon more than Gandhi. It was becoming more and more vogue to believe US government officials were *crooks*. Some people believed they were upstanding people in a touch situation. Nobody *anywhere* would mistake them as Gandhi, though. “Matthew? This place... and the place we’re heading is the very manifestation of what I believe *domestic tranquility* has become in the modern era.”

Matt Stubbs ate a hot dog. “It looks just like the place I worked at in Beech Grove... except there is no barbed wire yet!” Matt had never been in the military but he purchased clothing at an army depot and was wearing a camouflaged outfit. “It was tough to hear about Tom. I didn’t like him as a person—he was *mean*—but he didn’t have to die.” Matt watched a row of ten eight-wheel *Stryker* armored vehicles pass along.

“You are a loyalist and that’s why I recommended you to replace Tom. For all practical reasons, you are actually replacing Cornelius. *Tom wasn’t in his position all that long.*” Two black helicopters flew high in the sky. A third one

landed near Herman and Matt. “*Come on!*” Herman headed toward the *UH-60 Chopper* and jumped in. “They used one of these in the *bin Laden* raid!”

Elwyn Hayes was already in the helicopter. Matt introduced him to Herman, “I want you to meet a good buddy of mine! Herman? This is Elwyn Hayes. He has family in the NSA and I thought he’d be the perfect understudy for me!”

“*Good to meet you!*” Elwyn shook Herman’s hand and the craft lifted into the sky.

“You better be good!” Herman told Elwyn, “We flew you in all the way from California. I don’t know if Matt told you... but we keep losing agents! It’s not the safest job!” They caught up to the other black copters above. “That’s the Annville Train Station! Elwyn? Have you been briefed on what we’re going through?”

“I haven’t been told anything. Matt called me last night and said, *pardon my French*, ‘The shit is about to hit the fan!’” Elwyn Hayes wore a gray uniform. “I’m a mechanic. I didn’t go home to change. I headed to John Wayne Airport and got in this thing!”

“The shit’s gonna hit the fan?” Herman asked. “It might! We don’t know yet. I’m eighty percent positive that FEMA will start rounding up Americans next month... if not a week from now! Ten miles to the west is Hershey, Pennsylvania! I’m almost sure they still make chocolate bars there! Ten miles to the north is Fort Indiantown Gap! Population? Officially less than two hundred! It’s twenty thousand acres of training area, though, and at any given time there are tens of thousands of people scattered here and there. Muir Army Airfield isn’t far off. They’re always doing exercises. In the mid-seventies, there were more than thirty thousand Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees living there. In 1980, there was about twenty thousand Cubans! You see where this is going?”

“*No... sir!*” Elwyn barked.

“Region 3, Elwyn! We are in FEMA’s *Region 3*! The United States might not be able to pay its bills in the near future! That’s going to leave a lot of people ticked off! They’ll take to the streets and they’ll have guns! What are we to do? Let them shoot random people all over the place?” Matt brought a brown paper bag of hot dogs wrapped in foil. “*Hungry?*” He took one out and offered it to Elwyn.

Elwyn declined but Herman took it without saying a word. “I am here to support you, right Matt? What specifically do you want me to do?”

“*Relay messages... and don’t break down!*” Matt took out a thick sausage link and squirted relish on it from a condiment packet. “We were in that UCLA mental facility for a reason! They peered into our psyche. *We have what it takes!* We can go along with this type of operation without raising a fuss.”

“I don’t like to think of myself as a mean person... but a dude’s got to do what a dude’s got to do!” Elwyn looked down. They were flying over the 934 and were near Memorial Lake. “I feel like I’m in the middle of an *action* movie, Matthew. I’m going to be fine.”

“I’ll have you know something, Mister Hayes.” Herman Eichelberger thought about the people on the ground. He tapped into *conspiracy* sites every now and then and he knew about the paranoia that the black helicopters incited. Matt had even seemed uneasy when they first arrived at the Annville Train

Station. "You're going back to the UCLA medical facility if this turns out to be a dry run. If this hype blows over, we're going to have to re-acclimate you to an ordinary world. It's like a decompression chamber, you see? It's more of a psychological transition than a physiological one, though. If the United States pays its bills and the patriot groups calm down, we're all going to head back to personal norms. If the Million Muslim March turns out to be three hundred oddballs protesting, we have nothing at all to worry about! We hope for the best and prepare for the worst!"

"Mister Eichelberger, sir? I have been preparing for this my whole life. I know what I'm in the middle of. I know why I get tossed around and I know why I get called to do dirty work." Elwyn looked down at five tanks driving along Ammo Road. "I am crazy, Mister Eichelberger. In a sane world, I am crazy. In this world? I fit in."

The *UH-60* landed near a large, dark green tent. The other two black helicopters headed south. "Matthew Stubbs? I'd like you to meet Lewis Faulkner from the Federal Emergency Management Agency. To his left, that is David Grossman from the Department of Homeland Security. Behind them at the desk is Sergi Urnov from *EMERCOM*. He's been instrumental at bringing fifteen thousand of his troops to America and many of them are here right now training."

"*Pleased to meet you.*" Matt lifted his palm in a greeting gesture.

"You will shadow these guys and make reports to me every evening. *Logistics*. I need you to master logistics, Matthew. I need to know how many people are moving around. I need to know how many people have become problematic. We aren't far from Harrisburg. There is a minimum security prison there called *Camp Hill*. Locals have complained that it looks too scary of all things. It has a protruding guard tower and shiny coiled razor-sharp barbed wire all over the place. The prisoners there will have to be moved to the Beech Grove place." Herman studied Matt. For the first time, it looked like he was getting cold feet. He averted eye contact and bit his lip. "Are we understood? Let me make myself completely clear if I am not understood. If the United States of America can no longer function as a peaceful democracy, we will detain and kill millions of folks who never fathomed that such thing could happen outside of an AMC theatre."

"Logistics? I understand logistics. I understand inventory control." Matt tried to assure Herman that he was solid. "People have to be places. If we need Camp Hill for fresh, unruly citizens then the inmates already there have to be somewhere else."

"*You got it!*" Herman turned to Lewis Faulkner and shook his hand. "Teach them the ropes," he said about Matt and Elwyn. "I'll be back at nineteen hundred hours to pick them up." Herman headed back to the chopper and flew away.

Fletcher, Viv, Nancy and Eddie were heading east traveling through *Puerto Cumarebo* when Vivian broke a silence. "Fletcher?" She was driving. "I have that feeling again. You know how I felt when we left San Francisco a few months ago?"

"Yes. We were gonna go to Portland then to China... but we wound up going to *Euro Disney*." There was no need for questions. Fletch said, "Turn around or stop."

"I'm going to call Finnegan. I think he's still in Aruba." Vivian pulled over to the side of the road and called. "*Finn? Pick us up. It's going down. Something's going down.*"

Lewis Faulkner pulled out a few black folding chairs and offered Matt and Elwyn a place to sit. "Do you know what the first casualty of war is?"

"Women? Children?" Matt answered.

"*The truth!*" Lewis held a thick binder with a FEMA logo on it. He opened it and looked over the first page. "Thomas Jefferson and John Adams both died on July 4, 1826... *fifty years to the day after the delivery of the Declaration of Independence.* Coincidence? If you're stupid, you'd believe so! John Adams complained in a letter, '*You physicians are growing so familiar with hemlock, arsenic, and mercury sublimate and laudanum and brandy and everything that used to frighten me that I know not what you will do with us.*' He died in Massachusetts and Jefferson died in Virginia. A month later, John Randolph wrote, '*And so old Mister Adams is dead, on Fourth of July, too, just a half century after our Declaration of Independence, and leaving his son on the thrown. This is euthanasia, indeed. They have killed Mister Jefferson, too, on the same day but I don't believe it.*' Have you watched Monty Python's *Life of Brian*, Matthew Stubbs?"

"Yes." Matt began to stutter, "Y-y-ye-y-ye-yesss. I've watched it many times. Oh-oh-over and over."

"Do you remember when *Brian* is hanging on the cross and the big-nosed gal comes by? She says something to him!" Lewis shut the binder and set it on the floor.

"She thanks him for being a *martyr*... but you and I know that he was put up to crucifixion by accident, am I right?" Matt's right foot nervously thudded the ground.

Lewis observed Elwyn and was pleased that he sat calm like a rock. "I think Jefferson and Adams were done under by their physicians. Both men were old. It was symbolic. Human nature doesn't change a whole lot over time. Conrad Murray is jailed for the death of Michael Jackson and we're to believe that it's something we only experience in modern times. The USS Maine is sunk near Havana and it starts the Spanish American War. '*Remember the Maine! To hell with Spain*' is what everyone was shouting and spreading around. Was it a false flag event? The ship probably hit a Cuban mine and they knew *Spain* would be blamed. An excuse for war? Crap! I even think I heard someone recently say it was negligent storage of our own ammo in that friggin' boat! Whose fault is it at the end of the day?"

"Sir? You keep asking questions and I don't have time to answer," Matt claimed.

"*The truth* is the first casualty of war! That's what I want you to remember, here! It's attributed to a historical *Greek* guy, Aeschylus!" Lewis pointed to the binder at his feet. "It's in there somewhere! And later around World War I, California senator Hiram Johnson said it again! Guess when *that* guy died?" Lewis waited for an answer this time.

"*The Fourth of July?*" Matt looked over at Elwyn. "Are you following this?" Elwyn shook his head "no" then put on a locked stone face again.

"He died on the day that the US dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima!"

Lewis handed the FEMA binder to Matt. “Do you think these things are coincidences? Or do you believe that people like you and me exist?”

“*Oh!*” A light bulb lit up in Matt’s mind. “I get it! We’re the physicians and we give *nine eleven* additional meaning next week!” He flipped through pages and tried to ingest the general content. “Wow! I feel like we’re making plans from the *Hall of Doom*.”

Vivian looked down at the courtyard in front of *Rossum Machinery International* headquarters as their helicopter descended. There were ten S-2026 units situated in a pyramid form with one android in front, two in the second row, three in the third, and four in the fourth. They were wearing business suits and they were moving about. When the CH-149 landed, she got out and realized what was going on. They were performing the Michael Jackson *Thriller* dance in perfect synchronicity. Eddie, Nancy and Fletch were still in the helicopter discussing some issue and they didn’t notice the spectacle. Vivian listened for music but there wasn’t any stereo speakers visible and there weren’t any sounds except for gawks of gulls and chirps of various small birds. Alvin was in front and left the group. In seconds, the others disbanded and headed inside. Alvin said, “It’s great to see you! Androids have need for recreation, believe it or not!”

“That was a fantastic dance!” Vivian remarked. She turned around and saw that Fletcher was behind her. “Did you see that?”

“See what?” Fletch asked. “We were talking about heading to the Mediterranean. Would you like to head to Cyprus?”

“I don’t know. I want to take a couple of hours to rest my mind.” Vivian walked back to the helicopter. “Are you guys getting out?” She caught Eddie and Nancy in a romantic moment.

“Getting out? We’re thinking about going to Florida. I *want* to go to the Mediterranean... but I don’t like the constant interruptions we keep having. Nancy wants to see the house where Jeff Bush was swallowed in his room by a freak sinkhole.”

“I’ll be inside, guys. I want to lay down and we can decide something by sundown.” Vivian walked toward the building.

“*Honey?* I’m going to relax too... but I’m heading to the beach, okay?” Fletcher watched Vivian raise her hand up in acknowledgment but she didn’t turn around as she walked through RMI’s double doors. Fletch walked toward the shore without asking Eddie and Nancy if they were going to join.

As soon as the doors closed behind Viv, she had a sudden and unexpected adrenaline rush. She didn’t feel like resting. She headed downstairs and wanted to fool around with her yellow exoskeleton suit. She reached the first underground floor and didn’t say anything to the engineers assembling more S-2026 robots. She hurried along and got down to the second underground floor. She was stopped by Eugene. He told her, “Vivian? I think it’s time you know.”

“What is it, Eugene?” All of the droids looked like *Shazbot* to Viv. The only reason she knew who she was talking to was because of the lab coat with a golden name placard pinned to it. “I want go downstairs and clear my mind. I’m feeling really anxious, lately. I want to get to my suit.”

“You’ll want to see this. It’ll help, I’m sure.” Eugene turned to a human biologist. “Can you give us some privacy?” The biologist left. Eugene walked to a small cage with a dozen white mice. “Splinter? Come forward.”

The rodents were huddled in the far corner. One mouse walked away from the pack. "Yes sir?" the mouse asked. "What can I do for you?"

Eugene picked Splinter up. "We named them after movie characters. You already know from your suit's name that we're fans of the *Ninja Turtles*." He held Splinter with his palm open. "Vivian? I'd like you to meet *Splinter*." He handed the mouse to Viv.

"*Holy mackerel!*" Vivian's eyes opened wide. "Am I seeing this?" She petted Splinter with her forefinger. "Splinter? Are you like a parrot? Have you just memorized certain words? Can you understand me? Can you have a conversation?"

"We know you, Vivian." Splinter crawled to the tip of Vivian's hand and started to squeak to the group. "We've had language all along. We didn't have sophisticated tongue muscles. Bioengineering has provided us with the tools to speak with your kind."

"You know me? How do you know me?" Vivian set Splinter down on the table just outside of the cage.

"We study. We read. We have different quarters on the upper level of this building. It serves as a college for us. Do you remember when you and Fletcher were given a mouse a few months ago? It was trained to find keys and retrieve them?" Splinter's whiskers twitched.

"Yes. We took the mouse after we had a chimp named *Sandy*." Viv asked Eugene, "What's going on?"

"Vivian? We have studied popular culture and we have studied military strategy. We are useful. I look forward to working with you." Splinter walked onto Eugene's extended hand and was set back in the cage.

"You realize that we have a shortage of drone pilots, correct? These mice are the answer. They serve a million purposes. *Think about the spying potential.*" Eugene opened a mini-fridge and pulled out string cheese. He peeled it apart and fed the group. "Splinter's buddies are Nemo, Hooch, Pac Man, Bambi, Winnie, Jerry, Simba, Rango, Orca, Wile E and Lassie."

"*Glad to meet you!*" Vivian smiled.

"We love you, Vivian!" one of them said. A few of them repeated, "*We love you!*"

"I'll see you later!" Vivian told Eugene, "I'm going to head downstairs to relax. Thank you for introducing me to your pals!"

"I'll talk to you later, Viv!" Eugene put a miniature soccer ball into the cage and watched Viv leave.

Lewis Faulkner drove a traditional army jeep along Tomstown Road. He lectured Matt, "This has got to be tight. You lie to me or any superior officer, you're likely to get thrown in with the rest of the sheep. You might get gassed in the same facility where you installed furnaces and poison gas pipes."

"I took them out, too. The Beech Grove place was dismantled. *At least the deadly parts were.*" Matt watched fighter jets fly above.

"Are you stupid? You had a photographer with you! It was done for PR! As soon as you removed the piping, it was put back in! I'm not trying to scare you, though." Lewis checked his rearview and saw Elwyn's frozen face. "He doesn't talk a whole lot, does he?"

"He talks. He respects chain of command, I think." Matt turned around.

“Are you getting all this?” Elwyn nodded “yes”.

“Honesty to one another is a great thing... and it’s vital... but you must not tell the public anything that will compromise our mission. You understand?” Lewis looked in his rearview again but this time he was making sure that David Grossman’s jeep was following. “Valor! Do you understand? There’s a time when loyalty and valor must supercede honesty... at least to the public!” Lewis didn’t get a response. “Can you hear me? Is the wind too much?”

“I hear you!” Matt felt nervous. He thought he would be excited about this kind of work. He was starting to feel sympathy for ordinary people.

“As far as I’m concerned, the seeds of our problem started in 1992. Hillary Clinton said that Bill was threatened by someone in the Bush White House not to run for office. *The vast Right Wing Conspiracy you’ve heard of.* It didn’t end with Bill, though. Ross Perot was also threatened that year.” Lewis cherished rides in topless jeeps. It was hot outside but the wind cooled his face. “Some mysterious Republicans were gonna post naked pictures of Perot’s daughter or something. Then? During the Clinton years, Ken Starr was let loose like a wild bloodhound. Nobody believes it was anything but political retaliation. The first real shot in this war, as far as I’m concerned, is when they tried to impeach Bill for perjury. I happen to know that right-wingers weren’t only targeting the president. They went after his entire support system. Some sold out and others were crushed.”

“Timothy McVeigh was executed in my home town, Terre Haute. The place where they whacked him is a place just like this. Conspiracy theorists try to guess what institutions would be used as concentration camps when our government finally cracks. That’s how I got my job at Beech Grove. I had a year of construction experience and I was snooping around. I heard about Katrina. You guys in FEMA weren’t really prepared for helping citizens in times of natural disaster as much as you were ready to take away guns and putting people down. I watched the grandmas yelling about their rights. It’s all over the internet.” The jets that had been overhead were long gone but they left white trails. Matt wanted to ask about chemtrails but opted for silence.

“I’m in this job because disasters happen. I’m not in it for the politics... but a lot of people are.” Lewis made his way onto Ridge Road. “You’re probably a fan of Metallica? ‘*So be it... threaten no more... to secure peace is to prepare for war...*’ The first step of the mess we’re in was tying Clinton’s hands. Gore distanced himself from him and Republicans gained momentum. PNAC was released, the Towers came down, then everyone’s liberties were strangled.” Lewis Faulkner knew the jeep didn’t have a radio but looked at the spot where one would be. He wanted to blast some heavy metal.

“Don’t Tread On Me?” Matt rubbed his chin. “I used to be a fan of Metallica. They started chewing out their fans, though... and I don’t think that was a good idea.”

“Are you old enough to remember the Chevy Chase Show on Fox? It was a slap in the face to Arsenio. Rupert Murdoch, owner of News Corp and Fox, was a big GOP donor. Arsenio and MTV made candidate Clinton look *hip* in 1992. Remember him playing the saxophone?” Lewis pulled on to Stoney Lane.

“I remember. I was a kid, but I remember. Arsenio felt insulted for being passed up. Chevy Chase only lasted a few weeks.” Matt looked ahead.

There was a dead end.

"Republicans get even in different ways than Democrats. They have enough money to do stranger stuff." Lewis stopped the jeep and pointed upward. "Here he is."

"Arsenio?" Matt asked.

"No. Herman. He's back." A black helicopter came down. "Aresenio's gonna have a show that starts next week but don't you think it's a dollar short and a day late?" Lewis asked. The black helicopter landed. The side door opened. Tad, Ramon and Brent were the first ones out. "Your support team has arrived." Herman got out behind the three youngsters. Lewis, Matt and Elwyn got out of their jeep. David Grossman and Sergi Urnov stopped behind them and went toward the *UH-60*. David and Sergi got into the chopper and flew away.

It was precisely nineteen hundred hours as Herman had reported his return would be. "By way of deception, thou shalt do war!" He walked up to Matt and squeezed his hand tightly in a hand shake. "What am I talking about, Matthew?"

"Proverbs." Matt rubbed his right hand with his left after Herman released it. "Mossad. No secret that it was their motto. They have since changed it to 'Where there is no guidance, a nation falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety'... another Proverb."

"Good. Good." Herman Eichelberger shook Lewis Faulkner's hand. "You have prepped him!" He asked Matt, "What does *Mossad* mean in Hebrew?"

"The Institute." They originated in December of 1949. They have been implicated in deadly covert activities in Argentina, Norway, France, Belgium, Iraq, Greece, Italy and other countries. The Madrid train bombings in 2004 were thought to be a Mossad operation." Matt high fived Tad, Ramon and Brent. "Glad you guys could make it!" Herman's gaze on Matt was locked. "I've been briefed and I am ready for the next phase," Matthew Stubbs assured Herman Eichelberger.

"Are you familiar with the *Phoenix Lights*?" Herman backed off a couple of steps and addressed the group. "In 1997, more than ten thousand residents of Phoenix, Arizona collectively witnessed a strange phenomenon. *Seven huge lights drifted from Luke Air Force Base and slowly headed south.* Were the crafts driven by space aliens from a distant galaxy? No! It was a social experiment. How would large masses of people respond to government lies and denial? That's what we wanted to know! Frances Barwood was the lone council member to publicly question the sighting. Respected community members came forward. *Police, fire fighters, construction workers.* They were treated like nut jobs! Governor Fife Symington held a mock press conference in which he was to reveal the real reason behind the *Phoenix Lights*. Do you know what it was? A space alien!" Herman laughed and felt embarrassed that he lost his professional poise. "A guy in an alien costume walks up the aisle and cameras are flashing and the media's there!" Herman slapped his leg. *"A space alien!"*

"What's your point?" Lewis Faulkner asked. "With all do respect, we're losing all daylight."

"This social experiment showed us on a small scale what would happen in New York City when the World Trade Center was hit. You don't think people knew even *then* that it would happen? You think those goofballs packed up their

bags and left after the foiled 1993 explosion in the parking structure?" Herman rubbed his face and became serious again. "You saw the hole a million times in Shanksville. You saw no wreckage. We, as a government, learned that people scurry into their mouse holes. They split like cockroaches. Somewhere out there, Penn Fraser Jillette is shaming folks for even *considering* that nine eleven might've been an inside job of the US government. Somewhere on TV, Sean Hannity is ranting about Bush's phony shtick and getting paid big money to do it! Do you know what *Penn* said we should do to the Truthers?"

"*Penn*? Are we talking about the magician? Penn and Teller? That one?" Matt asked.

"Penn said Truthers should be pushed down stairwells! Ha!" Herman laughed some more. "Yes, Matt. Penn the Vegas magician." He composed himself again. "I wish Penn could be here with us. I wish he could see the detention centers. I wish he could know the things that I know."

"Maybe he does," Lewis said. "Maybe he's just a scared guy. This is '*reaction formation*' in psychology if he's actually yelling about opposite things than what he believes. He has a good gig going. Why jeopardize it by aligning with the fringe protesters?"

"Doesn't matter. We're losing light. Let's get to the tent." Herman went to the jeep that David and Sergi had left behind. Tad, Ramon and Brent followed and joined in. They headed out.

While they were in Anguilla, Fletcher and Viv spent their beach time along Auntie Dol Bay and Long Pond Bay in the south eastern part of the island. Most of the hotels and shops were on the western or northern ends. Anguilla was no monster island, and unlike Huntington in California, the coastline where Fletch and Viv spent most of their time was devoid of homes or any other structure. RMI headquarters was a half mile from the beach along the "Long Path", also known as Albert Lake Drive. In between Long Pond Bay and the Long Path was an actual lagoon called "Long Pond". On the western end, there were nice residential homes and a couple of them were for rent. It was Sunday and president Obama was set to address the world about what action the US would take in regards to the Syrian conflict in two days. Viv and Fletch were inspecting a two-story home dubbed "White Cedars Villa" with a real estate agent. There was no direct access to the ocean but the lot had a nice swimming pool. "I think we could stay here for a year, Fletcher. I feel safe here. I haven't felt better about life in a long time."

"I am kind of tired of renting cars in every other town and checking into a new hotel every few days." Fletch looked around. The place was big. Nancy and Eddie were out on a boat somewhere. "Do you think this place is big enough for four of us?"

"Eddie and Nancy?" Vivian made her way into the kitchen. "I think we could be happy together for a couple of months. I don't think they'd want to stay a full year. They took off when we were in Havasu, remember? I think it'd be good for all of us. When they decide to try another place, we'll have it all to ourselves."

"I really don't like what's going on in the world. Syrian residents are forming human shields against US targets in Damascus. Rebel forces have claimed responsibility for the chemical attacks knowing the United States would

intervene and somehow, Saudi Arabia is being mentioned in the mix.” Fletcher looked out through the window. The pool was clean. “I could use a break.”

“What were we doing that whole time?” Vivian asked. She wanted to cuddle on the couch but she felt guilty as well. “One day, we’re going to wake up and say, *‘They were going to blow each other up with or without you! You should’ve spent your entire time in the Caribbean!’*”

Fletcher turned toward Viv and kissed her forehead. “I’m starting to see the light. My gut, though. My gut keeps excreting all this bile when I think I should just ride it out in a paradise like this.” He kissed Viv’s forehead again. “My brain is on the same page as you. What can I do about my gut?”

Vivian wanted to joke but was at a loss for words. “We’ll stay here until Thanksgiving, Fletcher! We’ll offer one of the bedrooms to Eddie and Nancy. We’ll eat a nice turkey dinner here... *or Tofurky!* I don’t really care! Fish? You want to eat fish for Thanksgiving? I don’t care! I want to be here... then we could decide our next move.”

“Tofurky? It sounds *soooooo* good.” Fletcher giggled and felt like a teenager. “Fish? Remember we were eating that wahoo near Barbados? *‘It’s okay eat fish ‘cause they don’t have any feelings’!* Who started singing Nirvana? It was funny. Maybe it was the beer.”

Vivian’s iPhone dinged. “*The ice caps are melting,*” she told Fletch. She showed him the text message. “It’s from Alvin.”

“What is this? A code? He was going to tell us *‘Nibiru is imminent’* if World War III was breaking out. Could this mean that peace has been settled?” Fletcher looked out toward the pool again. There was a helicopter hovering above it. The side door opened and a ladder rolled down. “I guess we’re not spending Thanksgiving here, hun. I’m thinking they’re taking us somewhere far away.”

Vivian walked out of the villa through the sliding back door. Fletcher quickly explained to the real estate agent that there would be no deal then he jogged to catch up to his life partner. They climbed up the ladder then Fletch asked Finnegan, “The ice caps are melting? What is this? Some kind of coded message?”

“No sir. We listen in on your conversations, remember? We understand your frustration with the impending war. We processed some of the variables and considered allowing you to waste your time on this tiny isle... but instead, we’re going to take you to the North Pole. You would like that, no? NASA photos have shown that arctic ice is less than half of what it used to be in 1980. It is shrinking at around fifteen percent rate every decade. One comedian said that the North Pole has become the *North Pool*. I am not programmed for absolute human humor, but I can chuckle at that one. If we were in a public restaurant, I would know to laugh at that joke because I know it is funny. There is literally a pool of water up there made from melted ice! One would think it’s ocean water that’s seeped in but it’s not salty. Hilarious! Then we can travel to Switzerland’s Aletsch glacier! That’s where hundreds of nudists formed a ‘living sculpture’ to raise awareness about our warming planet! These activities would take your mind off the beginning of World War III, would they not?”

“We wanted this when we were teenagers, Viv!” Fletch was excited. “I say we go! Have we ever stayed together in Norway?”

“Okay, okay.” Vivian was reluctant. “I want to hit *Mount Kilimanjaro*

when it's all over, alright? We keep talking about hiking Everest and I know it's just *not* going to happen... but we can do Kilimanjaro. There's a national park more than nineteen thousand feet above sea level."

The copter flew to Cape Canaveral where they boarded a *Concorde* and jetted toward Meiringen Air Base in Switzerland. Finnegan handed Viv a cold glass of Coca Cola. "These super sonic jets stopped running for the public in 2003. It's too bad. I think many people are missing out on a good ride." He handed her a furry, white cap with a red star in the front on the forehead. Vivian put it on without question. Finnegan handed her a stack of about a hundred unbound pages. "That is a Russian ushanka. The flaps on the side keep the ears warm during frozen winters. In your hand is a script. Have you checked your Netflix categories? Foreign dramas? Independent movies? You will have the chance to act in one of these movies." Finnegan reached into a duffle bag and pulled out a hockey jersey. He handed it to Fletcher. "Wear this." He handed Fletcher a hundred pages of script. "You will help Vivian rehearse lines."

"Am I going to be in the movie? Am I just helping her become a star?" Fletcher slipped the red jersey on over his striped knit shirt. Across the chest it read "CCCP" in white block.

Finnegan dropped ice cubes into a glass and poured soda for Fletcher. "Star? There are many reasons for an actor to choose a part for a movie. Some do it simply to pay the bills. Some do it to get laid. Some people are drawn in by vanity and they love to see pictures of themselves staring back at them from giant Hollywood billboard signs. Some want the nice home in Beverly Hills. Star? This is not about making Vivian into a *star*. This is to help both of you *cope* with your situation. This is a cathartic event unequal to anything you've experienced so far. You will be better off." Finnegan handed Fletcher a hockey stick. "Hold this. Get in to character. You're going to be featured in the movie as well."

Fletcher was parched and thanked Finn for the drink. "What's the script about?"

Unlike the traditional airlines Viv and Fletcher had been riding around in, the *Concorde* had a seating layout conducive for face-to-face interaction. Finnegan sat across from Viv and Fletcher. "First of all, let's talk about the forces at work. Obama couldn't make up his own mind if he wanted to. As a senator, he was opposed to the way George W Bush handled Iraq. Remember when Arnold Schwarzenegger campaigned to be governor of California and he said he was going to open up the books for everyone to see? He wasn't going to take a salary? What happened? Years of financial deadlock. He took a salary. No one knew what was in the books and how the government reached the point of economic meltdown. Senator Obama was a similar idealist... but we see him in the shoes of his predecessor, and too many people believe they're behaving the same way."

"Okay. Finnegan? We get it. We've talked about these issues for many years. Me and Viv know..." Fletcher stopped his clarification. "Never mind. Go on. What's the gist of the story?"

"Well, the CFR puts enormous pressure on Obama to start an unpopular war. The CIA has intel that rebel fighters linked with the Saudis gassed their own people. The year is 2020, the dollar had collapsed long ago, and for the second time this millennium, the United States is in a war based off atrociously false information. al-Assad wouldn't have passed as a saint but it turns out he was

clearly framed. Iran hits Israel after the US invasion of Syria and the world community turns on America. The Kuala Lumpur War Crimes Commission of 2007 is finally invoked and George W Bush is picked up by UN soldiers in Zambia and he is imprisoned. Barack Obama panics and declares official martial law.” When Shazbot was around, he would drink alcoholic beverages with Viv and Fletch. Finnegan drank Coke. His system didn’t require it. S-2026 units were designed to keep humans at ease. He sipped from a glass. “The FEMA camps are finally utilized. American citizens are killed with sarin. The Soviet Union is reformed. Brazil replaces the USA as a permanent Security Council member.”

“I like the idea. I’m all paranoid about these things taking form in real life. I can say with honesty and certainty that the United States is a breakaway fascist country. I don’t need this *script*. But you know something. If I say these things in a mere YouTube documentary, I could be the next Snowden. They’ll be out to kill me in the name of peace. If I say it in a foreign film based in the near future... like the rendition of *Red Dawn*, then I get it off my chest. The monkey comes off my back.” Fletcher noticed that Vivian was actually reading her script.

“What you’ll notice is that Leningrad is alive again. *So is Stalingrad*. I’m not sure that America properly dealt with the falling of the Eastern Bloc. I mean, they jumped up and down for joy for a decade or so... but this project deals with the inevitable crumbling of the dollar. It faces not just the breakdown of old communism but inserts the hardcore failure of capitalism. We will be filming in Kjerringøy, also called ‘the Hollywood of Norway’. It will be depicted in Russia and begins when citizens rename *St Petersburg* ‘Leningrad’ again. History repeats itself, you see? You two have defected from fascist America to find freedom.” Finnegan reached into a briefcase and pulled out a third copy. “I can read with you... if you’re interested.”

“How ironic! I can’t believe I’m considering this!” Fletcher euphorically examined the lines.

“Fletcher?” Viv stopped reading and turned to her man, “There’s a book on my nightstand in Dagmar. Paul Craig Roberts wrote *Role Reversal: How the US Became the USSR*. That’s what this is based off. I’m almost sure.”

“No ma’am,” Finnegan politely alleged. “I mean, it might be a coincidence. Great minds think alike, though. It does not take a genius to see that the United States is behaving like the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Speak out against the government? What happens? Suppression. In place of Siberia, the US has *Guantanamo Bay*. Who runs the gig? An oligarchy. The difference between the US and the reborn USSR in this script is that the United States still insists it procures freedom for its people. It pretends it responds to the *people* instead of some perennial lobbyist or obscure secret society.”

“Okay,” Vivian said. “I like the script. I don’t care where they got their idea from. Maybe we’re all seeing the same thing. Maybe Paul Craig Roberts didn’t enlighten the masses and we all just realized these things at the same time.” Viv put her script down at her feet and turned to Fletch again. “The words in that manuscript ring true to me. I can see myself saying that the United States is dead. I can *feel* the character. I look forward to traveling to the Kremlin.”

“It’s very ironic!” Fletcher flipped along. “Apparently, the USSR has learned from its mistakes. No more slaughtering millions of dissidents on

horseback. They're keeping a dab of *Perestroika* and *Glasnost* and they're watching the USA disintegrate on internet and TV before they're eyes. My character gets to laugh at the buffoons in America while you serve me *Smirnoff* every night. If it wasn't fiction, I'd feel bad that we're laughing at the concentration camps we were almost in!" Fletch put his script down. "Viv? I don't see why we don't do this anyway. I'm not talking about watching internet videos every night and witnessing the slow decay of the United States. Why don't we stay in Norway for a while? Or even *Russia*?" Fletcher looked down at the lettering on his jersey. "I really like this. I've never been in to hockey but I bet I can grow to like it."

"We'll give it a shot, Fletch." Vivian kissed Fletch while they flew over the Atlantic Ocean at around *Mach Two* then rubbed her nose across his chin. "I want to stay in Norway and I hope it works out." She put her hands over the white furry flaps covering her ears. "Do I look good in this?"

Nancy and Eddie were fishing in Tent Bay off of the shore of dinky Saba Island. This was their first time on the sea together without an android chaperoning them. They rode around in a sleek forty-foot *Flybridge Cruiser*. Eddie read from his iPhone, "Ken Starr is masturbating in a restroom to a picture of Monica Lewinski on the morning of *nine eleven*. Scene fades to American Airlines Flight 77 where Pentagon numbers expert, Bryan Jack, straps in for take off. He's reading the Washington Post about Donald Rumsfeld reporting the previous day that two point three trillion dollars are completely missing from the defense budget. Mysterious vans, meanwhile, are loading a trillion dollars worth of gold from Twin Towers vaults. In a DC Ritz-Carlton luxury suite, HW Bush is complaining to Shafiq bin Laden that the Democrats rained on his parade by electing Clinton. In Florida, junior Bush is jogging somewhere when Ari Fleischer receives a text message from Odigo about impending large scale attacks. The Towers go down. Pan to Dick Cheney. He gives shoot-down orders of domestic aircraft but he does not warn the Pentagon that jets are heading their way. Bryan Jack, flying in hijacked AA77, thinks about the crab feast at accountant team leader Robert Russell's home to celebrate the end of the fiscal year. His Boeing 757 was shot down over the hills of West Virginia, though, and a cruise missile is sent to the Pentagon to complete a false flag attack. The missile hits the office where Bryan Jack worked. Every person that worked on the budget with Robert Russell comes up missing and is presumed dead."

"Sounds like someone's working on a movie we can believe. Where'd you get the script?" Nancy drank a Bartles & James Tropical Mango wine cooler.

"Viv and Fletch are flying over the Azores right now. They'll be in Europe for a while." Eddie put his phone away. "I'm jealous. I'm really jealous."

It was six in the morning sharp when Tad, Ramon and Brent were woken up by a blaring bugle. They slept on cots inside the tent headquarters. Herman Eichelberger approached the boys and they stood at attention. "Who can tell me about Khamisiyah?"

"Khamisiyah, Iraq! One hundred and sixty stock houses of chemical weapons destroyed during the first *Gulf War*. These weapons provided by the United States government covertly to the Saddam Hussein regime during their war with Iran. These said weapons destroyed Kurdish rebels and were used against

Iran with the assistance of American satellite intelligence! Sir!” Ramon saluted.

“Were all of these chemical weapons destroyed, Ramon? Did some of them make their way to Syria? Does Bashar al-Assad have some of the nerve gasses that our government provided for Iraq? Do the rebels in Syria have these weapons? We sure know they weren’t found in the second Gulf War!” Herman walked to Matt’s cot and shook him. “*Get up!* Today, it’s the genuine article!”

“It’s not rocket science, sir. Sarin was supposedly made by monastic hermits from Mount Fuji and they jolted hundreds of transients in a Japanese train station in 1995. It takes fluorine to produce. Nazis discovered it accidentally before World War II when they were experimenting with strong pesticides. The sarin used recently against women and children in Syria didn’t necessarily have to come from US stockpiles in Iraq. The victims were believed by many to have been kidnapped by the FSA in Latakia.” Ramon saluted again. “And satellite images can’t tell one warhead from another.”

Herman said, “I don’t care where the stuff came from. I don’t care where it went. I care about lunatics taking to the streets with arms. We’re going to go out there today and we’re going to screw with some protesters in New York City. We’re going to round some of ‘em up and we’re going to shackle them in UN military vans. We’re going to bring them here.” Herman thought someone might say something sympathetic. The guys stayed in line. “We want to know who they cry to. Ten years ago, it was typical to hear something like, ‘*I’m going to call my lawyer!*’ What a joke! The Patriot Act turned ordinary lawyers into useless pussies! People know better now to rely on lawyers and Constitutional law. I’m an advocate of the Constitution but I’m a greater advocate of keeping my job! Who will the kids scream out to now? Al Qaeda? Is that real? ‘*Home grown terrorists*’ and all? Russia? God? Their mothers?”

“I think this is overblown,” Tad said. “With all due respect.”

“Something is happening on October first if any of our sources are correct. I told Matt that today’s the genuine article... but it’s the genuine article for *sparring* with the public. This is our preseason. Heads could very well roll next month. Let’s hope it doesn’t happen.” Herman headed for his jeep. “Let’s go if ya’ want breakfast.” They ate then flew in a black helicopter to the Big Apple. They had operatives there and they were provided two white full-size Chevy vans. Herman opened the back doors of one of them and looked inside. It was full of picket signs and banners. He asked the guys, “Webster Tarpley believes it takes three types of people to pull off a good false flag mission. Who can tell me what they are?”

Ramon raised his hand. “Patsies, moles and killers.”

“*Good.*” Herman went through the signs. One was yellow, about ten feet wide, and stabilized at the top by a long wooden rod. In black letters it read “Hands Off Syria”. Herman handed it to Ramon. “Guess which one you’re going to be today?”

“*The mole.* We’re looking for patsies. We’re looking for citizens with authentic rage toward the government. We’re looking at people too stupid to know how to make a fertilizer bomb but are angry enough to be credible scapegoats.” Ramon poked his sign in the direction of Brent and Tad. They would march behind it. It could fit another couple of people if need be.

Herman grabbed another sign. It was orange and had face shots of W

Bush and Obama next to one another. Its caption read “War Crimes Must Be Stopped”. Herman handed it to Matthew Stubbs. “Do you like this one?” Matt took it from him. Herman grabbed a small white sign which simply read “WARmerica”. “Elwyn? Do you like to march? If you don’t like it, ya’ better get used to it!” Herman handed it out. There were other agents there who had provided the vans. They rummaged through the material and grabbed signs of their own. “The plan is to get friendly with the crowd. There are multiple reasons to come to an anti-war protest. Some guys here really don’t care about the issues and are just trying to mingle with the ladies. Some people are ethnic Syrians and believe in their cause wholeheartedly. There are other people who are simple anarchists and would protest *anything* the government is doing. There are those who would protest house flies if that’s what we were doing today.” Herman didn’t like what he was in the middle of. “We are after the people who will do harm to our government. That’s the bottom line. Talk to these guys about *Molotov cocktails* and see where it goes. If they brush you off, then they are genuinely here for a peaceful protest. If they engage you, take ‘em down the rabbit hole. See how far they’d go in the hypothetical world. Lead them here to this van. We will lock them up and return them to Fort Indiantown Gap. We’re going to have fun with a nice social experiment.”

The guys walked along Forty-Second Street and joined a group of activists. They chanted slogans. Matthew Stubbs wore a red bandana, ripped Levis, dirty Chuck Taylor Converse sneakers, and a white T-shirt which read “War Is Murder” in large print on the front. The back of his shirt featured a black-and-white atomic mushroom cloud. Matt chanted and he found a gruffy teenager wearing a black T-shirt featuring the face of Dzhokhar Tsarnaev on the front. “*Nice shirt!*” Matt told him. “Is that the photo that *Rolling Stone* used on its cover?”

“Yes! We must stop these warmongering pigs!” The teen continued to chant. He walked alongside a few other guys roughly the same age. They seemed to know each other.

“Should we impeach Obama?” Matt asked. “I mean, these guys aren’t earning their titles lately. It started with Bush. Could we call him ‘president Bush’? No! *Cowboy Bush* is more like it! We should change the titles of *all* the sons of bitches! Cowboy Bush! Cowboy McCain! Cowboy Boehner! Cowboy Kerry! And, yes, Cowboy Obama!”

The teen shouted anti-war phrases and marched along. Finally he commented, “I like your shirt too! Where’d you get it?”

“My girlfriend is in PeTA! She has an identical shirt that says ‘*Meat Is Murder*’! She’s in college right now and couldn’t make it. We have something... *explosive*... going on in DC on nine eleven though. We’re going to meet up at the mall. It’s going to be... *a blast*! Do you understand? A blast! We’re going to have... *a blast*! Do you get it?” Matt made up the information on the spot. In minutes, he lured the teenager and his buddies to one of the white vans. They believed they were going to be part of something very “explosive” in Washington, DC. Instead, they were taken to Fort Indiantown Gap. By the end of the march, there were about forty-some-odd other dissidents fooled into coming along. Matt was quietly cheerful about his newfound cloaking abilities. When he was talking to demonstrators about socking it to America, it wasn’t a far stretch from the

feelings he had while working under Tom McKay. He questioned his true inward loyalty and he was disturbed that no definite answer crystallized in the midst of his mind.

It was Tuesday morning on September 10, 2013. Fletch and Viv were dressed in warm clothing. They headed to Fiesch, Switzerland via a cable car called the “Fiescheralp”. “The buildings in this town are so wonderful.” Fletch’s eyes were trained on the outside scenic view. “So much is going on in the world around us but... *my mind*... doesn’t want to let any of it in.”

“Norway just had elections and conservatives made huge gains. They’re somewhat anti-immigration. Finnegan said it might be good to put the ‘*movie idea*’ on hold. Plus? There’s been a big change in the Syria matter. John Kerry was speaking tongue-in-cheek about how military action could be avoided and he quipped at a press conference that Assad must turn over all of his chemical weapons and a diplomatic solution could be possible. Russia took him up on it... and so did Assad! The situation might be diffused. Of course, the Department of Defense is ticked off. *They want war*. They want to bomb Syrian women and children... just like they wanted to outdo Saddam Hussein in Iraq! ‘*We’re here to liberate you and save you from a tyrant*’! Then we went ahead and killed many, many more times Iraqis than Saddam and his psychotic kids!” Vivian really liked the town. “We almost decided to stay in Anguilla. I’m glad we came here.”

“Obama speaks tonight. You know what nickname he picked up since last month? *O-bomb-a!* Sounds the same. I’ve been reading protesters in internet blogs.” Fletcher opened an old fashioned physical map. “From here, we hike to Betten. How do you pronounce this? *Grosser Aletschgletscher*? That’s the official name of this glacier. It’s the biggest one in the Alps.”

“It takes all day? I hope I’m in shape for it.” Vivian kept falling in love with different areas. “Maybe we can skip Norway and stay here. It seems so *quaint*.”

It was Wednesday night at Fort Indiantown Gap. It was twelve years to the day of the attacks in New York City, the Pentagon and Pennsylvania. Herman Eichelberger led Matt Stubbs and others to fish out extreme dissidents from a protest a couple of days before in NYC. They took roughly fifty people from an anti-war march and held them in a detention camp. The next day, president Obama announced to the world that a diplomatic remedy might be possible if Syria surrendered all of its chemical weapons with the assistance of Russian intervention. He did not mention that prince Bandar bin Sultan admitted to supplying the rebels with deadly gasses. He did not talk about Iraq covertly receiving sarin from the United States during the eighties... and after the first Gulf War, many of the US-supplied weapons made their way into Syria. He did not mention Colin Powell’s false statement at the UN about satellite images showing WMDs before the second Gulf War. He did not mention the pure numbers in Congress overwhelming against war. It had seemed that the planet was very well in a fast track to World War III. Somehow, the emotions were diffused and logic, albeit on a low level, prevailed. Matt was walking back to tent headquarters with Herman on the night of September 11, 2013. “Big limp dick, wouldn’t you say?”

“*Huh?* What’s that? Limp dick? What is this? Junior high school?” Herman woke early that day and turned on the news. There was an irate TSA agent in LA that caused a tiny fuss.

"A million Muslims were supposed to show up in DC. I don't think there were more than a few thousand." Matt and the guys blended in with marchers in Washington and flew back to base when it got dark. "*Two million bikers!* That's what I was expecting. How many were there? A few thousand?" If the nine eleven event turned out to be as big as organizers wanted it to be, they would've nabbed more people. "The patriot groups? I didn't see a whole lot of 'em. *Not as many as I thought I was gonna see!*"

"Makes our work easier. I'm starting to wonder about these programs we have running. Executive Orders 10999 and 12919. The Patriot Act. NDAA. I think people are afraid. I don't think anyone wants to go out of their homes!" Herman reached his jeep. "I'm going to make a few rounds. You're welcome to come along."

"Nah. I'm beat. I'm going to get some sleep." Matt headed to the tent after Herman took off along the path.

Matthew Stubbs was nodding off at eleven at night when Viv Streets and Fletch Browne were approaching Baghdad International seven time zones ahead. It was technically September 12, 2013 at six in the morning when the couple were close to touching down with Finnegan leading them around. The android told Viv, "We'll get to Kilimanjaro eventually. You like melting glaciers, don't you? The one at the national park in Tanzania is different than the one you just came from in the Alps. The Furtwängler Glacier is located near the summit and is about fifteen acres large and twenty feet thick. It has receded eighty-two percent since 1912 and might be completely gone by 2020. There are different issues regarding pollution from the base of the mountain and the fact that there are different weather patterns. Kilimanjaro's elevation is high enough that rain precipitates well below its peaks. The reality of global warming appears self-evident."

"Yes, Finnegan... but you brought us to Iraq for some reason. What's going on?" Viv asked.

"Did you know that NASA scientists and astronauts regularly share sensitive information with Russians now? That would've been unheard of during the Cold War. We realized though that if we're going to be effective as a human race that it's best that we work together without secrets. We live together in the International Space Station. We will be together on Mars one day unless we blow each other up first with nuclear weapons." Finnegan squeezed Fletcher's knee to get his attention. "An odd thing happened when astronauts started sharing their stories with the cosmonauts."

Fletch was startled by Finnegan. "*Whoa!*" He almost spilled coffee on his lap but recovered. "What is it, Finn?"

"Aliens. They started talking about aliens. No one wants to believe in these things in this great secular and scientific age. I mean, much of the world still seems to be locked in the Stone Age... but when we send people into orbit, we like to believe in a highly rational conception of what the Universe is. Do you know how far the closest star is? The Hubble Telescope was a great leap for humanity but it looks like a rotary phone compared to the Webb Telescope and some others. There are orphan planets drifting all over the galaxy, it turns out, without stars to revolve around." Finnegan looked out into the desert as the plane slide along the runway. "Something is out there," he said. "If you're to believe the people who've circled our planet in outer space."

“Finnegan? Shazbot was way more direct than you, Alvin and the rest of the droids we’ve been around. What are you getting at?” Fletch finished his coffee and still felt sluggish.

“We share information is all. You asked if there are more places like the one you were staying at in Anguilla. Rossum Machinery International is a secret subsidiary of Northrop Grumman. Halliburton has built a compound here in Iraq that is larger than Vatican City. Remember anyone saying that we went to war in Iraq to liberate the people? Do you remember one of the commanders being scolded for putting up an American flag after one of the major battle victories? It is not an occupation, right?” There wasn’t a lot of time for Finnegan to explain. The airplane was stopping. “Halliburton has its own covert branch of operations. How do I know this? *We share information*. By now, you know that the second Gulf War was started on false pretenses. Just because we share information doesn’t mean it’s accurate. Halliburton’s secret arm has been called *Zombie Logistics*. I have not physically been to the compound where we’re heading. It’s more than a hundred acres. Technically, it’s an embassy but it looks more like a mini-America featuring a golf course, shopping mall and soccer field. *The food court is amazing*. Do you like sushi? Mexican? You won’t be disappointed.” They got out of the plane and were shuttled to a waiting Abrams tank. Finnegan mounted up and pulled Vivian by the hand. He said, “You haven’t had the full Iraq experience until you’ve taken a ride in one of *these* things.” Fletcher was the last to climb in then they drove along. “There’s a graveyard of destroyed armored vehicles we might want to visit if we have the time.”

They reached the gates of the complex and got out of the M1. “The cost of this place was three quarters of a billion dollars.” Vivian looked around as they marched. “The war was supposed to cost eighty-seven billion. What happened? I wonder.”

“There’s a great six-lane pool here. The two main roads are Broadway and Main Street. They crisscross each other ahead.” Finnegan waved at diplomats walking from the opposite direction. “There are officially twenty-one buildings here but, like many other American projects, this place has *secrets*. It’s ironic, you know? Saddam Hussein was portrayed to be an indiscreet killer with a lavish palace and a sophisticated bunker system. The US military has killed way more Iraqis than Saddam... this embassy puts his palace to shame... and you’re going to like the secret!” They crossed Broadway and Main without much talk then entered an amber building. Like the RMI headquarters in Anguilla, there was a passage to lower floors. “Everyone needs bunkers! Everyone could use subterranean flooring!”

“Wow!” Vivian followed Finnegan down a flight of stairs from the main level. “Did the same contractor build this place? It looks just like the lab where S-2026 units were being assembled!”

“Yes!” Finnegan reached into his wallet and pulled out an ID card. He showed it to a few approaching scientists without saying a word. They walked along and went down another flight of stairs.

“Holy crap, Finnegan! They are building S-2026 units here! But...” Fletch was drawn in and examined the faces of a few unfinished androids. “*They have different faces!*” He was awestruck. “They are celebrities! And politicians!”

"I have a couple of different blueprint layouts of this facility in my hard drive brain. One of them is the 'official' version as the US government believes exists without this robot assembly line. The other? I can now say that it's not a hoax. This place is real!" Finnegan walked up to an unfinished droid with the traditional look. "*Shazbot!*" Finnegan said. "We'll always remember Shazbot! This guy could pass as my twin when he's finished." Finnegan didn't stick around for nostalgia. He walked along and descended down a third set of stairs. "If my information is accurate, there is a warehouse on the bottom floor."

"Finnegan? Why are there celebrity look-alikes? Is this *Invasion of the Body Snatchers?*?" Vivian wasn't sure if she should be astonished or petrified.

He stopped in his tracks and did an about face. "All is fair in love and war." Finnegan's eyes were strangely distant. "If the shit hits the fan next month and FEMA camps are utilized to round up citizens, it will not just be a physical civil war taking place in America. It will be a *psychological* one as well. Not everyone is headed to a camp. Citizens will be glued to their televisions. They will need to feel normal. They will need to see their favorite stars harassed by paparazzi on TMZ. The androids you saw upstairs? They will be able to fill the void of crazy liberals taken to labor sites. Did you know that Ed Asner is sounding the alarm about World Trade Center 7?" Finnegan's strange and serious speech ended in an instant and he continued down the steps.

Fletcher could see the magnitude of the project. There were *hundreds* of S-2026 units in orderly rows. Many of them resembled Saddam Hussein. Some of them looked like Matt Damon. Others took the form of Barack Obama, George W Bush and Nancy Pelosi. "This takes the cake, Finnegan! I wanted to see the *thermite*! That's what I was driven by! I wanted to talk candidly with anyone who set the charges in the World Trade Center. That was my wet dream! I wanted a peace of mind. If I could talk to one demolition expert who was in the Towers before nine eleven, I didn't have to be a whistle blower. I just wanted to know! Did our government take down its own buildings in order to implement martial law? I had to know!"

Vivian walked along. "*Fletcher?*" Her voice shrieked. "Fletcher! Come here!"

"Honey?" Fletcher caught up to his lover. "*Vivian?*" He grabbed her by the shoulder but she didn't budge. She might as well have seen a ghost. "Viv? Talk to me!"

Vivian's right hand slowly raised into the air and pointed between celebrity and politician androids. "*Look!*"

The S-2026 units were tightly packed. None of them moved. Five rows in, Fletcher could see what snatched Viv's attention. For a few seconds, he stood in silence. "Is that us?"

"Finnegan?" Viv finally broke out of her spell. "Why are there androids that look identical to me and Fletcher?" She guessed there were about fifty of each kind.

"My, my!" Finnegan walked down one of the rows and called Viv and Fletch. "That is nothing! You've got to see our masterpieces."

"*Jesus Christ!*" Fletcher yelled. "Vivian? Literally... *Jesus Christ!* What are you messing with, Finn?! What kind of psychological warfare are you planning?"

"First of all, the Halliburton secret subsidiary makes its own guidelines. They are not directly affiliated with RMI." Finnegan spoke toward the Jesus android. "Jesus? Polar bears are rafting along the Nile." The Jesus android turned his head toward Viv.

She fainted.

"Turn it off! Finnegan! This is freaking me out too much!" Fletch shook Finn by the shoulders.

"*The penguins eat tofu in Siberia!*" Finnegan called. The Jesus android faced forward again then froze like a mannequin. "The first wave of droids turned on and off with that command, you might remember. Now? We have a separate phrase for turning them on."

Behind Jesus was the Beatles. "John? George? Ringo? Paul? *Polar bears are rafting along the Nile.*" The Fab Four started chitchatting in Liverpool accents. "This beats the *crap* out of the Hollywood Wax Museum!" Fletcher was actually happy. "If we survive the madness that we're in the middle of, I want to keep these guys for a couple of months. Can you arrange that, Finnegan?"

"Why is there a Tupac android, Finnegan? How did they decide that Little Richard would not be made but Tupac would?" Vivian strolled along and saw more marvels. James Dean, Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley.

"Like I have said before, RMI is unaffiliated with this division. We shared technology so we could both achieve our personal goals, but manufacturing policy was devised by different individuals." Finnegan noticed that Fletch behaved like a kid in a candy store. "Have you had enough?"

"It's like stepping into the Sergeant Pepper album cover! *Geez!*" Fletch wanted the moment to stretch but he knew there was other business to tend to. "*The penguins eat tofu in Siberia,*" he said. The Beatles reassumed their previous positions and looked like wax figures.

It was Friday the Thirteenth. It was two days after marches and demonstrations in DC. Herman Eichelberger and Matthew Stubbs were seated behind a bus driver. Behind them, there were roughly fifty protesters they had nabbed at the beginning of the week. Herman and Matt were separated from the protesters by a cage wall. Herman had told the group at Fort Indiantown Gap, "If you are smart, you will not tell anyone that the government abducted you! Some of you were shitting on the American flag! Some of you were planning violent mischief on the twelfth anniversary of *nine eleven*. Many of you are simply idiots that we wanted to experiment with!"

The bus was headed south on the 443 toward the Annville Train Station. The captured deviants were all given one way tickets back to New York. Matt spoke to them through the thick wire mesh, "I want to let you know that I had a good time with a lot of you. For those of you that think you're gonna call a lawyer? Forget about it. Tell your friends and family when you return that you were abducted by aliens. *You'll be better off.* Tell them you went to DC to protest and lost track of time. Tell them that you went camping. *Hell!* Tell them you're responsible for the Seaside fire in Jersey!"

Matthew Stubbs spent a lot of time with the detainees during the week. They would be brought in individually to an interrogation room and Brent, Ramon or Tad would be around with an armed weapon just in case anything funny went down. Matt explained in candor what was going on. It started with three pounds

of organic matter. It had to do with economics and unsustainability. Jonathan Lipnicki apologized on TMZ about being wrong about his famous *Jerry Maguire* line that a human head weighs eight pounds. Matt Stubbs did his research. There was no reason for apology. The number was accurate enough. A cadaver cut off around vertebra C3 without hair was around four and half kilograms. The brain, on average, was about three pounds.

Matt's spiel was pretty much the same with each person he sat down with.

Three pounds of *faulty* organic matter is what it took. Supreme Court judge Antonin Scalia decided for all humankind what the world would be like. The retrospective contrast between Gore and Bush couldn't be wider peering back at 2000. Gore was part of an administration which accomplished a trillion dollar surplus. W Bush was the son of the man who coined the phrase, "voodoo economics". HW Bush went on to be vice president for the man whom he accused advocated the horrid, unworkable supply-side economics, *Ronald Wilson Reagan*. When HW Bush was sworn in as vice president, the national debt was a controllable one trillion dollars.

Matt's spiel stayed consistent even though he sounded like a confused rambling person to each person he sat down with.

Judge Scalia was a self-admitted conservative, as was W Bush and the governor of the 2000 contested state of Florida, Jeb Bush. Everyone knew about the issues with the butterfly ballots. That dead horse couldn't be beaten more. There were issues about computerized voting machines and minorities purged from voting rolls. There were issues of long lines in minority precincts. A hundred million Americans voted in 2000 but ultimately it was an issue of three pounds of organic matter which decided the election. Somewhere in this mysterious set of neurons and brain cells, a decision was made that "originalism" and "strict construction" would apply somehow to the Fourteenth Amendment's "equal protection" clause. Gore was gaining ground in the recount and Scalia, together with four other conservative justices, decided there would be a two-hour window for Al to demonstrate that victory was his in the wild Sunshine state.

"Life is arbitrary, now," Matt would wind up telling people. "Why were you picked up? It's all about who's running the show."

Who knows what's going on in someone's brain? Shows like *Star Trek* and *Gilligan's Island* were cancelled after a few short seasons but managed to remain in pop culture for decades in reruns. All the while, *Jake and the Fatman* ran for a longer period yet slipped into obscurity. Who knows why decisions have been made? It was clear to Matt, though, the democracy itself lost in the year 2000. Three pounds of organic mass tilted humanity's future toward war and irresponsible economics. The wars were deemed illegal by Mahathir Mohamad, Desmond Tutu and a host of others. W Bush implemented a suicidal form of "voodoo economics" which shot the United States toward eventual handicapped obliteration. Three pounds of organic mass could have chosen prudence and real democracy but instead selected favoritism and fascism. Matt wanted to know what made the protesters tick. *Do you not know it's over? Are you out there for the cameras? Is it your greatest chance for fame? Do you not know that the decisions have already been made?* Matt was challenged by Herman to find out who the protesters believed had their backs. Some of them couldn't wait until the

USA was taken over by foreign powers. Others believed that democracy—*actual democracy*—could return. Matt usually finished by telling the captives that whatever was going on between Scalia's ears in 2000, that it doomed the fate of planet Earth for the next few centuries. *If you want to know why you're here instead of working for a good wage at a wind farm, you can thank that guy.*

The apprehended picketers were dropped off at the Annville Train Station without apology and without monetary compensation. On the bus ride back to Fort Indiantown Gap, Herman decided to discuss Adolf Hitler with Matthew Stubbs. "*Das Grosse Luge!* Do you know what that means?"

"What? Is that German?" Matt looked behind them. The bus was now empty and it somehow felt strange. He grew to like some of the guys they had stolen from the streets.

"Das Grosse Luge? German? Yes. *Mein Kampf*." Herman went on to talk about what he believed world history was. Volume one of Hitler's famous book was printed in 1925 and volume two was printed in 1926. Joseph Goebbels was attributed with the line "a lie told a million times becomes the truth" but Herman believed it was meant to describe Ashkenazi Jewish settlers in Poland. It wasn't their native homeland. The land around Jerusalem had changed names many times throughout the Biblical era. "America was founded simply and innocently enough," Herman explained. There was no reason for mass deception and sinister plots. There was no completed world map, for example. How could there be such thing as the *Manifest Destiny* idea at the time pilgrims landed on Plymouth Rock? The early settlers looked for a new home and they tried to get along with the natives. "Where do you think *Thanksgiving* comes from?" Herman asked. Eventually, Americans in the so-called New World hit the same problem as the Ashkenazi nomads immigrating from the Caspian Sea. Their population exploded and the place where they intended to live already had people living there. "Do you know that after *nine eleven*, some Israelis were quoted as saying that Israel is now America's fifty-first state?" Herman went on without interruption from Matt. "They're liars, Matt. We're part of the lie, now."

"It's always been about survival for me," Matt told Herman. "I don't care what it takes, really. You're really good at depicting our circumstance in the bigger picture but it really doesn't matter to me at the end of the day. I don't care if we're telling the truth and I don't care if we're telling lies. I care about food in my stomach and I care about a roof over my head."

Finnegan, Fletch and Viv were on the *Concorde* again zipping to southern Africa at supersonic speeds. "Tell me about Old Man Rossum!" Fletch swirled the ice in his *Jack and Coke*.

"Old Man Rossum?" Finnegan asked. "There *is* no Old Man Rossum if you're referring to Rossum Machinery International... at least not in the truest sense. In fiction, the name was taken from *Czechoslovakian* theatre. *Rossum's Universal Robots* was a play written by Karel Čapek in 1921. The English word '*robot*' comes from his work, by the way. It's about a kid who builds many S-2026 units and the world is better off for it." Finnegan liked that Viv smirked. "I made a joke... but in a nutshell, that's what the story is. In 1938, a thirty-five minute portion was adapted for early BBC television. Perhaps we can find it online?" Finnegan gestured to the flat screen TV.

"Nah. I'm fine." Fletch reclined his seat and stretched.

"Since we're heading to Kilimanjaro, perhaps we can discuss *Barry Soetoro*." Finnegan got nothing from Fletch. Viv, on the other hand, seemed curious. "You know? The president of the United States of America?"

"Have you crossed a circuit again?" Viv was rarely angry with any of the androids but she found herself frustrated and perplexed. "What are you talking about?"

"Barry Soetoro. Registered voter in Washington, DC up until this past July. Date of birth is August 4, 1961. Resident of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue." Finnegan saw the light bulb come on above Viv's head.

"*1600 Pennsylvania*. That's the White House!" She still didn't understand what Finn was getting at. "Barry... *who*?"

"Barack Hussein Obama, when he was a child, was raised by Stanley Ann Dunham and Lolo Soetoro. When Barack was six years old, he went to live in Indonesia... and took the name Barry Soetoro. He lived there until he was ten, at which point he went to live with his grandmother in Honolulu." Finnegan was not trying to make it more complicated than it needed to be. He was getting better at knowing when he was successfully getting points across. He thought that Vivian would put the pieces together but there were no indicators that she understood. There was no paraphrase. She did not complete his sentences. "Donald Trump has accused the president of being born in Kenya. It's not all that far from Tanzania."

"Oh! I thought you wanted to fly to the other side of the globe!" Viv laughed. "I thought we were going to change plans and head many hours in a different direction!"

"We can go to Kenya to try to verify or dispel the outrageous birther allegations. Would you like to do that?" Finnegan watched Fletch's glass drop out of his hands. Fletch started to snore.

"Me? No. I want to hike in the most beautiful mountain in Africa. I don't want to think about politics. I've had too much of it over these past few weeks." Viv admired Fletch for passing out. She wished she could sleep but felt too restless.

It was Monday morning and Matthew Stubbs was finishing a bowl of eight scrambled eggs. He was in the makeshift headquarters tent with Herman, Elwyn, Tad, Brent and Ramon. "I have an idea for a show. You think daytime television is saturated with *Judge This* and *Judge That* type of programs? How's this one?" Matt scarfed down the rest of his food and, though it was ample, he wanted to eat more. "*Conspiracy Court*! I mean, we just dropped off fifty people we yanked from the streets because they were protesting about the wrong thing! I know it, you know it, and they know it! But the public? They'll never know. If any of them ever tries to explain it, they'll be put in the same category as nuts that've seen Big Foot!"

"Conspiracy Court?" Herman ate his scrambled eggs in the form of a breakfast sandwich. "Tell me about it."

"You get someone like a Judge Judy and you grab Jonathan Vankin's *70 Greatest Conspiracies*... or you go to the *AboveTopSecret* web site. You get a lawyer who argues and presents evidence that... I don't know. Let's say *Princess Diana*. You get him to show facts which would lead a jury to believe that her death was no accident. You get this special lawyer-type to call a few unique

witnesses.” Matt watched the guys around him still eating. He looked into his empty bowl and had to resist asking anyone if they were going to finish breakfast.

“Who’s on the jury?” Ramon asked.

“*People like you.* I think it could work on MTV or something. Get a bunch of young kids. The decision doesn’t have to be binding. Is the Loch Ness Monster out there? Are there aliens at Area 51? Was there a lone gunman in Dallas, 1963?” Matt shook the idea off. “It’s probably stupid.”

“I like it actually,” Brent said. “There’s a problem, though. A *big* problem. The corporations that finance commercial television are part of most of the good conspiracies.”

“Yeah. I guess Viacom or General Electric is not really gonna let people talk crap about their buddies in front of national TV.” Matt thought back about his work in Beech Grove. He thought about the modified warehouses around Ontario International Airport. He thought about his present time in the tent. “It’s all useless. I think it’d be a good idea... but in today’s America, it just wouldn’t happen.”

“I have an idea for a judge show! How’s this?” Tad scooted his chair toward the group. “*Judge Scout!* Think Gary Coleman or Macaulay Culkin when they were tikes. You get this cute kid with a bad attitude... and he knows *nothing* about law. It’s like the *People’s Court* except every now and then, the kid judge would yell things like ‘*you’re a stupid idiot*’ or ‘*you should hit yourself!*’ Totally off the cuff, right? It’d only be a slight exaggeration of how people feel in *real* court today!”

It was Friday, September twentieth. Viv and Fletcher spent a few days hiking around the mountain peaks of Kilimanjaro. Vivian believed it was the best time she could remember having as an adult. Fletcher popped the question. “Vivian? I think we’ve run our course. I think we’ve sowed our wild oats. I don’t have any desire to chase down the monsters who are ruining our planet. I *do* have the desire to live with you... and to settle down. I think we should get married here. It would be perfect. We can live in Anguilla for a year and take life as it comes.”

Vivian agreed that marriage should happen soon or not at all. She proposed a quaint wedding in Paris. There was one more adventure, though. Finnegan told the young couple that he could get them into the Saudi sarin stockpile from where Syrian rebels received their chemical weapons which were used on August twenty-first. Everything seemed like it was years ago. *Nine eleven, Benghazi and the Syrian gas tragedy.* Fletcher’s focus had turned from understanding thermite to understanding sarin during the past few weeks. Finnegan flew Viv and Fletch to an undisclosed warehouse and provided connections so that they could see first-hand what was going on behind the veil of the sold out American media.

It was popularly believed that a person’s life flashes before hers or his eyes right before death. Something was wrong. Finnegan was with Viv and Fletcher as they examined barrels and warheads. There were crates of fluoride and there were pallets of pesticides. There was cyanide and there were various explosives. There were boxes of landmines.

Vivian Streets saw Juliet Capulet pierce her heart with a dagger.

Vivian was thirteen years old when her father took her to see a live

depiction of *Romeo and Juliet* at the San Francisco Playhouse. She hadn't met Fletcher Browne, yet. She fell in love with love. She wanted to find her personal Romeo.

Romeo Montague was dead on the floor.

There was no strong odor in the room. Nothing looked out of place besides the stacks of weapons.

Fletcher Browne was on the floor convulsing.

Vivian looked over at Finnegan. He was a robot with acutely developed artificial intelligence. He would know what was going on... except that Finnegan took off running to the warehouse's exit.

Romeo didn't understand. Juliet ingested a small amount of poison so it would put her into a mild hibernation. It would seem to the world that she had died. It was the only way to escape the asinine political feuding between the Montague and Capulet families. It was the only way that she could live with her true love, Romeo Montague... but Romeo didn't understand. He wasn't let in on the plan and he believed Juliet was dead so he ended his own life.

Fletcher Browne was on the floor foaming at the mouth. Vivian wanted him to explain himself. "Why are you joking about something so stupid!" she screamed at him... then she could feel it. Her nose started to run and the muscles in her upper body tightened. She found it impossible to breathe and she puked her lunch onto the floor. She fell to the ground.

I've got to get to Fletch.

She dry heaved a few times and commanded her body to slither toward her lover. Her bowels released inside of her hiking shorts and gobs of drool slid outside of her mouth.

Here's to my love. Romeo swallowed his toxic drink. O true apothecary! Thy drugs are quick.

Vivian managed to get close enough to Fletcher to lay her head on one of his shins right before she could feel his spasms totally cease.

Romeo. O pale.

Vivian remembered her first kiss with Fletcher on the Rosemont High School bleachers during halftime of a football game.

What's here? A cup, closed in my true love's hand? Poison, I see, hath been his timeless end.

Vivian Streets grasped at Fletcher Browne's thigh.

There rust and let me die.