

DOMINION

by

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www.JLBryanbooks.com



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"American Blood" lyrics © 2008 Willy Braun. Used by permission.

From the album *Bulletproof*

Visit www.recklesskelly.com

For Christina

Mine eyes have seen the orgy of the launching of the Sword;
 He is searching out the hoardings where the stranger's wealth is stored;
 He hath loosed his fateful lightnings, and with woe and death has scored;
 His lust is marching on.

I have seen him in the watch-fires of a hundred circling camps;
 They have builded him an altar in the Eastern dews and damp;
 I have read his doomful mission by the dim and flaring lamps—
 His night is marching on.

I have read his bandit gospel writ in burnished rows of steel:
 "As ye deal with my pretensions, so with you my wrath shall deal;
 Let the faithless son of Freedom crush the patriot with his heel;
 Lo, Greed is marching on!"

In a sordid slime harmonious Greed was born in yonder ditch,
 With a longing in his bosom—and for others' goods an itch.
 As Christ died to make men holy, let men die to make us rich—
 Our god is marching on.

"The Battle Hymn of the Republic, Updated"
 Mark Twain, 1901

black gold for silver stars
 cold hard cash for armored cars
 the brass ain't fighting but they're sure as hell taking a stand
 and they'll have to live with American blood on their hands

"American Blood"
 Reckless Kelly, 2008

ONE

Daniel Ruppert left the steel-reinforced black dome of the GlobeNet, Los Angeles studio and drove into the war-torn concrete hell of south L.A. The roads deteriorated beneath him as he traveled deeper into the Economic Reclamation Zone, where the Western Resources and Energy Committee now permitted up to four hours of electricity a day and as much as two gallons of water per household, a bid to stave off riots as the National Guard effected its latest withdrawal. Another intervention would likely follow within the month. Ruppert would report on it ominously, while framed by footage captured by the triangular GlobeNet spycams that glided like tight swarms of black vultures over newsworthy sites.

On this evening's newscast, Ruppert had described the new measures as a "bold initiative to increase prosperity and opportunity for the citizens of Southern Los Angeles." Privately, he'd wondered whether "increase" was the proper word, since it implied that those things existed in the first place. The word, like the overall positive tone of the story, had been chosen by network, and a mere reporter had no place suggesting revisions. Ruppert was just a face-man, someone who could look trustworthy and reassuring regardless of what he said, or how much he lied.

His new 2035 Ford Bluehawk stuck out like a golden thumb as it raced low and sleek along the shattered 405, picking up speed each time he darted under a wrecked overpass bridge. Scavengers sometimes lurked in the shadows beneath bridges, waiting to snare a promising target using a homemade explosive tucked into a roadway fissure, or maybe an old-fashioned burst of machine gun fire. At least, this was the kind of thing Ruppert reported for the local news. The boundary between the true world and the one manufactured for the audience was slippery and porous, even for him, especially since he didn't know when he told the truth and when he didn't. It was all just script.

Garbage and earthquake rubble buried most of the ramps on this stretch of interstate. Up the ramps, behind the rusty barbs and chain link running alongside the highway, most of the old concrete buildings stood lightless except for the occasional red glare of an open fire in a window hole. The four hours of electricity was probably an exaggeration. More likely, the Western Resource and Energy Committee provided one hour, or no hours at all—most likely, they had simply issued the announcement to assure

security-enclave residents in Beverly Hills and Orange County that something was being done for the benighted masses of the south.

In three or four weeks, he would be reading a new statement for the cameras—that the residents of South L.A. had sabotaged the transformers and power lines, or had used the new electricity to fuel insurgent activity, and the power needed to be cut once again. Over iced drinks on manicured golf courses, where groves of trees concealed the electrified razor-wired fences, Ruppert's colleagues would shake their heads and comment on how you just couldn't help those people.

To support the story, the National Guard would be sent in for another round of occupation. A few hundred adolescents and young men would be swept up and shoved into the overcrowded Emergency Penitentiaries, and the well-heeled portion of the public would go on with their lives, satisfied that what could be done, had been done.

Ruppert should never have pointed his car south. His home was north, in Bel Aire, a three-story house in a high-walled, high-security suburban cell, where the houses all faced a "village green" in the center, complete with a swing set none of the obese neighborhood children bothered to touch. He did not belong down here.

Traveling into the southern zone was not illegal, of course, but highly suspicious. Suspicion mattered more than the law. Suspicion was enough to send you to an Emergency Penitentiary, though it was more likely that Ruppert, with his job and his background, would be submerged into the nightmare realm of the state's psychiatric prisons. Or just killed—one could always hope.

He reached his exit, passed through a lightless warren of dilapidated office parks, and trundled up to the gate at the STORE-SAFE. He waved his access card and the gate squealed as it rolled aside. The STORE-SAFE facility ran on its own battery power when south L.A. was blacked out. It was part of the STORE-SAFE Quality Pledge.

He navigated through the low brick alleys lined with rusty, padlocked garage doors until he reached his unit—332—and stopped the car. He got out, breathing in the burnt, ozone-laced night air, and his door quietly closed behind him. The manufacturer claimed the automatic-closing door was "soft as a butler's touch," which just sounded creepy to Ruppert.

His car locked itself up, and the windshield and windows tinted black to conceal the interior from potential thieves. He'd disabled the car's GPS system. If asked, he would say it had been malfunctioning but he simply hadn't made it to the mechanic. It would seem unlikely that he would disable it himself—what sane person wanted to run the risk of falling off the steady, safe beams of the grid? Still, he figured he only had a few weeks until that excuse became questionable.

The old-fashioned padlock on the storage unit door, and its matching archaic metal key, always amused him. It was the only physical key he owned. His car, his home, his office granted entry based on biometric data. Such an object, implying secretive off-the-grid activities, was also great cause for suspicion.

The padlock screeched open and the hasp shed flakes of rust as he lifted it free. Ruppert raised the garage door, stepped inside, and let it rattle shut behind him.

He flicked on his flashlight. The beam passed over a heap of furniture—a couch, a moth-chewed recliner with a broken ottoman, coffee table, dusty cardboard boxes filled with moldy books and clothing. None of this was his. It had been here when he'd rented the storage unit, abandoned remnants of someone else's life. When Ruppert had rented

the unit from the facility manager—an old, half-blind man named Carlos—the manager had avoided the ridiculously obvious subject of clearing out the previous renter's property, but Ruppert had said nothing, and hadn't bothered to do it himself. The heap of old junk made the unit appear to be nothing special, nothing that Department of Terror agents should waste their time searching.

Outside, a long, screaming whistle screeched across the night, followed by a rumbling explosion. Rocket-propelled grenade. The locals were at war again, either with authorities or each other. The floor seemed to jerk away beneath him, an armful of dust spilled from the ceiling, and then the world was quiet again.

He pried open the bottom drawer of a file cabinet and shoved the mass of folders toward the front of drawer. From the back, he withdrew his most prized possession, a gray cube a little smaller than his fist, etched with glittering Chinese ideograms. The only English was stamped on the bottom of the cube: SinoDyne, with the serial number filed off. It was three or four years old, but far more advanced than anything available to unlicensed consumers. The Department of Terror mandated low processing speeds for anything portable--they preferred people use their home or office networks, which were easier for Terror to track and record.

He fastened on the interface apparatus—eyephones, audio headset, input glove. He resisted the urge to check outside. The facility was walled and gated. Suddenly he wished he'd rented another unit to store his car when he visited. Anything manufactured in the last ten years would draw suspicion in this neighborhood. At the moment, only a helicopter patrol would be able to see his car, but the helicopter patrols worried him more than the street criminals. A criminal would only take Ruppert's car, and maybe his life. That was nothing compared to what Terror might do.

He booted up the Chinese data console and was immediately immersed in a world of ideograms. His ghostly virtual hand selected the translation icon, and his environment clarified into English. Ruppert did not know one bit of Chinese or any language but English. Learning a second language was dangerously unpatriotic.

He directed the computer to search out the 'bolivarNet' data archive, just one of hundreds of sites he might have accessed, all of them illegal, and usually impossible, to view. He was searching for rawfeed—news unfiltered by the Department of Terror approval process. He'd selected the bolivarNet site to find news from the wars in South America.

Ruppert found himself an invisible observer in a scene previously recorded on the streets of San Juan, Argentina, where Atlantic contractors fought a protracted war against Mercosur forces, either to contain the rabid political virus of Neocommunism, or to control local gold and copper mines--the motive depended on your source. The video had probably been filmed by Argentine guerillas, but Ruppert did not see any indication of the author's name.

A convoy of black armored tanks approached him, crushing the debris and the rust-heaps of long-abandoned automobiles that cluttered the barrio street. One side of each tank displayed the seal of Hartwell Services, Inc.--a black letter "H" with a hollow heart at the crossbar, centered inside an oval the color of gold rubbed with warm butter.

The opposite sides of the tanks displayed the New America flag: one fat white star on a blue square, framed by three thick lines, two red and one white. Some marketing consultant or other had allegedly redesigned the flag so that children could draw it more

easily, in order to help them develop the virtue of patriotism at a younger age. President Winthrop had proclaimed the single star represented the new, more unified country his administration liked to pretend it had created.

Artillery shells flared from the turrets, demolishing the few clay houses that still stood. Most of the neighborhood was already shattered and smoldering, probably from aerial bombardment.

The tanks' loudspeakers broadcast, in English, "Lay down your weapons. Insurgents will not be tolerated. Lay down your weapons. Prisoners will find mercy. Lay down your weapons."

The turret of the lead tank turned directly towards Ruppert, and he found himself running down a narrow alley; he was a captive audience to whomever had shot the video. He had a jagged, bouncing view of broken walls, a sky full of dark smoke, the ground strewn with rubble. The videographer, along with a few armed mestizo men who apparently accompanied him, turned down a steep flight of stairs--Ruppert could not tell whether the stairs were meant to be outdoors, or had once been inside a house--into a narrow, underground tunnel. Ruppert glimpsed scrawny, dismembered bodies in the shadows. The videographer hurried into the darkness under the city, and the video ended there, the rebels apparently not wanting to give the outside world a look at whatever subterranean passageways existed in San Juan.

Ruppert was standing again in the bolivarNet data archive, surrounded by floating spheres and cubes etched in several languages, each geometric form representing a different video, audio or text file supplied by Argentine rebels. He could move into other "rooms" if he wanted updates from Brazil or Venezuela, but he felt shaken already, and was in no hurry to see more.

He'd already committed enough crimes to draw the wrath of the Department of Terror, which held jurisdiction over all forms of foreign propaganda. One of their agents, George Baldwin, occupied an office at GlobeNet down the hall from Ruppert. His job was to ensure that no terrorist propaganda accidentally slipped into GlobeNet's broadcasts, to help sort the true from the untrue. He also facilitated conveying information from official sources to the news writers.

According to the story provided by Baldwin and presented to the public by Ruppert, the Argentinean people lived under a brutal Neocommunist dictator, and they were begging America for help. President Winthrop, in his mercy and benevolence, wanted them liberated.

Ruppert had become a junkie for foreign news, which would automatically mark him as a sympathizer. The Chinese data console, with its built-in language translation software, was extremely illegal—no good citizen desired information from unofficial, foreign sources. Ruppert had felt for years the urge to discover the truth behind the stories he reported each day, probably because he'd been young enough to study journalism at a time when it was considered important to find multiple sources on each story, cross-check them, sift them for solid facts. The Propaganda and Sedition Acts had eventually killed that method of journalism, and now the younger reporters at GlobeNet never questioned whether the story was true or false. The story was only reportable or nonreportable.

Ruppert unplugged from the console, the images of the shattered neighborhood still burning on the backs of his eyelids. One would be enough for tonight. It was always

best to stay cautious, in case you faced interrogation by a Terror agent. And there was his wife Madeline to think about—who may as well have been an agent herself.

He stashed the console away, locked up the storage unit, returned to his car. As he accelerated north on the broken freeway, he felt stupid and ashamed. He could not gain anything from learning unofficial information. He could only put himself and Madeline in danger, as well as his job and home. Already he could imagine himself packed into an Emergency Penitentiary cage pit, brawling like a starving dog with the other prisoners for protein goop at mealtime.

Ruppert hammered the accelerator and roared northward, pushing away from the forever murky and incomplete world of the truth, towards the bright order and superficial sanity of the officially sanctioned world.

TWO

Ruppert sat at the glossy green desk and faced a smooth, blank wall of the same color. A single, glossy shade of green covered every surface from floor to ceiling. Video technicians would add graphics around and behind him, and they would fill in this month's look for his studio. Black concave lenses protruded from each wall, capturing a 360-degree view that editors could slice into dynamic visuals, sweeps and pans to keep the eyes of a jaded audience interested.

Sullivan Stone took the green chair several feet to Ruppert's left, his blond hair cropped in a tight jarhead cut (Sully had never served in the Marines, or any branch of the military). Animated holograms on his tie depicted clips from the previous night's Dodgers game, the big story he'd be reporting for most of the news hour. Twenty-two minutes of the program were devoted to sports, thirty to commercials, two to weather and three to Ruppert's beat, national and international news. As the more "serious" reporter, he wore his usual severe blue suit embellished by the New America flag at his lapel.

Amanda Greene ("with the weather," his brain filled in automatically) sat off to his right.

"Daniel!" Stone punched Ruppert's arm with his usual ludicrous enthusiasm. "What do you say? Catch those Snipes?"

Ruppert hadn't seen it—he'd been busy watching illegal data. He mentally kicked himself for not checking the score this morning.

"Yeah," Ruppert said. "Crazy, huh?"

"You said it. That triple in the top of the ninth? Who saw that coming, am I right?"

"Your department, Sully."

"I know. God forbid I do my own research. No offense there, Amanda."

Amanda looked up from the digital weather report scrolling across her desk long enough to give him a scowl. Her data came prepackaged from the Central Weather Authority.

“Video up,” a tech’s voice spoke from overhead. “Audio okay. Everybody ready?”

“Ready and willing,” Stone said, with a wink at Amanda, who answered him with a sharp look, lips pressed into a tight line. Ruppert frowned automatically; it was always safest to feign disapproval at any indiscretion. He was always being watched and evaluated.

“Great,” the tech said. “Ruppert, here comes the count.”

Ruppert drew himself up in his chair and cleared his throat. The flashing blue-and-chrome sphere of the GlobeNet logo materialized in the air before him, and he heard the swooshing chords and chimes of the nightly news theme music. Floating holographic numbers counted down from five to one.

“Good evening,” Ruppert said. The logo disappeared and his script appeared in tall floating letters in front of him, one line at a time. “And welcome to GlobeNet-L.A.’s nightly news. I’m Daniel Ruppert.

“The citizens of San Juan, Argentina held a spontaneous rally today celebrating the arrival of democracy in their city. Old and young alike gathered to thank us for...” Ruppert stumbled. He’d just seen last night that San Juan was a war zone, but he was used to reporting untrue stories. What caused him to stumble was the video played to document the event—crowds of Latinos cheering and waving thousands of tiny New America flags. He recognized the footage. They’d used the exact same video a year and a half ago to illustrate the gratitude of Venezuelans in Caracas following American victory there. He doubted whether the original footage had even been shot in Venezuela, for that matter. Would nobody at home notice?

“...For liberating them from the brutal oppression of left-wing Mercosur forces that had seized control of their country,” he continued. “It was a stunning victory for freedom. Final score: three hundred leftists dead, two hundred twelve captured. For more, we go to our South America correspondent Robert Maxwell.”

The video flicked angles, and now tall, pale Maxwell stood among a cluster of Latino children waving flags and pushing forward to be caught on camera. Ruppert was impressed—Maxwell had been digitally dropped into the old footage.

“As you said, Ruppert, a stunning victory for freedom indeed. People are flooding the streets to celebrate the arrival of Hartwell Security Services...As you know, I’ve been here for the last six months, and I can tell you that it’s never been a more exciting time for the people of Colombia.”

“He said Colombia,” Ruppert said.

“Thanks, Ruppert,” a techie’s voice replied from the ceiling. “We’ll fix it in post. Get ready for your next load.”

The image of the Latin crowd—Argentinean, Venezuelan, or other—vanished, replaced by a new stream of bright words.

“Vice President Hartwell,” Ruppert read aloud, “Whose Hartwell Services contractors brought home the victory, said our soldiers fought with unrelenting courage and valor.

“In other news, the Chinese Navy continues its blockade of the Korean peninsula, interfering with supply lines to American bases there.” Stock footage of battleships and aircraft carriers emblazoned with red stars appeared in front of Ruppert, reflecting what viewers would see at home. Ruppert changed his facial expression accordingly, from

enthusiastic to grim. “President Winthrop was attending the Masters Tournament in Augusta, Georgia, and unavailable for comment. However, the Secretary of Defense issued the following statement.”

The pasty, obese Secretary appeared at a flag-draped podium and read in a flat monotone:

“Once again, we warn the prime minister of China that the Atlantic alliance possesses a full-spectrum, first-strike capability against Chinese cities and installations. Our Skyfire orbital weapons system is online and fully operational. If this unwarranted aggression continues, China will find itself incapable of wielding its nuclear arsenal against the American people, because that arsenal will no longer exist.”

“Strong words from the Secretary of Defense,” Ruppert said. “And speaking of strong words, imagine what Del Ray Snipers head coach Richard “Rusty” Keyes must have said to his team after their brutal, bloody defeat by the Dodgers. Am I right, Sully?”

“Absolutely, Daniel,” Sully said. “Last night’s game was a steel-toed kick in the head for Rusty...”



Ruppert and Stone took a late lunch at the Soyballs Bistro, a small, dirty nook of a restaurant far enough from the studio to avoid their co-workers, though still within the concrete walls of the Westwood Secured Zone (Sealed for Your Protection by Hartwell Security Services, as the billboards said). Soyballs was a good place to escape their co-workers. The dingy restaurant specialized in meatlike dishes from its own secret soy recipe, which was of uneven quality and had been known to cause constipation, or the opposite. As a result, their co-workers treated Soyballs like a leper colony, naturally preferring the high-end spots on the other side of Westwood. Ruppert felt more comfortable talking among the janitors and day laborers who ate here.

The waitress arrived, but said nothing, just thumped her pencil nub against a stained notepad. Ruppert ordered the soy patty with cabbage, and raised an eyebrow when Sully asked for the Soy-Ton salad. The waitress nodded her head and jotted these down, and left without having spoken a single word.

"Chinese themed food?" Ruppert asked Sully, with a slight grin. "Not exactly patriotic these days, Sully. You should watch out."

Sully poured hot tea from the table top dispenser. At Soyballs, you didn't have a choice. You drank whatever was supplied at your table that day, or nothing at all.

"It's not as if Chinese food really represents what they eat in China," Sully said. "It's more of a satire."

"What do you think about China?" Ruppert asked. "Do you think it'll be war?"

"I think their new president exhibits a horrendous sense of fashion."

"Does that matter?"

"A great deal. It's a crime for a man to rule two billion people but dress that poorly. That should raise alarm bells all on its own."

Ruppert poured his own tea. It was pale and green and tasted like boiled tree bark.

"What are we doing, Sully?"

"You mean like on the planet? Whether we have a driving purpose, like the Warrenites are always screaming on the street corners? Or whether life is just stupid noise, as the punk bands teach us?"

"I mean our jobs. The network."

"We inform the public."

"It's easier for you," Ruppert said.

"How? My segment's much longer than yours." Sully smirked as his Soy-Ton salad arrived. He looked down at the three pale, membranous, vaguely won-ton-shaped lumps on top of his green salad, then began picking them off.

"But you just report scores and injuries," Ruppert said. "It's easy. What you report is always true."

Sully's blue eyes flared and he leaned back.

"You should watch what you say, Ruppert. In a time of war, you know."

"It's always a time of war."

"Listen." Sully whispered through his teeth, his boyish face suddenly taut and hard. He sounded to Ruppert like a snake that had been backed into a corner. "I know what you think. You know what I think. Just leave it, okay? I do not want to get picked up and questioned right now."

"Sully, I'm not trying to bait you. I'm not with Terror."

"I know that."

"Why are you so paranoid today?" Ruppert looked at the only other customers remaining, a table of three Mexican men in stained, threadbare coveralls. "I don't think they're with Terror, either."

"How can you know that?" Sully whispered.

"Jesus Christ, Sully." Ruppert shook his head and jabbed a fork at the fried black lump of soy patty. He wasn't hungry. "Things used to be different, didn't they?"

"I can hardly remember," Sully said. "It's like the bomb stopped time. Now every day is just the day after the bomb."

THREE

Ruppert parked in the guest lot at District 118-4 Public Secondary School 171E, a twelve-story cinderblock building in Brentwood Glen. Cameras mounted on razor-wire fences swiveled after him as he approached the bulletproof window of the guard station by the school's front door. The security guard, a heavysset white guy with a shaved head and drooping eyelids, was engrossed in a glossy sports magazine.

"Hi," Ruppert said. "My name is Daniel Ruppert, I'm here to see my wife, Madeline—"

The guard looked up, and his eyes flared open.

"Oh, shit!" The guard spoke with a tinny echo over the loudspeaker. Then a loud, grinding screech resounded over the same speaker, and the guard clapped his hands over his ears. It was the school's voice-monitoring system, punishing the guard for inappropriate speech.

"I mean, shucks, or whatever," the guard said. "You're the news guy!"

"Yep." Ruppert gave what his thought of his as his photo-op grin. "Thanks for watching. I'm here to pick up my wife."

"Your wife works here?"

"Madeline Ruppert."

"Madeline..." The guard leaned forward and tapped at the screen on his console. "Yeah, yeah, I've seen her. Sorry, first week on the job. We're not supposed to admit unscheduled visitors during school hours. It's still ninth period."

"You really want me to stand here for the next twenty minutes?"

"Not up to me." Ruppert waited while the guard spoke to a supervisor over his earphones. Finally, the guard nodded, tapped his screen again, and a sliding drawer emerged from beneath his window. Ruppert lifted out a laminated badge with his name, the date and time, and a photograph of himself that had apparently just been taken.

"Mrs. Ruppert is on the eighth floor—Room 82B," the guard said. "Adults stay to the center lane in all corridors. The badge is radio-tagged, so don't go off-course or you'll trigger an alert."

“Thanks.”

The front doors opened, and Ruppert entered a hallway divided into three lanes by thick black stripes on the floor. More cameras watched him from the ceiling. Posters lined the walls, many of them depicting President Winthrop at a flag-draped podium, the image of the Earth floating in blackness behind him. The pictures showed Winthrop in his prime, rather than the somewhat decrepit and shriveled old man now serving his twenty-third year as President of the United States. The posters were emblazoned with some of the Party’s favorite slogans: “Strength Abroad, Strength At Home;” “America for Americans;” “America: The Revolution Continues.” And of course the inevitable cross painted like the flag, planted in a hilltop and apparently leaking blood into the grass, with the inevitable slogan: “America Everlasting.”

As Ruppert continued towards the elevator bank, he glanced at other posters, these depicting the homeland’s enemies. One showed a fierce-looking Latino guerrilla, certainly a leftist, his face painted with black stripes, his machine gun pointed at the viewer. He stood in a jungle under a full moon. The caption for this one: “If You Use Drugs, You Support the Terrorists.” Another poster depicted Arabic jihadis huddled in a cave, staring at a map of the United States: “Where Will They Strike Next? Stay Alert!”

The elevator automatically took him to the eighth floor, since Ruppert was not authorized to visit any of the others. As he walked down a similar hallway towards Madeline’s room, a boy of twelve or thirteen shuffled past in the lane to his left. The boy kept his eyes on his own shoes and flashed a hall pass at Ruppert without looking up.

The door to Madeline’s classroom was next to a poster of an adolescent girl in an orange prison jumpsuit, her lips a corrupt mass of blisters and sores. The poster read, “Remember: Premarital SEX is a SIN and a CRIME.”

The door opened, and Madeline leaned out, smiling, tucking a long strand of red hair behind her ear. Security must have beeped her.

“We’re still in ninth period,” she whispered. “You’re breaking school protocol.”

“I wanted to surprise you. Surprised?”

“Sh. We’re watching a lesson.”

He followed her into a darkened classroom where sixty eighth-grade students watched a standard montage of life in Columbus, Ohio, before the bomb: kids playing baseball, families attending church, a farmer driving a pick-up truck loaded with bales of hay. Whenever Ruppert saw this one, he always wondered how many farmers had actually driven around downtown Columbus with a full load of hay, and for what purpose, but naturally he kept questions to himself.

“The Fourth of July, 2016. Columbus, Ohio, was a quiet Christian city in the middle of the American heartland,” the narrator said. It was the deep, twangy voice of semi-forgotten country music star Olroy P. Toombs. “People lived the traditional American way in Columbus. The good people of Ohio never expected the horrible fate the terrorists planned that Fourth of July.” A few video clips illustrated the Fourth of July factor, families in red, white and blue oohing and aahing at fireworks as they ate hot dogs and waved sparklers.

The movie’s background music shifted from pleasant piano notes to grim, dark oboe and bass tones. Ruppert reclined against the back wall, next to Madeline, and looked over the herd of kids. They all dressed according to the school’s strict moral code: long skirts and long sleeves for the girls, slacks and collared shirts for the boys.

The moral code also required boys' hair to remain less than an inch long, preferably crew cut, while all girls had to grow theirs out to at least shoulder-length. A few of the kids looked bored, but most watched as if the video would soon show Christ rising from his tomb.

Stark video clips cut into each other. The mushroom cloud rising from Columbus, captured from one angle after another. The neighborhoods blown flat. The twisted black hulk of a school bus.

Then the soundtrack shifted again, to a thundering brass orchestra, as hundreds of military, police and FEMA vehicles swarmed into the city. The video cut to President Winthrop, the edges of his face still hard and sharp at age fifty, his steel-gray hair tousled by the wind as he stood under the White House portico.

"Today, on the birthday of our nation, we have suffered a horrendous and unjustified attack at the very heart of our homeland. The entire country mourns with the good people of Ohio.

"Today, our country has changed forever. For too long, America has allowed her enemies to gather in the shadowy realms of the world. We have been generous. We have been just. We have loved peace; today, we see we have loved peace too much, been too forgiving of our enemies, too kind to those who threaten our interests.

"The American people are a good-hearted people, but after this grievous act of war, perpetrated by foreign terrorists against innocent lives, we must show the world a new face, another side, a different view of what our power can be.

"Americans love peace—but we love justice more."

A roar of cries and an avalanche of applause poured over the speakers, the recorded enthusiasm of the press corps.

"America has suffered today, but America is strong, and America will grow stronger still. Today, I pronounce a Second American Revolution, one that will purge the corrupting influences from our nation and make us pure and upright once again. As we have grown complacent abroad, we have grown complacent at home—and as we all see now, the enemy is present here among us. Perhaps in our neighborhoods. Perhaps in our schools. Perhaps even at our churches.

"We are not safe, America. We must band together, now, as Americans, to fight the enemy in every corner of the Earth. Including our own. Tomorrow Congress will pass, and I will sign, the Articles for the Continuation of Democracy. These emergency measures will grant the executive branch full authority to find every terrorist, to root out every infiltrator hidden among us, to seek out everyone anywhere in the world who might intend us harm, and to destroy them all. To defend our freedom, to protect our children, to fight for our way of life, and--yes, America, for our God."

After another wave of cheers, the President continued, "Even in this worst of all tragedies lies opportunity. We will reclaim America for the American people, and we will set our nation right. Citizens of America, the Second Revolution has begun. Together, we will build an America that will stand a thousand years, an America everlasting."

This time, even the kids in the room joined in the cataclysmic applause. They'd been trained that way.

Madeline touched a black panel in the wall and the fluorescent classroom lights came up, while the giant image of President Winthrop faded into a blank whiteboard. Black words appeared in Madeline's handwriting:

FOR TONIGHT:

Watch today's lesson again. Journalize your feelings on video. We will evaluate you in class tomorrow.

The bell rang, and sixty kids jumped to their feet. Madeline shouted after them as they surged out of the room.

"Mark, no pushing! Keep your eyes on the ground! Sarah, pull up your sock, no one wants to see your dirty leg!"

When the last kid had left, she turned to Ruppert and her hard glare melted into a smile.

"Hi there," she said.

"Hi there yourself." Daniel leaned in to kiss her, but she kept him at arm's length.

"Not in the gulag, okay?" she said.

He stepped back from her as she gathered her purse from her desk.

"You must have the easiest job in the world," he said.

"You try babysitting nine classes of sixty little hell-trolls every day."

"I thought you taught history."

"What do you call that?" She gestured toward the whiteboard as they started towards the door.

"A movie."

"It's the only way these pagan brats learn anything. Just try to get one to read a book. Half of them are just waiting to go home and shoot up virtual Muslims."

"That's what half of them will spend their whole lives doing."

"Right." They stepped into the crowded hallway, moving quickly into the center, kid-free lane. "I just hope they carry some respect for history onto the battlefield with them. They should know what they're sacrificing for. Did you get the cookies?"

"Cookies?"

Madeline froze, and Daniel nearly crashed into her.

"I told you three times. I have to bring cookies for the Ladies' Antiquing Society fundraiser. Butterscotch. Daniel, I told you three times!" Her voice rose an octave. "Do you have Men's Meeting tonight?"

"It's Wednesday, isn't it?"

"Then we have to be at the church by five! Daniel, I have to get them from the same bakery. Aunt Frizzie's Bakery. You know that." She rushed to the teachers' elevator. Ruppert hurried to keep up.

"Aren't you supposed to make them yourself?" he asked.

"Shut up, Daniel. Now everybody's going to think I'm not contributing."

In the parking lot, Daniel's Bluehawk unlocked as they approached. They would return later to pick up Madeline's car.

"I can't believe you're doing this to me, Daniel." Madeline's voice was knotted with fury.

“Doing what? Hey, what’s that on your seat?”

Madeline opened the door and broke into a smile. A plump white bag, with the blue-haired caricature of Aunt Frizzie stamped on the front, occupied the passenger seat. An empty cookie tin, leftover from a previous Christmas, lay beside it.

“Daniel!” Madeline picked up them up and slid into the seat. He sat down beside her. The car doors silently closed themselves.

“What are those, exactly?” Daniel asked.

“You’re so mean. Now I want my kiss.”

As Ruppert pulled out of the parking lot, Madeline began transferring cookies into the tin.

FOUR

The Golden Tabernacle World Dominion Church occupied a sprawling twenty-acre complex in Pacific Palisades, including a long stripe of beach fenced off from the public. Ruppert drove past the security gate, which recognized his car and opened automatically, and onto the church's network of brick boulevards lined with palm trees. They rounded a corner, and the church's immense sanctuary swelled into view, the great golden dome shimmering in the sunset.

"You're not going to be late for Men's, are you?" Madeline asked. She was checking her hair in the mirror. "Oh, I hope Doreathea isn't there."

"Which one is that?"

"Doreathea? The founder and president of Ladies' Antiquing?" She cast an annoyed look at him, as if Ruppert should have memorized the membership lists of all her church groups. "She hates anyone under the age of sixty, I swear."

"So join a different group."

"I don't like any of the other Wednesdays."

"So stay home Wednesdays."

"And let her win?" Madeline rolled her eyes and shook her head.

Ruppert took a side road and entered one of the two giant parking towers; his car informed him that a space was available on the fifteenth floor. He sped up the curling rampway.

They took the elevator down and followed a paved footpath through a garden, towards the looming golden dome.

"I'll see you later," Madeline said. "Play nice with the other boys." She planted a chaste, perfunctory kiss on his mouth, then turned down another path towards Salvation Hall, a long canary-yellow building that made Ruppert think of a giant Twinkie. Salvation Hall belonged to the women's clubs. There were buildings for every sex and age group: Angel Academy for the little girls, Daniel's Den for the boys, and two others for adolescent girls and boys, these located on opposite ends of the campus from each other. The men had the Holy Redeemer Workshop building for pursuing healthy,

masculine hobbies—and the golf course, too, though that was not officially closed to women—but tonight was the general Men’s Meeting, and for that they needed the massive seating of the sanctuary itself.

Ruppert entered into the West Narthex, where high glass walls and skylights gave a view of the low, fat sun sinking toward the ocean. Men in suits crowded the room, greeting each other with the hearty handshake-plus-shoulder-grab move, sipping iced teas and juices from the Fishes ‘N Loaves franchise just inside the front door.

“Daniel! Great to see you!”

Ruppert turned to greet a bland-faced, balding man with a toothy smile. For a moment he struggled to remember the man’s name as he shook the offered hand and accepted the obligatory thump on the arm.

“Hi there...” At the last moment, the name popped into his head: Liam O’Shea. “Liam!”

“We’ve missed you in Revelation Review,” the man said, his smile fixed as if determined not to waver. “Where have you been spending your Tuesdays?”

“I’ve only missed...three. I’m sorry.” He struggled to remember what Liam did for a living—something vague for the Church. Child and Family Services, maybe? Welfare distribution? It had to be something bureaucratic, the man reeked of it.

“We’re nearly to the coming of the Beast. You shouldn’t miss that—Pastor John sent down special guidelines for discussion.”

“I’ll be there next week.”

“You should really feel more concerned about preparing for the End Times, Daniel.” O’Shea was leaning in too close, flinging minute drops of spittle precariously close to Ruppert’s face. A bright gleam crept in at the back of his eyes. “Some of the prophecies have already come to pass. It’s not long now, Daniel.”

“I’m very concerned. We’re all concerned. I’ve had a lot of work lately, Liam. There’s a war on, you know. News is an important part of the war effort. Our brave men and women in uniform are counting on us.”

Liam O’Shea’s smile quivered, then reluctantly bent into the grave frown appropriate for any discussion of the soldiers at war. “Of course. We must not forget our brave men and women in uniform.”

Checkmate, Liam, Ruppert thought.

Ruppert shook hands and pounded arms and greeted perhaps a hundred more men, but despite his maneuvering, Liam O’Shea managed to stay close by, taking the occasional furtive glance at Ruppert.

Ruppert hadn’t been playing as much golf as usual, either. His new illegal hobby had eaten into social time; O’Shea had noticed, and now apparently felt obliged to keep an eye on Ruppert—for the good of Ruppert’s soul. If Ruppert failed display sufficient piety and groupiness, O’Shea might even report him to one of the lay pastors for counseling.

Ruppert took the most circuitous route possible to his usual Men’s Meeting seat on the second tier of pews, but O’Shea kept pace and followed him all the way, sitting down in the same row when Ruppert joined up with his current golfing group. The men were like him, in their early thirties, similar suit, same haircut from the Church barbershop. He did remember their names, but generally thought of them as the lawyer,

the doctor, the television producer. It was easier that way. He'd be assigned a different group of friends next month.

The sanctuary was laid out like a Roman circus, encircled by three tiers of seating with a capacity of ninety thousand souls. The golden domed ceiling soared above them, its apex too distant to see, giving an impression of infinite glimmering space overhead (though Ruppert wondered if the Church enhanced this effect with holograms).

He looked down on the stages below, at the center of the sanctuary. An array of giant screens, each four stories high, faced out from the center to replicate the scene below, blown up to immense proportions that dwarfed the viewer. At the moment, the Men's Blessed Banjo Band played a cover of a current faith-pop hit, "Down on My Knees (For Him)." They wore crosses, painted to resemble the American flag, pinned to the brims of their oversized straw hats, about six musicians of uneven skill.

I'm down on my knees,
Ready to receive,
Oh Lord, come into me...

"Daniel!"

"Hi there, Daniel! What's the news?"

"Good to see you, Daniel."

Ruppert gripped and grinned and clapped shoulders, repeating the interminable round of rising, smiling, shaking hands, exchanging pleasantries, sitting again. These days, he thought, everyone has to be a fucking politician just to survive.

The men continued to pour in—there might be ten thousand of them tonight. Every man eighteen or older was expected to attend the weekly Men's Meeting. It was not required, of course. The Church did not explicitly require anything but faith and a willingness to serve.

In practice, New Dominion Church was the "true American faith" promoted by the Department of Faith and Values, and membership was implicitly required for any sort of licensed professional (such as a journalist or historian) and any kind of government-linked job. In the Ninety-Third Amendment to the Constitution, the title "Defender of the Faith" had been added to the duties of the President.

And in practice, everyone had to join a number of groups and clubs. The smaller associations played a vital role in knitting the congregation together, ensuring that every individual sheep could be watched for signs of straying from the flock.

"Daniel!"

"What's the news there, Daniel?"

I give up my pride,
I spread open wide,
Oh Lord, I feel you inside...

The band finished, drawing a smattering of applause from the audience. A few lay pastors took turns making announcements, usually of people deserving recognition and praise. One man had been made CEO of his firm. Another had purchased a new,

larger home, on a higher hill. A third man had donated a large sum to provide Bibles for Muslim children in Palestine, one of Pastor John's newest programs.

Finally, Pastor John Perrish arrived, drawing applause and stomping feet from the vast mob of men. Ruppert watched him on the screen, the man's face thirty feet high, his hair a youthful jet black even though he was well past sixty. The New America flag in his lapel bore a glittering diamond Jesus fish in place of the star.

Pastor John favored the crowd with a tight smile, his electric blue eyes piercing, glowing in the stage lights. He remained a step back from the podium, giving the occasional understated wave or nod at men in the front rows. He let the crowd's enthusiasm roll over and around him, but still he hung back from the microphone, letting the sustained applause run its course.

As the crowd quieted, he stayed where he was, his bright eyes scanning over the crowd. He raised his right hand and spread his fingers. A glowing orb of white light the size of an egg rose from his fingertips and floated above his head. The orb melted and spread into a glowing dove with a golden aura, which orbited over Pastor John like the Holy Spirit in every painting of Christ's baptism.

It was an illusion, of course, an animated hologram provided by hidden projectors. You couldn't trust much you saw in a Dominionist Church. But the illusion was attractive.

The dove turned in wider circles over the crowd, soaring towards the vast emptiness of the golden dome above the sanctuary. It mutated, sprouting long talons, its wingspan swelling, its beak bending into a sharp hook. It metamorphosed into a bald eagle the size of a pterodactyl, turning a wide spiral inside the dome, glaring down at the men's assembly with one flaming eye and up at heaven with the other.

The applause regained momentum, and soon the crowd roared again. Ruppert was among them, overwhelmed by the surging crowd-energy, cheering and yelling like the others. It was easier than sitting it out and drawing attention to yourself.

Pastor John stayed completely silent until the last man had stopped clapping. Only then did he step forward.

"Men of the Dominion," Pastor John said. "Welcome back to God's House." This drew another sustained round of applause, spurred along with a few guitar licks from the band. The Banjo Club had departed in favor of Pastor John's personal musicians. "Let us pray."

Ten thousand heads bowed before the towering image of Pastor John.

"The Eighty-Ninth Psalm. O Lord God Almighty, who is like you?" Pastor John read from the oversized leather Bible on the podium. "You are mighty, O Lord, and your faithfulness surrounds you. You rule over the surging sea; when its waves mount up, you still them. With your strong arm you scattered your enemies. The heavens are yours, and yours also the earth; you founded the world and all that is in it. Your arm is endued with power; your hand is strong, your right hand exalted. Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne. Blessed are those who have learned to acclaim you, who walk in the light of your presence, O Lord."

Pastor John paused for a long moment.

"Today, we thank you for the many blessings in our lives. So many in our congregation have met with great success in the affairs of the world. We believe it is because You act us through us, because You desire the best for Your favored children.

Help us each to strive to be better servants, and guide us to reach out to one another, to keep one another strong in the faith. Oh, Great and Fierce Judge of the World, help us find those who doubt, that we may keep them close in the flock.

“Oh Mighty Ruler of Us All, we pray that You watch over our brave men and women in uniform, and that You reign destruction and death upon the dark forces they oppose. And we pray that the lost souls of the jungle and desert find their way to You, that You will minister unto them through your chosen people, your New Jerusalem, Your Kingdom-on-Earth, the great nation of America everlasting.

“In the name of Our King, Amen.”

“Amen,” the crowd answered.

Pastor John looked up. He seemed to be measuring the crowd with his eyes. “Gentlemen, we face a hostile world. A world devoted to false gods, to false ideas. A world which refuses to see that the hand of God approaches, that time is short, that the hour is near.

“We face a renewed insurgency in Egypt, a Biblical land. The pagans have found a new cleric to lead them, who stirs up hatred and violence in their souls. He preaches a gospel of death and hellfire, and prays to a host of demons.” Uneasy murmurs circulated through the crowd. War images and disheartening news from the battlefield were strictly limited on television, for the benefit of the women and children, but it was considered important to keep the men updated. The faithful men.

A dark face filled the giant display screens, an Arab with a low, hairy brow and a scowl barely visible through a black lion’s mane of a beard. Ruppert knew they sometimes altered the images to make enemies look extra fierce, or mixed in Neanderthal features to make them appear barbaric. It was important, he understood, to help drive home the threat to a population that sometimes grew complacent.

Angry boos and shouts greeting the image.

“He calls himself Sheik Muhammad al Taba,” Pastor John continued. “Reports say he may have as many as a hundred thousand radical followers, possibly as many as half a million across North Africa.”

The men groaned at the staggering odds.

“You see what these people do?” Pastor John said. “They just keep coming back. They just keep marching for any raving lunatic that stands up and says 'go and kill.' Now, I have seen these people up close. From Babylon to Jerusalem, and halfway up to Moscow, I’ve fought them, and I’ve studied them.” The pastor’s hand cracked the podium at the word “studied.”

Ruppert believed it. Pastor John had numerous Purple Hearts and a Cross of Glory, most of them earned in the streets and deserts of the Middle East. After Columbus, the False and Foreign Religions Act required state certification of all religious leaders. The New Dominion Church seemed to prefer those with a long record of military service. One of the assistant pastors had explained that you could never get closer to God than on a battlefield.

“...and they will not rest until they have forced all of us to worship their false idol in Mecca!” Pastor John’s voice trembled with anger. “This is the great conflict, the last great conflict of mankind. Either we annihilate our enemies, or we bow our knees toward that monstrous black box five times each day.” This drew shouts of anger from the crowd.

“So I want you to know I support our renewed mission in Egypt. We are sending twenty battalions into Cairo even as I speak. For the sake of all that is holy, I hope they send in twenty more! This radical cleric must be stopped before he can send his armies against us. With your support, and your prayers, our brave forces will strike down this false prophet, this corrupter of souls, this enemy of God, and they will carry forward the holy lamp of truth into the darkest realms of the world!”

Ruppert found himself cheering along with the others, fists beating into the air.

Pastor John described more about the new enemy, his blasphemous teachings, his obsession with war, his demands of mindless obedience, his dreams of global domination, his atrocities against the innocent. After the men had their fill of war news, each turn of the plot provoking the crowd’s enthusiasm or animosity, he led them in a closing prayer.

“...and so we pray, Lord, that you make us as strong and resilient as our ancestors were, ready to do battle in Your name until the devil’s armies are at last routed from the soil of the earth. We pray that you will let our tongues speak only truth, and that you will guide us to hear the whispers of dissent among us, those false and unholy voices that would corrupt our hearts and blur our vision in this grand crusade. And when we hear them, Lord, let them be a reminder that the serpent remains among us today, and the serpent must be crushed under the heel of righteousness. Let us root out the voices of wicked deception in our community, Lord, and make us a whole people, united behind You. Lord, please protect and embolden our Dear President and our brave men and women in uniform as they wage war on the forces of evil. In the name of our King, Amen.”

“Amen,” Ruppert said, his voice lost among ten thousand others.

FIVE

On Saturday, Madeline hosted some kind of cheese-tasting garden party for the women in her Christian Gardening Society, and twenty of them came in nearly identical spring dresses, their ages from twenty to sixty, their husbands in tow. The women gathered in deck chairs on the rear deck to eat Wisconsin brie and talk. God knew what they could have talked about for so long, but their chattering voices never quieted; to Ruppert, they became like the twittering of birds against the sleepy jazz-lite music flowing from fake rocks in the garden.

As usual, the men eventually drifted inside to gather around Ruppert's floor-to-ceiling wall screen and watch the Dodgers game. Like all men awkwardly drawn together by a convergence of their women, they spoke a little about sports and cars, drank what they could, and stayed grateful the game was there to fill the time between arrival and departure.

The Dodgers were up three to one against the Pirates at the top of the eighth, and Ruppert gave every appearance of watching the game. His eyes kept drifting towards the upper corner of the screen, where he'd always imagined the cameras were hidden, though he had no reason to believe this. More likely, the cameras were microscopic and scattered across the surface of the screen.

Everyone knew the cameras were there; it was obvious every time you made a video call, and the better screens also responded to hand gestures. The most expensive screens, like those at GlobeNet, actually followed your eyes, highlighting and enlarging anything on which you rested your gaze.

He'd heard rumors about the screens. They said the Department of Terror could track anything you did online, from phone calls to paying your bills to watching a show; Nicholas had no doubt about that, and it had never been kept secret. He'd also heard that Terror could silently activate your screens at any time to watch your activities at home, even if the screen was turned off.

The most chilling thing he'd heard, though, was that the cameras recorded everyone, all the time, and Terror stored every bit of it in giant data archives, somewhere

deep underground in the desert, or extreme northern Alaska, or somewhere in the Appalachian mountains (depending on who it was that had too many drinks and dared to talk about it). If you became of interest to them, they could search back through your whole life for signs of insufficient patriotism or sympathy with the enemy, even perform keyword searches through your most intimate conversations.

Nobody knew what Terror could do, because Terror operated behind an absolute black shield of national security. There were only rumors and the occasional news report: “The Department of Terror has arrested a group of leftist terrorists in San Diego.” Leftist usually meant Latino. Jihadi, of course, always meant Middle Eastern, while imperialist always meant Chinese.

As the Dodgers took the mound, Ruppert’s doorbell rang. It sang out an instrumental of “Jesus Loves the Little Children” played on what sounded like wind chimes. Madeline refused to change the doorbell sound, even though she could choose from thousands at the touch of a button. After four years, Ruppert thought, even Jesus would be sick of that song.

Ruppert stepped into the front hall and saw Sullivan Stone through the window pane by his front door. Sullivan waved, just as enthusiastically as if he’d been an invited guest. Ruppert went to answer the door, puzzled, unable to think of a plausible reason for Sully to show up at his wife’s party.

Ruppert’s house identified Sully and announced in a melodic voice high above Ruppert’s head: “Sullivan Stone, and guest Brandiwynne Hope. Ms. Hope has not visited your home before. She is a nonfamous entertainer. Sullivan Stone is your co-worker at GlobeNet. Both are nonscheduled guests today.”

Ruppert paused long enough to roll his eyes before opening the door. He vaguely recognized the name Brandiwynne Hope, mainly because it was outlandish even for an entertainer. She would be the latest in Sully’s endless stream of models/singer/actresses that appeared and disappeared at his arm, each of them a seductive commercial for herself, Sully cool and indifferent as they came and went. The girls were of the type still drawn to Los Angeles for its faded mystique as the entertainment capital of the world, a position it had long ago yielded to Tokyo and Mumbai. Terror men controlled the dying film studios.

Speculation ran back and forth among the men at the office about Sully’s wild success at dating—dating, because no one would dare accuse another of premarital sex crimes without strong evidence. Privately, Ruppert doubted that Sully was ever interested in any of the beautiful ladies who accompanied him.

He opened the door.

“Daniel!” Sully thrust a brown-wrapped bottle into his hands as he swept into the front hall. After him followed the sort of person Ruppert expected—long blonde hair, wide eyes like blueberries, her mouth a bit redder than might be accepted at one of his wife’s church groups. She wore tight denim overalls tucked into thigh-high leather boots, a fashion unfamiliar to Ruppert, if it was a fashion.

Ruppert unwrapped the bottle—Signorello, a Napa wine, bottled in 2010.

“You brought wine?” Ruppert asked.

“Wine and Brandiwynne,” Sully said. “Have you met? She’s cutting a studio setlist with Haisako. A very big, breakout hit. Or it will be, next month.”

“Nice to meet you, uh, Brandy.”

“Brandywynne,” she corrected him. “Brandywynne. Brandywynne Hope.”

“Right. What kind of music do you play?”

“Rust.”

“Is that a...genre?”

“Hey!” she shrieked, pointing at Ruppert. He turned, half-expecting to see a feral rodent swooping down at his head. “You’re that news guy, right? The one that comes on before Sully?”

“That’s how I’m known to the greater Los Angeles area,” Ruppert said. “That guy before Sully.”

“Wow! So, yeah, what’s the news today?”

“I’m off today. The kids take our place on the weekends, at least until they’re trained up enough to take our jobs. You’d better come back and meet my wife.”

Ruppert led them through the living room, where a few heads turned towards Brandiwynne and quickly swiveled back to the screen. Ruppert cast a questioning look at Sully, who had only visited his house once before, at Ruppert and Madeline’s housewarming four years ago. Sully held up his index finger and raised his eyebrows. Ruppert had no idea what he meant by it.

The garden club women, who had broken into small, chattering groups, fell silent as Ruppert emerged with Sully and Brandiwynne. They eyed the pretty, unnamed younger girl with cold suspicion.

“Ladies, you all know Sullivan Stone—unless you avoid my newscasts as well as Madeline does.” This brought one or two laughs, which were instantly quashed by hard glares from the other women. “And this is...Brandiwynne Hope, a new rock star—”

“Rust star,” Brandiwynne interrupted.

“—anyway, a musical genius, from what I’ve heard people tell me recently.”

Madeline took Brandiwynne’s hand and smiled, but her eyes were like smoldering green coals when she glanced at Ruppert.

“So nice to meet you. I’m Madeline. We’re just in the middle of a private cheese party.”

“I’m terribly sorry, Mrs. Ruppert,” Sully said. “We were just passing through Bel-Air when I remembered Ruppert mentioning you were having a party today, and I just really, honestly, needed to see the end.”

“The end?” Madeline asked.

“We’re up by two, but it’s just moving into the bottom of the eighth and the Pirates have that new pitcher, Marshall What’s-his—”

“Fine, fine,” Madeline said. “Men to the den. We can take care of Miss...Hope?”

“Brandiwynne. Brandiwynne. Brandiwynne Hope.”

“And what sort of music do you sing?”

As they walked toward the door, Sully whispered to Ruppert: “Is there a screen in your bedroom?”

“Yeah,” Ruppert whispered back.

“Where can we go?”

Ruppert thought of his house—the den, the guest bedrooms, the small screen set into the kitchen wall. “Follow me.”

Ruppert’s basement was mostly underground, the floors and walls lined with cold, flat stone. Probably faux-stone, but it felt real to the touch. He slid his against along the

smooth surface until he brushed the touchpad, bringing the ceiling bulbs to life. Sully closed the door before following him down the steps.

“What’s going on, Sully?”

“Are you sure we’re safe?”

“From who?” Ruppert asked.

Sully just looked at him.

“There’s no screens down here.”

“Any kind of media link?”

“Just my old college furniture.”

“Listen, Daniel,” Sully whispered. “I need your help, but first I need to know if you’ll keep a secret. A serious one.”

“Sully, what are you—”

“Just—please, all right?”

Ruppert saw that Sully was sweating hard now, his hands trembling. His eyes slashed back and forth between Ruppert and the basement door above.

“Okay, Sully, just calm down. It can’t be that bad.”

Sully breathed out something between a snort and a laugh. “That bad, that bad... Listen, Daniel, you’re probably right. We’ll say you’re right. Then help me out?”

“I’ll help, Sully, Jesus.”

“I can trust you? Swear to God and the flag?”

“I... yeah, Sully, I swear.” The childish expression unnerved Ruppert. He began glancing furtively at the door, too, though he’d done nothing wrong. Not yet.

“Okay. I thought so. Great.” Sully lifted a thin wafer of plastic from his pocket and held it out to him. A long chain of numbers and letters was stamped across it.

“This is... what?” Ruppert asked. “A data slide?”

“A contact code. Just type it into your web interface. I mean, not your interface. Not here. Do it from a café.”

“Why?”

“Don’t do it yet!” Sully glanced at the door again. His hair, matted with sweat, drooped into his eyes. “This is just in case.”

“I don’t understand, Sully.”

“In case it happens to me!” Sully yelled, then winced at his own voice.

Whispering again, leaning in close to Ruppert, he said, “If they come for me. If I disappear. Then I want you to call. From a safe line. Voice only.”

“Nothing’s safe, Sully. I have a wife, Sully.”

“Don’t involve her.”

Ruppert looked at the digits—forty-three numbers and letters. It was a phone number, but nobody used the actual numbers anymore. You just told your screen who to call and it called.

“Who will this connect me to?”

“He’s a friend of mine. A really good friend, Daniel, and I don’t want anything to happen to him. If they come for me, call him. He can give you what you always wanted.”

“What?”

The basement door swung open, and a graying man in a beige sweater vest looked down on them.

“Oh,” the man said, taking in the sight of them huddled in the basement. “I was looking...for...the men’s room?”

“Second door on your right,” Ruppert said.

“Yes, thank you.” The man remained in place. “Should I close the door again, or...?”

“It’s fine,” Ruppert said. He heard his own heart pounding in his ears. “Thanks.”

The man’s gaze lingered on them as he stepped away.

“Be careful,” Sully whispered. “Don’t mention this again. Remember, only if they come for me.”

Then Sully raced up the stairs and out of sight. Ruppert stood in his basement, puzzling over the slice of plastic. *What you always wanted.* What did Sully mean by that?

SIX

On Sunday, after a long church service and afternoon groups (Womanly Virtues and Duties for Madeline, Family Leadership for Ruppert), Ruppert suggested they eat their usual early Sunday dinner at their favorite Chinese restaurant, the Laughing Dragon. Madeline bristled.

“Wouldn’t that be unpatriotic now?” she asked. “You heard Pastor John—the Chinese are making more threats.”

“The Hans aren’t Chinese agents,” Ruppert said as they turned east on Wilshire. “They’ve been there forever.”

“Maybe they’re a sleeper cell. Pastor John says sleeper cells are everywhere.”

“So they’ve been asleep for, what, five generations? Ten? You think the Chinese Communists planted the Han family in Los Angeles before Karl Marx was born?”

“I’m staying alert, Daniel. We all have to stay alert.”

“We can stay alert over tea and egg rolls. If it makes you feel better, we can watch our waiter for suspicious behavior.”

“Shut up.” She glared out the window.

“Watch for propaganda in your fortune cookie.”

“Fine, you win. But no more Chinese after this. I don’t want to be un-American.”

From two blocks away, Ruppert could see the giant red dragon crouching on the roof of the restaurant, his serpentine body a scarlet sine wave. Happy the Dragon, mascot and minor tourist attraction, had eyes that were squinted almost closed and jaws spread in a smiling howl, as if someone had just whispered the world’s funniest joke into his ear. Today, smoke curled out from the dragon’s nostrils, an effect the Hans created with dry ice on both Chinese and American holidays.

“What’s today?” Ruppert asked.

“Sunday.”

“No, I mean—”

“April eighth. Why?”

“Must be a Chinese holiday.”

Madeline looked at the smoke pouring from the dragon’s maw. Her lip curled. “We can’t eat Chinese on a Communist holiday.”

“It’s not necessarily Communist...” Daniel’s words trailed off. They had reached a red light a block from the Laughing Dragon, and he now saw there was something wrong. Happy the Dragon was not exhaling white plumes of evaporating dry ice, but dark, sooty clouds.

The light changed, and the pulled forward to see the actual restaurant underneath the dragon’s belly. The plate-glass picture windows were shattered, the ornate double doors had been ripped from their hinges and thrown aside, and flames engulfed the building.

“Oh, my God,” Madeline whispered. “Keep going, Daniel. Don’t stop here.”

“I’m trying,” Daniel said, but traffic and another red light locked them in place.

He recognized the three unmarked black vans parked in the Laughing Dragon’s lot, and he cringed. The Han family emerged from their burning restaurant, four generations of them, from the ninety-year-old matriarch Wen to her seven-year-old great-grandson, Gabriel. There were eighteen family members in all, their hands clasped behind their heads as their captors marched them out at gunpoint.

The captors wore black cloth masks with American flags stitched on the foreheads. They had to be one of the Freedom Brigades, the loose network of ultrapatriotic vigilantes that emerged nationwide in the wake of Columbus. They’d begun with mosque bombings and violent raids on Muslim community centers. Once the Department of Terror had purged most of the Muslims from America, sweeping them into the Emergency Penitentiaries, the Freedom Brigades had moved on to persecuting illegal Latino immigrants, and assorted others.

The Brigades sometimes released video manifestos, usually consisting of masked men claiming they were true Americans “retaking the country” from corrupting foreign influences. They were not a government agency, and police sometimes condemned their actions, but Ruppert had never heard of Freedom Brigade members getting arrested for their crimes.

The vigilantes forced the Han family to kneel in a row, facing out toward traffic. Many of them wept openly; only old Wen betrayed no emotion, her lined face hard and stoic.

Little Gabriel’s mother, crying, reached for her son, but two of the masked men wrenched her back. One of them drew a pistol from his belt, pressed it to the back of her head, and fired.

“Oh Jesus Christ!” Madeline turned her head away, clapping a hand over her eyes. Ruppert wanted to turn away, too, but instead he watched as the masked men walked down the line, executing one Han after another, their heads erupting in surreal gouts of blood.

“Are we moving? Why aren’t we moving, Daniel?” Madeline screamed.

Daniel looked ahead to see the train of cars that had been ahead of him pull away into the distance. Normally, this would draw irate honks from the cars behind him, but he supposed no one wanted to draw the attention of the Freedom Brigade. He stomped the accelerator.

After several minutes, Madeline whispered, “I must have been right.”

“About what?”

“The Hans. They must have been a sleeper cell after all. Right?” An odd glaze had crept into her eyes. “They were spies for the Chinese. The imperialists.”

“We don’t know that.”

“The Freedom Brigades wouldn’t just kill innocent people like that. Not in public like that.”

“The Freedom Brigades don’t know things like that.”

“How do you know what they know?” Madeline sat up, straightening her shoulders. She lowered the sun visor and checked her hair in the mirror. “The Freedom Brigades really do protect us most of the time. Nobody likes to say it, but they do. They keep regular people safe.”

“Honey—”

“They keep good people safe,” Madeline repeated. “Safe and free. I bet they were Communist spies. That big red dragon. Listening in on all those conversations, all those years, while we ate their greasy rice. Think about it.”

Ruppert gaped at her, almost missed his turn, and swerved off at the last second onto Beverly Glen. This time, the other drivers weren’t shy about honking; some of them really laid into it, unleashing the rage they’d been unable to express at his failure to speed away from the gang of gunmen at the first opportunity.

He sped towards the white-walled hive of suburban enclaves that Bel Air had become. Ruppert understood what Madeline was doing; he saw it every day, could even recognize the expression in the face of strangers. She was editing her reality, making things fit. The Hans, who had sung Happy Birthday to her on her twenty-eighth birthday, had been Chinese spies. That was all. They’d been discovered and put to justice. If he ever mentioned the Han family or the Laughing Dragon again, she would snort something about Communists and change the subject.

Ruppert did not possess this talent, at least not to the incredible degree he saw in everyone around him. Even as a child, he’d held back his belief and his trust, wanting to ponder over information for flaws and contradictions. His natural skepticism led him to journalism school, but as his Berkeley professor Jozef Gorski said, “Journalism is a hard and unforgiving search for facts. Reporting is gossip. Most of you, if you want a paycheck, will work as reporters.”

Gorski had, in a distant youth, been a journalist active in the Polish Solidarity movement, then written Pulitzer-nominated book on the history of nonviolent resistance. He disappeared halfway through the spring semester of 2021. Another teacher took his place, without explanation, and when Ruppert asked where Dr. Gorski had gone, the new teacher scowled at him and shook his head. Ruppert tried to research the new teacher, but had been unable to find any information on the man’s background. He’d certainly never worked as a journalist.

Ruppert slowed as he approached his neighborhood gate. The road in this part of Bel Air was a paved channel between two thirty-foot walls, each occasionally punctuated by one of the large gates. The brass grill of the gate slid aside for his car.

“Daniel.” Madeline’s voice was unusually soft. She seemed to be making eye contact with herself in the mirror, as if trying to look into her own soul. Daniel knew how she felt.

“What is it?”

She touched her pinkie finger to the corner of her mouth. “Do you think I’m getting a zit here? It looks like there might be a zit.”

Daniel turned off the street into his driveway, then looked at her for a long time. She turned toward him, stretched her mouth into a vertical oval, and poked at the corner of her mouth again.

“See it?” she asked.

“No. I think it’s fine.”

“Good.” The car door opened for her, and she gathered her purse and climbed out. “I’d hate to start the week that way.”

SEVEN

Ruppert and Sully spoke very little to each other after Sully's panicked visit, and they never had lunch together again. Ruppert busied himself trying to patch up his image with his fellow churchgoers. Not only did he attend Revelation Review on Tuesday night, but he arranged to meet a few of the men for lunch the following day, including Liam O'Shea, who accepted the invitation with his usual rubbery, toothy smile. Ruppert spent most of the lunch poking at dry, flavorless slices of grilled chicken on top of a limp salad and feigning interest in O'Shea's drooling pedantry.

"We have to stay vigilant, you know," O'Shea said. Ranch dressing dribbled from his lower lip. "You'd be surprised how many families are still raising their children with incorrect beliefs and antisocial values."

"And your job is to fix that?" Ruppert asked. O'Shea, it turned out, was an analyst for Northern Los Angeles Social Services, a federal program contracted out to Pastor John and Golden Tabernacle. A bureaucrat, as Ruppert had thought.

"We have a hundred-point system to evaluate the morals of parents," O'Shea said. "It's very scientific. A score of sixty or below indicates a social crisis, and we get those kids to a Child Salvation Center immediately. It's important to grab them as young as you can, before their parents corrupt them beyond repair."

"And what happens to the parents?" Ruppert asked. The question drew sharp glares from the other two men at the table.

"We report them to Terror." O'Shea shrugged, dipped his thick hamburger into the cup of ranch dressing he'd ordered for just that purpose, and bit off a mouthful. The process of chewing didn't stop him from speaking; O'Shea was an efficient one. "We're focused on protecting children, not prosecuting terrorists. You know, we save thousands of young souls in California every year, but it's never enough. You can't help but worry about all the children that go unsaved these days, with Judgment Day so close at hand. I wish I could just get my hands on all of them."

Ruppert nodded solemnly and signaled their waiter for the check.

Sully did not show up to work on Thursday morning, and the producers scrambled to bring in the weekend sports reporter to cover his slot. No one mentioned why Sully was absent, and nobody asked, so Ruppert assumed the man hadn't simply called in sick.

He tried twice to call Sully from the screen in his office, but the screen spat back that the system had no record of any such person. This was a warning universally understood—look no further, the person you're trying to reach has been deleted from the official universe.

Ruppert's top news story concerned the new radical Egyptian cleric, Muhammad al Taba, and his alleged hordes of North African followers. The cleric was finally being introduced to the nation at large, a shiny new enemy to hate, and Ruppert was doing his part. War news often arrived in this fashion, first released by select religious authorities, then confirmed by news reports days or weeks later. It reinforced the faithful's confidence in the wisdom and infallibility of the Dominionist preachers. What Ruppert didn't understand was how the preachers got such important, still-classified intelligence ahead of everyone else.

After work, Ruppert wanted to visit his storage unit in south L.A. and get online—he'd earned it, after two consecutive days with O'Shea and his ilk—but instead he made an even less cautious decision and drove east into Silverlake.

Sully lived in a neighborhood of large, decaying old houses with yards of sand and weeds, some of them only burned-out hulls. Silverlake was not a walled community, and literally anyone could walk right up to Sully's door or window. After four years in Bel Air with Madeline, this seemed to Ruppert like a dangerously exposed way to live.

Sully's house stood at the top of a hill, an old Victorian with tall, narrow windows and sharply peaked roofs, ancient by California standards. The lawn was patchy here, too, as if Sully wanted to respect the neighborhood's standards, but in place of the coarse weeds choking up the other yards, Sully had only desert wildflowers and thick palm trees within the iron fence encircling his property.

Ruppert parked on the street in front of the house and approached the iron gate. He couldn't see any sign of a callbox, so he lifted the hand latch, opened the gate, and walked up the front steps.

The only sound in the neighborhood was the rush of highway traffic in the distance. He saw one person, a black man with a long gray beard, sitting on broken porch steps across the street from Sully's house. He smoked a hand-rolled cigarette and read a crumbling paperback, and paid no attention to Ruppert. One corner of the house's roof was cratered in, and bits of what might have been a second-floor balcony still dangled from the wrecked area.

Ruppert looked at the black lens over Sully's door. "Sully, are you here? Sully?"

No response. He rapped the antique door knocker, and the door crept inward. He nudged it open further. A wide vertical crack split the doorjamb, and there was only a gaping, splintered hole where the notch for the deadbolt should have been.

Ruppert pushed the door open all the way. The front hall of Sully's house was demolished, as if an earthquake and hurricane had hit at the same time. Side tables were overturned and broken apart, pictures had been ripped from the walls, and the walls themselves were punctured in more than a dozen places.

"Sully?" Ruppert moved down the hall, looking into a parlor, the kitchen, the dining room, the small library at the back of the first floor. Everything was broken open,

upholstery ripped out of furniture, appliances smashed apart, bookshelves overturned. Only Sully's screens had not been touched, even the floor-to-ceiling in his living room. All of them glowed the vapid blue color indicating your net connection was broken.

Ruppert climbed the narrow spiral staircase at the back of the house and into the upstairs hall. He looked into Sully's office, the guest bedroom, the bathroom. All had been ravaged, and even the claw-footed bathtub was overturned and broken into large pieces. The bathroom sink was full of shattered glass and bright pills from the medicine cabinet.

Every nerve ending in Ruppert's body told him to get out, run to his car and drive away, never to think of Sullivan Stone again, but he didn't. There was one more room to check.

One of the double doors to the master bedroom stood slightly ajar, revealing nothing about the lightless room beyond. Ruppert pushed them both open with trembling hands.

Wooden shutters blocked off the windows, but streaks of late-afternoon sunlight fell into the room between the slats. The only other source of light was the square of idiot blue from a small screen across from the curtained bed.

The bedroom had been destroyed, as he expected by now, the furniture gutted, the drawers yanked from the dresser and flung across the room. He avoided the curtained bed, looking first into the master bathroom to see a thousand fragments of shower stall littering the tile, then into the closet, which was nearly as large as the bedroom itself. Dozens of shoes were spilled on the floor, and the hundred or so stylish coats and jackets had been slashed open.

He returned to the bed, took a breath, and pulled back a handful of sliced curtain.

The mattress, too, had been gutted, and the pillows ripped apart. The memory of the Han family flared behind his eyes, as it often did, and he squeezed them shut for a long moment before he could look again. Sully's body, which he'd half-expected to see, was not there. He did notice a dark stain on the inner face of one of the bed's four posters. Looking closer, he could see it was a wide stamp of dried blood with a few blond hairs clinging to it. That was the only sign of Sully.

He let the curtain drop, momentarily relieved he hadn't confronted Sully's dead body, but he knew it meant worse things for Sully. If he was still alive, it meant long hours of interrogation, beatings in dark rooms, nights of torture...it meant Terror. The awareness of Terror was the submerged iceberg in the American consciousness. The Department of Terror was the full and final backstop against dissent, against unpatriotic attitudes, against moral deviance.

No one wanted to think about Terror, but fortunately you didn't have to. You just had to wave the flag harder than everyone else, pray louder than everyone else, recite the Pledge of Allegiance every morning with greater solemnity than your co-workers. You just had to adapt to the safe alternative to reality that they offered you. You just had to express your full faith and belief in whatever the latest version of the truth might happen to be, and commit yourself fully to it, and forget all about it when the story changed. In Madeline's school, they called this "well-adjusted." More than anything else, her job was to adjust children.

For the maladjusted, there was Terror.

Ruppert stepped away from the bed and turned toward the screen. The house's security system should have recorded what happened. It should have contacted the police, too; the fact that it hadn't meant it was not criminals who did this, but authorities.

"Restart home network," Ruppert said.

The screen did not change. It didn't even flicker.

"Hello? House, answer me."

Nothing.

It suddenly occurred to Ruppert just how he might look to Terror, should they choose to look in on Sully's house, or to review the records later. It was possible that the cameras weren't functioning, either, but he doubted it. More likely, they'd wiped the network's memory but would want to keep an eye on anybody who came to visit their latest target. Sully had been involved in something, or why would they have searched his house so thoroughly? It was not the kind of disappearance you associated with simple social deviants.

Whatever crimes they suspected of Sully, Ruppert was now unavoidably a person of interest. It was possible they would dismiss him because he was a co-worker and might have been concerned about Sully, and if not, Ruppert would certainly make that defense when they came for him. Ruppert was a God-fearing Dominionist, a Party member and regular donor, a public man. He'd erected every possible bulwark against Terror, doing his best to protect himself and his wife from their power. He hoped it counted now. Still, he should have known better than to check up on a disappeared friend.

Ruppert left the bedroom and hurried down the front stairs.

"Stop there!" a man's voice yelled from behind him. Ruppert felt a chill pass down the length of his spine. He raised both his hands, fingers wide.

"Turn this way."

Ruppert obeyed. He tried to not exhale a sigh of relief when he saw that he was facing two cops in black uniforms. The Hartwell Police logo was stamped on their shoulders, an "H" with a hollow heart at the center of the crossbar, a smaller "W" tucked into the lower bracket of the "H." Like most large cities on the West Coast, Los Angeles had contracted its police services out to Hartwell Civil Defense, Inc. These amounted to local cops. They were still dangerous, of course—he didn't want to offend them by looking relieved, but he'd expected Terror men in black coats.

"This your house?" one of the cops asked. He was short and pudgy, with a bristly mustache. He glanced at a thin screen in his hand. "Says it's not your house."

"No. This is where my...a co-worker of mine lives. Used to live."

"Looks like he moved out," the other cop said.

"Yeah," Ruppert said. "I thought he was at home sick. I guess I got some bad information."

"I guess you did," the pudgy cop said.

"Looks to me like he moved out," Ruppert said, his words moving a bit too fast. "He might have moved to another city and just didn't tell anyone. He's a...well, you know these TV types, and anyway maybe we're better off he's gone, he could have been a deviant or a criminal for all we know, you never know, I mean you have to stay vigilant about these things."

"You do have to stay vigilant," the second cop agreed.

“After Columbus, you really can’t trust anybody except God and the president.”

The two cops nodded solemnly. Then the pudgy one broke into a smile. Ruppert knew what that meant, and it relaxed him further.

“Hey! You’re that reporter guy, right? My wife watches you every day, right after that talk show with the three angry fat ladies.”

“Thanks,” Ruppert said. “Tell your wife I said thanks for watching.”

“Wow, the reporter guy,” the pudgy cop continued. “So, hey, what’s the news today?”

“The war’s on in Egypt again. Can I help you with anything else?”

“We got a report of a suspicious character. You seen anybody like that?”

“It is a bad neighborhood,” Ruppert said. “I thought somebody I used to know lived in this house, but I guess he’s moved. Can’t blame him with a neighborhood like this.”

“Can’t blame him at all,” the second cop said.

“All right,” Sully said. “Thank you both so much for your admirable public service in these difficult times.”

“We’d better escort you to your vehicle, sir,” the second cop said. “It is a dangerous neighborhood.”

“I’d appreciate that very much.”

They both walked close behind Ruppert all the way to the curb. He guessed that if he’d stopped walking, they would have pushed him to his car.

The cops hovered over him as he sat down in the driver’s seat and the car door closed. He thanked them both again and then drove west, shivering hard and barely able to concentrate on the road. He checked his rearview mirror the whole way home, but nobody seemed to be following him.

EIGHT

After Sully disappeared, Ruppert took great pains to keep his life unremarkable. He joined another group at church, the Dune Buggers for Christ, which involved building machines from kits and driving them around a church-owned park in the desert (but only as a large and supervised group, of course). He liked it because it meant hours of time at the church workshop, working with his hands—it was more enjoyable and more honest than the Revelation study group, focusing on electrical and mechanical systems, on undeniable reality instead of ideology.

He did not miss a single Revelation class, though, and he spent more time at the church golf course and working out in the church gym. He expressed maximum groupiness at every turn, smiling and slapping hands with anyone he vaguely recognized.

He lay awake many nights waiting for someone to kick in his front door, or at least come to question him, but as far as he could tell, his mistaken visit to Sully's house brought no consequences. It was always possible they were monitoring him closely. He would never know the difference until it was too late.

Sometimes he looked at the sleeping form of his wife and wondered how he had come to this place, sleeping next to this person who existed in a different universe than his own, a universe that could be reordered from top to bottom at the proper signal. He'd been fifteen when Columbus happened, and much of his life since then felt like a dazed sleepwalk. His private questions, too dangerous to be asked, targeted the larger truths about the world, about why his country seemed bent on ruling the planet, how they got away with claiming morality while they rained death on millions around the world, how they managed to claim his county was free and democratic when ten or fifteen or twenty million people were incarcerated, depending on what numbers you saw, and there was only one ideology represented on the ballot.

He puzzled over the mass behavior of humanity, but drifted like a zombie through his own life. He'd wanted to work as a print journalist, the kind who took long research trips and studied problems in the most troubled parts of the world. By the time he graduated college, those jobs had become not only scarce, but dangerous—writers kept

disappearing without explanation, as had much of the faculty at Berkeley. Newsgathering in foreign countries was limited to military and intelligence personnel for national security reasons.

He'd wisely joined the Dominionist church, a denomination that had spread quickly through the nation after Columbus and become more or less a requirement for those who wanted to participate in public life. Contacts at the church had gotten him his first internship with GlobeNet, and he'd worked there ever since.

He met Madeline as a "suggested match" from the church's Unmarried Young Adult ministry. Membership in that group was automatic for anyone who fit the description. The counselors would set you up on dates whether you asked them to or not. Madeline had been the fifth woman Ruppert met in this way, but they'd all been very similar, from well-heeled conservative families, all of them employed in some branch of the sort of social-service work the church deemed proper for females.

He dated Madeline for seven months, and as she pressed him harder and harder for marriage, he had trouble finding any cause to object. Madeline was undeniably beautiful, but she was also far more socially poised than Ruppert, navigating the new strangeness of life like a born native. She was about the same kind of person he would have to eventually marry anyway. The entire culture around him insisted he marry as soon as possible.

Madeline had finally gotten her way when she came to his home one night by herself, without one of the matronly chaperones that usually observed their courtship. This was shocking behavior on its own, but then Madeline had tied his hands to a chair and slowly removed her clothes until she stood naked in front of him. It was not illegal, so long as he wasn't paying her money to do it, but it was all completely forbidden.

The extreme audacity of the act impressed him even more than the sight of her body. For an unmarried woman to be alone with a man was shameful, but to reveal herself in this way could have gotten her flogged, if she belonged one of the more severe women's groups, or excommunicated from the church altogether. He admired her for it, and he agreed to marry her.

She had never done anything so bold again. Over drinks on the golf course, Ruppert occasionally heard similar stories from other men, and it eventually occurred to him that this was a technique women taught to each other, perhaps even in their church groups. The women never broke the law by performing actual sex acts, but in a culture where exposed wrists and ankles were points of contention for women, the sight of a woman without her clothes amounted to sensory overload for most men.

It was gradually dawning on Ruppert just how completely forces outside himself had shaped his life. There was no area in his life that was not carefully controlled by church and state.

He felt the strain especially hard at work, where he continued to read the official version of reality to a massive unseen audience. After the strong public-relations effort to boost support for an invasion of Egypt, stories about the radical cleric Muhammad al Taba dwindled away in favor of more palatable news—celebrity gossip, tales of captured spies and terrorist attacks narrowly averted, along with a heavy serving of petty local crime stories artificially inflated into national scandal.

After a couple of months, the temptation to return to his illegal computer with its ability to bypass federal filters became too strong to resist. He drove to the storage

facility in Watts, though after the Sully episode he half-expected to find his unit emptied out. Instead, he found it just as he'd left it.

He closed the rattling garage door, then felt relief wash over him as he slipped on the goggles and gloves and booted up the little black cube of a computer. Then he was online, floating among thousands more holographic cubes and spheres than his home and office systems permitted him to see. Each icon was a door to a different realm of information.

He explored down a few of the African channels and connected to the Carthaginian, a news archive in Tunisia. You had to be careful with foreign news services, because any source could be loaded with propaganda. Ruppert tried to stay to the smaller, independent journalists. Generally, the slicker the production values, the less you could trust.

He searched the archive and drew up a chain of texts, images and videolinks focused on al Taba. He picked one of the texts—written words were the most informative, but the easiest to fake—and it swelled to the size of a poster board. The text scrolled automatically as he read.

LUXOR, Egypt—American mercenaries clashed with the cult of Sheik Muhammad al Taba in their home base, the ancient temple at Karnak. In a standoff that continues tonight, the warrior cleric and as many as sixty followers have kept the Atlantic forces at bay with machine gun fire and napalm grenades.

Sources indicate that the mercenaries were sent by Hartwell Services, the private army owned by the American Vice President's family. According to locals, al Taba may have placed a bomb at a Hartwell installation further down the Nile.

The dateline for the story was two weeks old. Ruppert reordered his search results by date, then selected the most recent item. It was four days old.

After three days of fighting, Atlantic forces captured Sheik al Taba and seventeen of his disciples. As many as two dozen Taba followers are believed dead. Two American casualties were reported.

Hartwell Senior Infantry Coordinator Kurt Brownback, who led the attack, described the fight as a "great victory for the people of Egypt in their quest for democracy."

Al Taba is the leader of a radical group of heretics who mix Islam with practices of the primitive Egyptians. Local imams denounce his cult as satanic. Al Taba clashed with

Egyptian authorities several times to gain control of Karnak, which he calls the "Grand Mosque" of his cult.

The fate of the children who lived in the temple compound is not known. The damage to the 3600-year old temple has not been assessed but is believed extensive.

Ruppert sat back and thought it over. According to the news he'd read to the greater Southern California region, al-Taba was a "terrorist general" commanding an army of (at latest estimate) nearly a million men, with divisions all across Africa. Capturing al Taba had been the entire objective of the invasion of Egypt, according to Ruppert. If it had happened four days ago, it should be all over the nets, even cause for a special parade.

The Atlantic forces had toppled the radical Egyptian regime along the way, naturally, as penalty for harboring al Taba. Ruppert had mentioned this at the tag end of one of his reports about the invasion of Egypt, as if it were a minor and entirely predictable detail, and then it was on to the entertainment news.

The rest of the news had centered on al Taba, the pressing and urgent need to grab al Taba before he seized control of all North Africa. The fact that Hartwell Services had actually seized control of all Egypt did not rate an explicit mention. It was much easier to focus a television audience on capturing a single archvillain, using any means necessary, than to convince them that an invasion of an entire country was necessary. Coverage of the full-scale war could be omitted if you focused the audience on the good-and-evil struggle to capture the one supremely evil individual. At GlobeNet, they sometimes referred to these individuals as the "Devil of the Day."

A metallic squeal drilled into his ears. Ruppert tried to cover his ears with his hands, but the painful noise screamed from the inside of his earphones, not the exterior world.

The digital environment froze around him. He touched the shimmering icons on the control panel floating in the air beside his head, but none of the programs responded.

The environment shattered into a million fragments and Ruppert lost his balance, then fell backwards. He tumbled into an open, dark space. Bright silver skulls snapped at him from the dark, their shining teeth clacking together. The seal of the Department of Terror rose like a monolith before him, ten stories high, then a hundred. The animated, three-dimension seal depicted a silver bald eagle soaring against a moonlit night sky, breathing fire, shooting lightning from its talons. The eagle's hooked beak opened, and another painful metallic squeal sounded in Ruppert's ears.

A cold male voice boomed out at Ruppert: "You are in violation of Department of Terror Code 207-B. Importation of enemy propaganda and unauthorized data. You are under arrest. Now submitting your case to an automated tribunal. The tribunal has ruled you guilty of terrorist activity. Sentencing will be adjudicated by a Department of Terror official."

Ruppert reached out to bang on his control panel again, but it had disappeared. He tore the video goggles from his head, then peeled the input gloves from his hands.

Every indicator light on the surface of his little computer glowed bright red. He jabbed the power button with his thumb, but Terror had seized the computer and he had lost control.

Ruppert hurled the computer against the concrete wall of the storage cell. It fell and crashed to the floor, but all the little lights still burned. He threw it twice more, than a third time, finally opening a short hairline crack along one edge, but the device was tough and he had no real means of destroying it.

Ruppert lifted the latch on the cell's garage door, then took a deep breath. Terror men, or whatever police or Guardsmen happened to be available, would likely be waiting outside with their guns high. If he moved too quickly, they would cut him down instinctively.

He eased the door up, hearing every individual clank as each panel slid into the overhead track. He looked out to where he'd parked his car.

No one was here. His car had not even been disturbed. He listened carefully to the night around him—there was music and gunfire in the distance, but nothing happening in the storage complex.

Ruppert hurried to his car, loving the sound of the door unlocking for him. As the door opened, he thought that maybe his precautions were good enough, that they didn't actually know who'd used the computer, and he could get away clean if he was fast enough.

Then he heard the approaching whump-whump-whump of a helicopter, flying low. He looked up, and a searing white glare enveloped him.

Ruppert felt his whole body turn to ice. He wanted nothing more than to jump into his car and drive, but his arms and legs wouldn't move. He stood trembling in the light like a stupid animal, staring up at it, giving the helicopter's cameras a clear view of him as the wind from the rotors blasted his hair back from his face.

Then it was over. The light swept on down another alley of the complex as the helicopter pulled away from him.

The immobilizing fear collapsed into wild panic, and he leapt into his car and drove for the exit gate before the door had time to close.

As he chugged north through crushing traffic on the 405, he saw several more helicopters, mostly police, but also one very small black craft with no markings. One of the police crafts lingered above Ruppert's car for what seemed like a very long time. The helicopter did not address him over its loudspeakers or seize control of his car's systems, and finally it thundered away without incident.

In his mind, Ruppert chastised himself for his carelessness. He'd paid for the unit in cash, but he should have been prepared to destroy the computer at a moment's notice. A baseball bat. A simple bucket of water to drop it in. Anything.

Terror would be able to track the computer to the storage unit. The manager might be able to describe Ruppert, though he hadn't seen him since Ruppert rented the unit. Terror could eventually find one of Ruppert's fingerprints or hairs. They could crosscheck with the videolog of the police helicopter that had studied him, if it had been the police. There were a thousand ways Terror could identify him if they wanted to go to the trouble.

NINE

Ruppert lay awake in bed the rest of the night, twitching at every car horn and barking dog. Madeline had come home from church and regaled him with the intricacies of the power struggle surrounding the selection of a new chairlady for her gardening group. He couldn't follow exactly what made her so angry, but she was too wrapped up in the subject to notice his extreme nervousness, or that he didn't even ask his usual question about why she was in a gardening group when she paid a landscaper to keep up their yard.

Then she took her evening pill and drifted off to sleep, leaving him alone and waiting for Terror.

He struggled through a day of attempting to act normal at work, hearing himself talk a bit too fast and laugh a bit too loud. When the on-site Terror agent George Baldwin passed him in the hall, the broad-shouldered man gave him a cheerful greeting, and Ruppert's heart nearly collapsed of shock. Baldwin was not normally an outgoing man. He always wore the suit of a Terror man—black coat, black shirt, black tie—and rarely had much use for the newsreaders, or anyone below the executive level. Nothing came of it, though. Perhaps Baldwin was just in a rare good mood.

It was Tuesday, so after work he attended his Revelation group, where once again they discussed how the final clash between the armies of good and evil was playing out across the globe. Naturally, everything was following the Biblical prophecies of the End Times, even if it took some jiggling to make the details fit.

The group had become a maudlin comedy to Ruppert as he watched the other men try to fit the Book of Revelation to the latest news reports, while Ruppert knew the reports themselves were mostly false. Tonight's subject: Is Muhammad al Taba the Antichrist? Ruppert guessed no, partly because he knew al Taba had already been captured, and partly because he knew al Taba would be eventually be forgotten, and there would be a whole new Antichrist in a year or two. There always was.

After the meeting, O'Shea buttonholed Ruppert at the corner of the classroom, his rubbery smile even wider and toothier than usual.

“Looks like this is it, Daniel,” O’Shea said to him. “It finally happened.”

“What’s that?” Ruppert slid his hands in his pockets to conceal their shaking. If even O’Shea could scare him now, Ruppert thought, there was no hope.

“I heard from Pastor John’s office this morning,” O’Shea said.

“Yeah?”

“Yep! And you’ll never guess what they told me.”

Ruppert glanced around the room. He was left alone now with O’Shea, whose pudgy body blocked his path to the door.

“What’s that?” Ruppert asked. “What did you hear?”

“Just take a guess. I bet you can guess if you try. Think about it.”

“I don’t have any idea, Liam.” Ruppert looked out the door into the empty hall to see if any Terror men were approaching, but he saw nobody unusual, just men passing on their way out of various classes and study groups and discussion groups and activity groups.

“You don’t want to try and guess?”

“Liam, I need to go and meet Madeline—”

“They approved my application!” O’Shea brandished a laminated badge featuring his picture, in which O’Shea’s mouth sagged wide open as if he had no idea he was having his picture taken. The logo of the World Dominion Church was stamped above the picture—a golden sword, its upright handle the shape of a cross, skewering the Earth right through the North Pole, its tip protruding somewhere near Tierra del Fuego.

“I am now an official lay pastor here at Golden Tabernacle. I now have the authority to watch for those who show signs of straying from the flock, and to counsel them how best to correct their life’s course.”

As if you ever needed official sanction to do that, Ruppert thought. He felt himself sag with relief—this was about O’Shea, not him.

“Congratulations, Liam,” he said. “That does call for a little celebration. Let me buy you a Fizzer at the Fishes N’ Loaves. You like raspberry?” Ruppert nudged forward and put a hand on O’Shea’s soft upper arm, meaning to steer him around towards the door, but O’Shea didn’t budge. Instead, he cleared his throat.

“I’ve identified my first project, Daniel.”

“That’s great. Let’s go enjoy a nice Fizzer—”

“It’s you, Daniel.”

Ruppert was slipping from paranoid to merely annoyed.

“I don’t think I heard you correctly, O’Shea.”

“I’ve been watching you, Daniel. I’ve been trained to watch, you know, working in Social Services.”

“And what?” Ruppert’s voice was low and hard now, without the friendly office-chatter tone.

“I’ve seen signs of doubt.”

“Listen, Liam—”

“Do you suffer doubts, Daniel?” Liam edged up to him, his face looming to fill Ruppert’s sight. Spittle flew from his lips. “Do you feel your faith might be sliding?”

“No.” Ruppert decided it would be safest to take a hard line with him. “Liam, this is insulting. How dare you question my...my faith. My faith in Our King, Liam.”

“There’s no need to be ashamed, Daniel. The demons of doubt are everywhere. The legions of the devil gather in the largest cities. They offer temptation. They offer lies. They offer doubt and uncertainty. We cannot afford uncertainty, Michael, in these times. The armies of darkness are rising to destroy us. The end draws nigh, Michael. Soon Our King will arrive with a burning sword in his mouth, and he will destroy all unbelievers. If he finds doubt in your heart, he will destroy you, too. He knows how strong your faith is. Or how weak.”

“Liam, you’re a spitter.”

“What?”

“You spit on people when you talk. You’re, what, forty years old? Hasn’t anybody ever mentioned it to you? Have you ever considered the fine distinction between saying it and spraying it?”

Liam’s face turned red. “I have overactive saliva glands. Stop switching the subject. I am here to discuss the eternal fate of your soul. As a lay pastor, it is my sacred duty to bring your faults to your attention.”

“And I know that takes a lot of effort on your part.” Ruppert leaned in towards the pudgy man. If Terror was after him, there was no point in trying to impress people like Liam any longer. He found the realization strangely liberating. “Now get the hell out of my way, Liam.”

Liam’s mouth sagged open as if he were a dying fish taking its last gulp.

“This is for your own good, Daniel. I think you need a lot of prayer. You and I need to spend a long time in the prayer closet together. What are you doing after Men’s Meeting tomorrow?”

“Forget it, O’Shea.” Ruppert pushed one of his shoulders, meaning only to turn him aside and out of the way, but O’Shea didn’t cooperate. He lost his balance, toppled sideways into the wall, and slid to the floor, gaping as Ruppert stepped over him.

“This is the wrong choice!” O’Shea squealed. “You’re making the wrong choice! You assaulted me!”

Ruppert walked to the door, not looking back.

“Walk away!” O’Shea screamed after him. “Walk away! You can walk away from me, but you can’t escape from Our King! Nobody escapes the King, Daniel!”

TEN

On Wednesday night at the Men's Meeting rally, and then on Ruppert's news report for Thursday, the lead story centered on China. The Chinese government had issued a demand that all Atlantic-alliance naval craft depart the Yellow Sea, the East China Sea, and the South China Sea, decreeing a zone of control extending twenty miles from China's coastline.

President Winthrop was, as usual, unavailable for comment, but Vice President Hartwell issued a thundering video statement punctuating with sweeping hand gestures. He declared that "China will not intimidate or attempt to bully the United States and its allies. We will not submit to imperial terror."

On Thursday night, they came for Ruppert.

He was nearly asleep when he heard the clomping of boots downstairs. Ruppert had only begun to sit up in his bed when they burst into the room, piercing the darkness with a dozen or more bright beams from tactical lights mounted atop their assault rifles. They wore black body armor, black masks, black boots and gloves.

Some of the beams converged on Ruppert's chest and face, while others found Madeline sleeping beside him.

"Hands up! Hands up!" one of the Terror men shouted. "Stay where you are!"

Madeline stirred at the loud voice. "Turn off the screen," she mumbled, then rolled away on her side.

Ruppert raised his hands, and two masked men hauled Ruppert from the bed, in the process cracking his head against the nightstand and knocking over the lamp, which shattered against the baseboard.

"On your feet!" Gloved hands grabbed him up from the wrecked nightstand and shoved him face first into the wall. They clamped his hands behind him, then frisked him, tearing at his shirt and boxer shorts.

He could see the screen next to his bed, the one that should have alerted him to intruders in his home. It was completely blank, a mindless blue like the screens at Sully's house.

“What’s happening?” Madeline’s voice was distant and dreamy. “Daniel? Oh, Jesus, Daniel, what’s happening?” Her voice rose to a hysterical shriek. “Daniel, where are you?”

“I’m right here, cupcake.” Ruppert tried to twist his head around toward her, but he could only watch from the corner of his eye as the Terror men stripped the sheets from the bed and grabbed her up, then hauled her out of sight.

“Help! Daniel, please, somebody help me!”

“Leave her alone,” Daniel said. “She hasn’t done anything. She doesn’t know anything.”

“Who are you people?” Madeline screamed. “Make them stop!”

“It’s Terror. They’re here for me.”

“What? What have you done?” She began to plead with the men. “Please, I never did anything wrong, my husband’s a jerk. I’m a good, State-fearing woman—” Her voice became a strange gagging sound, and Ruppert could no longer make out her words.

“Please don’t hurt her,” Ruppert said. “She really doesn’t—”

A hand seized a fistful of the hair at the back of Ruppert’s head, snapped his head backward, then slammed his face into the wall.

“Shut the fuck up,” a gravelly male whispered in his ear. “You and your cow both.”

A leather bag dropped over Ruppert’s head, blocking all his vision. He felt it cinch tight around his neck, and a buckle snapped into place at the base of his throat. The musty interior of the bag smelled like old blood and sour vomit.

They slammed him into the wall again, then pinned his hands above his head. A hot, wet slime spurted onto his fingers, then hardened into tough, fibrous strands, binding his hands together.

They dragged him from the room, cracking his shins and knees on the furniture along the way. He called out Madeline’s name and strained to hear if she answered, but the hard leather bag muffled everything. He moved in complete darkness and near silence as his captors hauled him forward.

Blinded, with his hands glued together, Ruppert stumbled and fell as they dragged him down the stairs, banging his shoulder against every support post on the handrail.

They marched him across his front yard. He still couldn’t hear Madeline. Whatever they did to him, he’d earned it; he’d broken the rules and gotten caught. Madeline was no danger to society, though; more a slave to it. She’d done everything she was told, killed whatever part of herself people had to kill to adapt to the world, and the last thing she deserved was to be punished on top of that.

Their marriage might have been shallow, even loveless, but she was the closest companion in his life and they’d usually gotten along well when they saw each other. She liked being married to the famous newsreader, and he liked that she kept herself busy. He didn’t want to think about what the Terror men would do to her, what methods of interrogation they might use.

They dragged him over the lawn, Ruppert trying to walk but only managing to scuffle his bare feet sideways through the cool grass; they moved too fast, keeping him off balance.

They wrapped a rubbery cord around his arms and strung him up, and then he was moving, swinging like a pendulum. He was inside some kind of moving vehicle now. He thought of the Freedom Brigades and their black cargo vans.

Fists beat at him now, pounding his kidneys, his ribs, his stomach. He was kicked back and forth among unseen tormentors, each blow swinging him towards another assailant, and each time he could not be sure where the fist or the boot would land. His body became sore and he could feel the bruises forming all over him. He could have kicked out and maybe hit someone, but he knew better than to fight back.

The beating continued for twenty or thirty minutes, and then someone grabbed his foot and stabbed a needle into his lower leg, and then he blacked out.



Ruppert awoke shivering on a hard concrete floor, his entire body aching. The air was frigid around him. He opened one eye; the other was stuck closed. His hands were still bound together.

The bare room around him was about as long as a coffin, but a little wider, and the ceiling was only about five feet above him. Light came from a single small panel overhead protected by a steel grill. Freezing air poured from a dark mesh vent next to it.

He pushed himself up into a sitting position. The only way out of the room was a smooth metal panel at one end of the room, which was about three feet high. It had no handle on this side. He pushed at the cold surface, but of course it was locked from the outside.

“Hello?” Ruppert said. “Is anyone listening?”

There was no answer. He thought immediately of Madeline. Had they beaten her, too? Was she waking up in some painfully cold little cell nearby? Maybe they had taken her somewhere else altogether. Everything else in the world was segregated by sex. Why not the gulag system?

He felt like he was deep underground, but he had no way of knowing this. He could have been on the twentieth floor of a glass skyscraper.

He sat back against the wall and drew in his knees, trying to make himself as small as possible to conserve a little body heat. The cold was already painful, and the icy air kept pouring in on him. He wondered what it would be like to freeze to death. His fingers and toes had already gone numb.

He expected that eventually someone would come for him, and he waited and waited and waited, but nothing happened. He began listing all the things he did not know. He did not know where Madeline was or what they’d done to her. He did not know how long he’d been unconscious. He did not know if he was still in Los Angeles, or if he was still in America. He did not know if anyone was going to come for him, or if he would freeze to death.

After a few hours he was painfully hungry, but there was no food or water available. He pushed at the door again, then knocked on it a few times, but there was no answer.

Time passed and his arms and legs grew numb, and his nose began to run. He wiped it on the torn sleeve of his t-shirt.

Time passed and he found himself singing, under his breath, the jingle to a laundry detergent commercial: “Keeps your blues bright blue, Keeps your whites clean and bright, Try Splash Ultra Vibrant, In your laundry tonight.” It would not leave his head.

Time passed and he thought of Sully, wondering if Sully had been through this facility, maybe even in this cell.

Time passed and he thought of all the people he might never see again. Madeline. His parents in Bakersfield, his father who’d become obsessed with golf magazines and watching golf tournaments and practicing his short game with the digital putter Ruppert had bought him three Christmases ago, his mother who took very strong pills for nervousness and spent too much too time zoned out in front of the screen, sometimes drooling.

Time passed and he grew absurdly happy they’d never had a child. Or bought a dog. Madeline bristled at the idea of “dog hair” and “dog smells” in their home. The dog would be stuck inside by himself, with no one to take care of him. He wondered what happened to the pets of those disappeared by Terror. He decided it was better to have a small dog, because they would probably kill a large dog when they raided your home. A small, fearful dog who ran and hid at the first sign of danger.

Had Sully had a dog? He couldn’t remember. He hadn’t seen one at Sully’s house.

A cat might be a better choice. Cats were better survivors on their own.

He knew what happened to the children of the disappeared. Older teenagers would be interrogated, probably, but the younger ones would be given over to Child and Family Services, their fate to be decided by Liam O’Shea and his kind. He wondered what they did at the Child Salvation Centers.

He was grateful he had no children.

Time passed and he slid into a dark, comatose sleep. He dreamed he was hiking across an endless white glacier riddled with cracks as deep as canyons. In the distance, almost at the horizon, he saw Sully stooped over, trudging forward into the cold wind. Ruppert tried to call his name, but he’d lost his voice.



He awoke to a loud wailing sound that burned his cold, stiff ears. The door panel opened and two large men in black coveralls reached in and hauled him out of the cell. The cell was sunken below floor level, so Ruppert was up and over a ledge onto another concrete floor. The air here was only room temperature, but it felt like a soothing sauna to Ruppert. He sucked in a deep lungful of the warm air, then accidentally sighed as he breathed it out.

“Don’t get too comfortable,” one of the men said. They lifted him to his feet.

“Sooner or later you’ll wish you were back in there,” the other said. He had a flat nose that looked as if it had been broken long ago. “Get walking. We’re not carrying you.”

The men stayed close on either side as they walked up the dusty gray corridor. More metal doors were sunk low in the wall on either side of him.

“Is Madeline here?” he asked.

The first man, who had a scar twisting from his ear to his throat, stopped him with one hand and punched Ruppert in the jaw with his other.

“First rule,” he said. “No questions. You don’t ask anyone anything. Understand that? We own all the questions here.”

“Yes.”

“What did he say?” Scarface asked.

“I don’t know what he said.”

“Yes,” Ruppert said. “I said yes.”

Scarface hit him again, this time in the gut. Ruppert doubled over, slumped to his knees, and struggled to draw air.

“What was that for?” Ruppert asked.

Scarface grabbed him by his shirt. “Did you just ask me a question?”

“Yes. No.”

“Now he’s lying,” Broken Nose said. He grabbed Ruppert’s hair and turned Ruppert’s head to look at him. “You’re asking questions and telling lies.”

They threw him to the floor and kicking at his ribs, his shoulders, his head, their boots slamming into bruises still raw from his beating in the van. When his nose was bloodied and one eye was swollen, they jerked him back to his feet and made him walk.

The first stop was a large industrial sink, where Broken Nose dropped a metal grate over the basin, then drew on a pair of latex gloves. He grabbed Ruppert’s forearms and pressed them down on the grate, so that Ruppert’s bound hands were underneath the wide-mouthed faucet.

Scarface retrieved from under the sink a large plastic jug half-filled with a brackish, dark green fluid. He unscrewed the cap and bared his teeth at Ruppert.

“Don’t move your hands,” he said. He began to pour the fluid over the sticky bindings that glued Ruppert’s hands together, which now looked like a mass of old, dirty caulk.

The clumps of binding began to bubble and steam, dripping off his hands as fluid and acrid white smoke. He watched the drops of white liquid spatter the grimy basin, burning into the dark crust around the drain. He wriggled his fingers around, making sure Scarface poured it over the large clots sticking to his palms and between his fingers.

His hands began to itch, and then to burn. The green liquid, or its reaction with the dissolving paste, was eating into the skin of his hands. He hissed and tried to draw back, but Broken Nose just tightened his grip on Ruppert’s forearms.

“Burns a little, yeah,” Scarface said. He replaced the jug under the sink, then lit a cigarette. “It’s got to get in there good if you want that crap off your hands.”

The painful burning intensified. It felt like he’d grabbed a double handful of poisonous jellyfish tendrils and squeezed them tight. The burning spread underneath his fingernails, and deep into his knuckles. His teeth ground together, every muscle in his

arms seized up tight, and he tried not to shout his pain, understanding that his captors would beat him if he complained.

The bindings on his hands continued to dissolve, with a sound like frying eggs, bubbling and dripping—it looked and felt like his hands were melting away, right down to the bone.

“You know what helps with that?” Scarface said. “Water. Just plain, cold water.” He positioned the wide mouth of the faucet directly over Ruppert’s hands.

“Water does help,” the broken-nosed guard said.

Scarface touched the handle over the sink. “You want me to turn this knob here?”

“Yes,” Ruppert said.

“Yes what?”

“Please. Yes, please, sir, please turn on the water, Jesus God it hurts.”

“I think he called you Jesus,” Broken Nose said.

“Is that right?” Scarface leaned in close to Ruppert. “Did you call me Jesus? Do I look like God to you?”

“Please.” Ruppert’s voice was a pained hiss. His fingers were bent into sharp hooks. He thought he could feel his fingernails peeling away.

“That looks like enough to you?” Scarface asked the other captor.

“Looks okay.”

“I think it’s enough.” Scarface turned the knob and a broad column of cold water fell onto Ruppert’s hands, washing away the reacting chemicals and soothing his pain a little. He twisted and turned his hands to make sure everything got washed off, just as he’d been stupid enough to do when Scarface was pouring the acidic liquid.

“Make sure you get it all,” Broken Nose said. “You don’t want any bone damage.”

When his hands were thoroughly rinsed, Ruppert looked them over. A tangle of red, bleeding stripes was burned into them, from his wrists to his fingertips, and the muscles in his fingers felt very weak. His fingernails were actually intact, though a couple of them felt loose, like scales ready to be shed.

They marched him up a dusty concrete stairwell and down a gray cinderblock hall into another windowless room, which was empty except for a heavy wooden chair with leather cuffs for the wrists and ankles. They strapped him into the chair, then left the room.

Ruppert sat alone for a very long time, but with no way to judge time he could not really tell if it was twenty minutes or an hour, or more. His hands throbbled; the nerves in his fingers felt as if they’d been exposed to the open air. He glanced several times at the room’s only other feature, a mildewed green curtain that partitioned off one side of the room. He could not tell how much space was behind the curtain, or if it was just a wall.

His back was to the door, so when it finally opened again, he couldn’t see his captors until they walked in front of him. Scarface placed a folding card table in front of Ruppert, while Broken Nose positioned a chair on the far side of the table, facing Ruppert. They left again without a word.

It was another long time before the captors returned, and this time they were accompanied by a man in a black-on-black officer’s uniform and cap. The left side of his chest displayed a silver skull next to two colorful rows of ribbon bars, of the kind

Ruppert was accustomed to seeing on military dress. It was rare to see them on Terror uniforms.

This man was smaller than the other two, even slender, with fine blond hair and very pale blue eyes. He brought with him a large black bag, something a small-town doctor might have carried on house calls. He placed this on the table and sat down. He had not yet made eye contact with Ruppert or acknowledged his presence.

“The Captain’s going to ask you a couple questions,” Scarface said. “If you don’t play nice with him, we get to play with you.” The two large captors—Ruppert was beginning to think of them as prison guards—turned and walked away, and he heard the door close behind him.

The wiry Captain lifted out a very thin handheld screen and studied it, holding it at such an angle that Ruppert had no idea what he was reading. Several minutes passed before the Captain looked up.

“Daniel Ruppert?” he said.

“Yes.”

“You’re a newsreader for GlobeNet-Los Angeles.”

“Yes.”

The Captain shook his head. “We’ve always had trouble with you media people. Even now we can’t trust you. You get your face plastered all over town, suddenly you think that your personal opinion is in some way important.”

Ruppert didn’t know how to respond to this, so he stayed quiet.

“Your parents live in Bakersfield. Retired. Visit them often?”

“Sometimes.”

“Looks like only the occasional holiday. Why is that?”

“It’s...I don’t really know.”

“How’s your marriage?”

“Fine.”

“You don’t fuck your wife very much.”

Ruppert stumbled to find a response. “She’s very religious.”

“Religious women fuck. I see it all the time.”

“We’re not...It’s not a...”

“Yes?”

“We’re having some problems.”

“You just told me your marriage was fine.”

“I would say it’s average.”

“There is no point in lying to us,” the Captain said.

“Our marriage isn’t great. What does this have to do with anything?”

The Captain looked him directly in the eyes for the first time. There was something cold and reptilian in the man’s pale gaze.

“You have been briefed on the rules regarding asking questions?”

“Yes, sir. I’m sorry.”

The Captain looked past Ruppert and gave a short nod. The two guards seized either side of Ruppert’s chair—they hadn’t left the room at all. They carried the chair to the curtained side of the room, then hauled the curtain aside.

They tilted his chair back into a trough of scummy water, then dunked his head under the surface. Ruppert struggled to break free, but the restraints held firm and cut into him. His lungs began to burn—he hadn't taken a breath to prepare for this.

They tilted the chair up and he took a deep breath, then they leaned him back and held his head under the water. His lungs slowly consumed the air he'd taken in, and soon they were burning again.

They brought him up again, but he barely had time to exhale before he was back under water, this time squirming and aching for air. The dirty water seemed to swallow him up, and he felt immense pressure in his head, as if his brain were being crushed by the lack of oxygen.

They repeated the process several times, more than once bringing him right up to the brink of drowning before they pulled him out.

"Enough," Ruppert heard the Captain say. The two men lifted his chair and carried it back to the table, facing the Captain. The Captain lifted from his doctor bag a yellow plastic box strung with loops of stripped copper wire. One of the guards accepted the box from the Captain and dropped the wires over Ruppert's head. They swung against his soaked t-shirt.

The guards retreated back towards the door. The Captain held up a smaller yellow box and extended an antenna from its top.

"Now," the Captain said, "How would you characterize your relationship with your wife?"

"Terrible," Ruppert said.

"Good. You see how easy it is to tell the truth?"

"Yes."

"Now. Tell me where you came into possession of a SinoDyne 8000XR data console."

"Just a junk store in Chinatown."

"The name of the store?"

"I don't remember."

The Captain touched a lever on the smaller yellow box, and pain filled Ruppert's body. All his muscles seized up, and he spasmed in every direction, straining the chair's leather cuffs. The water soaking his skin and his meager clothing helped conduct the electric shock to every part of his body.

"Now," the Captain said.

"It was on one of the smaller streets. Bamboo, I think. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'd tell you if I remembered."

"Why did you purchase the unit?"

"I wanted to see the bigger picture."

"The bigger picture of what?"

"The world. What's really going on in the world."

"As a newsman, are you not already in a position to understand that?"

"I only report the official story."

"You report the truth to the people."

"Some of it."

“What’s that?”

“I report some of the facts. A version of the truth. I don’t even know how it gets decided what’s true and what isn’t.”

“So you look for truth in enemy propaganda. Is that it?”

“It’s not all propaganda.”

Another electric surge hit Ruppert’s body. He felt saliva foaming out of his lips.

“If it is anti-American, it is propaganda,” the Captain said. “This should be fairly simple for a man in your position to grasp. In a time of war, we must all band together. You have violated that basic principle.”

“I’ve kept these things secret,” Ruppert said. “I haven’t tried to change anyone else’s mind. I just want to know for myself.”

“I have seen this pattern before. First, you are simply curious. In time, you would be evangelizing for the enemy. Eventually, you would be willing to commit terrorist acts against our country. We have simply captured you in the process of conversion. You are a threat to the state and the people. What do you think we should do with you?”

“I don’t know.”

“What’s that?”

“I said I don’t know, sir.”

“Tell me this, Mr. Ruppert. If your doctor found a single cancerous cell in your body, would you want him to excise it immediately, or would you allow it to thrive, going its own way, altering the cells around it?”

“I’d have him cut it out,” Ruppert whispered. The strength was seeping from his body.

“Louder.”

“I’d say cut it out!”

“Then you understand. I am the doctor, Mr. Ruppert. And you are the cancer. My role is to protect the rest of the body. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Our enemies are murderers without hearts or souls. They do not care if they die themselves, so long as they bring suffering to our country in some way. You may try to sympathize with them if you wish, in the foolish way that some would sympathize with a venomous rattlesnake, but I assure you, they will never sympathize with you. Your place is here among your own people. That is the only realm in you which you could possibly be of any value. We are in a war for our survival. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Now. Explain to me your relationship with this sports reporter...” The Captain’s eyes scanned up and down the screen in his hand. “This Sullivan Stone, real name Kerry Gristone.”

“He was a co-worker.”

“The two of you occasionally took private lunch periods together.”

“It wasn’t that private. Sir. We just grabbed lunch at a place near the studio.”

“Why did the two of you require time alone? What did you discuss?”

“We mainly just talked about work.”

A third electric shock flared throughout Ruppert’s body, sending him surging up against his restraints. He could feel his nerve endings popping like expired light bulbs.

“Again,” the Captain said.

“We had a shared...I don’t know if you would call it...a sense of irony that wasn’t present in many of our co-workers.”

“Irony about what?”

“About...our roles in the world, I guess you’d say it that way.”

“As journalists? Your work at GlobeNet?”

“Yes. Sir. After a while, you start to notice how the truth shifts over time, how the story changes. A war in the Philippines becomes a war in Indonesia without any explanation. That kind of thing.”

“Naturally, facts change over time.”

“Yes, sir. It’s difficult to say what I mean. We talk about freedom and democracy, but we’ve had the same people in charge as long as anybody can remember. We talk about religion, but we bring war to every corner of the world.”

“You attend a Dominionist church?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then you understand the unique nature of our place in the world. We fight against evil itself.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Now. Did you ever fuck Sullivan Stone?”

“No.”

“Did you ever perform an act of sodomy on him?”

“No, sir.”

“Did you ever allow him to perform an act of sodomy on you?”

“No.”

“Did you suspect he was a social deviant?”

“It’s easy to suspect that kind of thing.”

“Why did you not register your suspicions with your employer? A public man cannot be allowed to carry on private immorality. It’s damaging to the republic.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I asked a question.”

“I don’t know, sir.”

The electrical jolt hit him again. He could feel his spine twisting like a flag in the wind.

“I should have reported him, sir,” Ruppert said between gasps for air. “I didn’t want to risk ruining his life over a false accusation, sir.”

“If the accusation turned out to be false, there would be nothing to worry about, would there, Mr. Ruppert?”

“I suppose not, sir.”

“Answer me more clearly.”

“No, sir. There would be nothing to worry about.”

“I have in front of me frames of video from a visit Mr. Stone made to your home. You and he go down into the basement. This was in April. What was the purpose of that visit?”

“I don’t remember, sir.”

The Captain held up the yellow remote control again.

“He was afraid,” Ruppert said quickly. “He thought you were watching him.”

“He thought I was watching him?”

“Terror. The Department of Terror.”

“Why would he come to you under that circumstance?”

“I don’t—I guess he thought I might be sympathetic.”

The Captain nodded and leaned back in his chair for a long minute. His pale eyes studied Ruppert, as if the Terror officer were contemplating whether a particular creature was worth pursuing as prey.

“This is exactly what I was talking about,” the Captain eventually said. “You see? This Sullivan Stone was a social deviant. He had a corrupting influence on you.”

“I’m not sure that’s exactly accurate.”

“Why not?”

“We didn’t explicitly talk about...politics, or anything.”

“I doubt that. But it isn’t necessary, in the early stages. It can be gradual. A particular facial expression or gesture at the proper time. A disparaging comment about our Dear President. You see?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Your employer will be reprimanded, of course, and probably fined for employing deviants. I think this is the real story here. Sullivan Stone was a corrupt and dangerous human being. He sympathized with the enemy, and he propagandized you to do the same. Is that correct?”

“Sir, I don’t think it was Sully’s influence so much as—”

This time the electrical jolt was much stronger. His teeth ground into each other and his lips curled back to expose his gums. His eyes felt as if they would pop from his skull.

“Now,” the Captain said. “I stated that Sullivan Stone influenced you towards thoughts and actions characteristic of terrorists. Is that correct or not?”

“Yes, yes, sir. It’s absolutely correct.”

“Yes, this is largely Mr. Stone’s fault. I want you to think that over. Think about it very carefully. We’ll talk again.” The Captain rose from the table, gathered his equipment back into the bag, and departed the room without another word.

ELEVEN

They returned him, still soaked to the waist, to his refrigerated cell, where Ruppert shivered until he slipped into a comatose sleep.

He lost track of the days and nights, and even the ability to determine the time of day. The guards pulled him out at irregular intervals, for another interrogation by the Captain, or to administer a gratuitous beating and maybe take him to the filthy bathroom at the end of the hall. They would interrupt his sleep with loud, piercing sounds that sometimes rang for hours and hours, driving him mad. They offered no medical treatment for the damage to his hands, and the wounds from his bindings etched into his flesh as scarred black loops and whorls across his palms, fingers, and the backs of his hands. He never saw any of the other prisoners.

The Captain questioned him repeatedly about his political and religious beliefs, but also devoted long, intense periods of questioning to the minute details of Ruppert's sexual history and inclinations. Ruppert did not know if they were profiling him as a social deviant, or if this was intended to break him down psychologically, or if it was just a private obsession of the Captain.

Eventually, the Captain brought him in again to talk about Sully. He began by replaying the video of Sully's visit to Ruppert's house, obviously recorded by Ruppert's screens at home.

"We have to wonder, Mr. Ruppert," the Captain said, "What might have transpired in your basement?"

"I told you, Sully was afraid."

"And what, precisely, did he want from you?"

"He wanted...he thought I might be able to help him. To hide him."

"And why would he think you could do that?"

"I don't know. He must have been desperate."

"And you said...?"

"I told him there was nothing I could do to help him. I don't think anyone could have helped him by then."

“You turned him away?”

“I just told him the truth.”

“But you wanted to help. You sympathized, even knowing he was a morally corrupt deviant. You would have helped him if it were in your power.”

“I felt sorry for him. I wouldn’t have risked my life to protect him, though. I still have Madeline to think about.” Under the captors’ rules, this was the closest he could come to asking what they’d done to Madeline.

“Are you absolutely sure nothing else happened?” the Captain asked, ignoring Ruppert’s implied question.

“Nothing. He was only there for a minute. I told him not to come back.”

A powerful electric jolt tore through Ruppert’s body.

“You know how we feel about lies, Mr. Ruppert.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Now. I’m going to make this extremely easy for you.” The Captain reached into his bag and brought out a transparent evidence bag. Inside was Ruppert’s wallet, a thin square box fronted with a screen for communications and transactions, with hollow compartments for cash and other items. The compartments were now open and empty.

The Captain laid the evidence bag on the table, then placed a second bag beside it. This one held the plastic card with the long alphanumeric direct number stamped across it.

“Where did you get this?” The Captain indicated the card.

“I’m not sure.”

Another painful electric shock hit him.

“Again,” the Captain said.

“I don’t remember.”

Another electric shock, even stronger this time.

“Why are you still trying to lie, Mr. Ruppert? Have you not fully grasped the rules? Don’t you think we investigated the number ourselves? We know who this contacts.”

“Then you know more than I do,” Ruppert said. He winced, waited for the shock, but either the Captain sensed he was telling the truth or he’d grown tired of jolting him for the moment.

“Allow me to make this completely clear, Mr. Ruppert. We still have your wife in custody. We can have your parents in ten minutes, if we wish to, though I don’t think they would hold up at this facility as well as you have. As for you—how familiar are you with the coal-mining industry?”

“Not at all. Sir.”

“You will learn fast. I have a standing request from a civilian labor camp in West Virginia. I don’t know what goes on there, but they do seem to have a bottomless demand for workers.

“As for your wife, there is a constant need for workers to help clean up the Comanche Peak reactor site. You remember the Comanche Peak meltdown, don’t you? You probably reported on it.”

“I was still an intern then.”

“Workers assigned there have an eighty-three percent chance of developing malignancies within twelve months. Again, a bottomless demand for warm bodies.”

Ruppert could not answer. He tried to suppress his imagined picture of Madeline toothless, hairless, shriveled by cancerous radiation.

“I have the necessary assignment orders on my desk,” the Captain said. “They only need my signature. I could put you both on a train tonight—separate trains, of course. You’d be at work by five A.M. Eastern time. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Now, I will likely send you both to these work camps. There is only one other possibility. Would you like to hear the other possibility?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Mr. Stone clearly intended that you make contact with this person.” The Captain tapped the card in the evidence bag. “We want you to do that. You are permitted for the purposes of this conversation to ask questions.”

“Why do you want me to do this?”

“Not an acceptable question.”

“Okay, I’m sorry. What...do you want me to say when I call?”

“You will do whatever is necessary to gain his trust. We believe that he knows the whereabouts of a Class A target, a person of high priority to my organization. We believe he may even lead you to this person, in time. Look at him carefully. We want you to find his location.”

The Captain laid his screen flat on the table and turned it around so Ruppert could see it clearly. The screen displayed two pictures of one man, probably a police mug shot. The man looked to be in his late thirties or early forties, large and husky like a football lineman gone to fat. He had a heavy mustache that sprawled out at either side into scraggly beard. His hair was long but he was balding at the top, and in the balding area Ruppert could see an aged, slightly wrinkled tattoo of what looked like scratch marks, or the footprints of chickens.

He read the description below the pic:

Name: Hollis Westerly
 Aliases: George Western. ThunderWulff-Z (cyber)
 DOB: 10/3/1983, Meridian, Mississippi
 CONVICTED: Narcotics possession, Owensboro,
 Kentucky
 CONVICTED: Assault/Armed Robbery, Detroit, Michigan
 Affiliates: Church of the White Creator; Aryan Social
 Nationalists...[click for more]

Two text rectangles blinked next to the image: AGE PROGRESSION and DISTINGUISHING MARKS/TATTOOS. Ruppert touched the second one, and the two pictures of the man’s face were replaced by a dozen close-ups of his tattoos: a howling wolf, surrounded by more of the scratchy marks, on his shoulder; something that looked like a swastika, but with only three arms, on his calf; something that was definitely a swastika surrounded by a ring of fire on his back.

“I don’t understand,” Ruppert said. “Why would Sully be involved with somebody like this?”

“It’s a strange world,” the Captain said. “I never said your deviant friend knew this target personally.”

“Why are you so interested in this person?”

“Class A target. Threat to the state.”

“How am I categorized?”

“Class D. Minor nuisance.”

“That’s nice to hear,” Ruppert said. “So if I agree to make contact, and try to find this old skinhead, then what?”

“Then I wave a magic wand and put your life back together for you,” the Captain said. “We let you go. We let your wife go.”

“You’ll drop all the charges?”

“We’ll let you go with a very severe warning. And we’ll keep a close watch on you for a long time—not that you’ll notice. You get us our target and then go back to being an obedient, moral citizen, then you’ll never have to hear from us again.”

“I feel like I should have a lawyer here or something.”

“We don’t deal in written laws.”

“Then how do I know you’ll hold up your end?”

“It’s this or a labor camp.”

“Good point.” Ruppert thought it over. He only had to help them capture somebody who was obviously dangerous. The alternative was horrifying. “I’ll do it.”

“You don’t want to think it over?”

“What’s to think about?”

The Captain smiled, but his pale blue eyes were flat and lifeless. “You are correct. It is an easy choice, isn’t it? I only hope you do not let the comforts of your life outside delude you into thinking you’ve escaped us. You must carry out this task or we will take you back.”

“I understand, sir.”

The Captain studied him for a long moment. He touched the AGE PROGRESSION button on the screen, and the face of Hollis Westerly appeared again, his hair longer and heavily streaked with gray, his bald spot expanded, his jowls deeper.

“Take a careful look, Mr. Ruppert. When you find this man, you will contact us. If you touch the weather icon on your wallet screen, then touch the Ski Forecast icon, that will send the necessary signal to us. That’s all you need to do. Understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Your cooperation is appreciated.” The Captain stood and gathered up his things, including Ruppert’s wallet, then moved for the door. “You will see that we are just as proficient at rewarding our friends as we are at punishing our enemies.”

He left the room, and a minute later the guards unstrapped Ruppert from the chair. This time, they did not take him back to the refrigerated cell, but up two flights of stairs, down a corridor lined with full-size doors, and into a concrete, windowless room with a padded bunk, a sink, a clear toilet. A few minutes after they locked him in, a hatch in the door opened and a plastic platter covered with foil was deposited on his floor.

Ruppert lifted it up and pulled away the foil. Underneath was a steaming hot meal of roasted chicken, baked potatoes, broccoli and carrots. There was even a chilled

can of soda. After days of starvation, it looked like a feast. The hunger had taken second place to his physical suffering, but now it rose to consume him.

Ruppert began to eat his reward.

TWELVE

Ruppert fell asleep on the padded cot, which felt like a down-stuffed mattress after countless nights on the cold concrete floor. He awoke in the back seat of a moving car. A yellow taxi cab. A clear panel divided him from the driver, who looked back at him in the rearview mirror.

“Got you moving, huh?” the cabbie said. “You’re almost home. Just take it easy.”

Ruppert became aware of a sour odor flooding his nostrils and the back of his throat. More sour-smelling air poured from the vents overhead. The sky was a dark blue outside, either just before sunrise or just after sunset.

“Where are you taking me?” Ruppert said.

“Like I said, you’re almost home. I got you up just in time. Here we are, pal.” The gates to Ruppert’s walled neighborhood opened in the cab’s headlights, and they drove inside. Ruppert began to understand that it was not a regular taxi, but a discreet way for Terror to move people around.

They stopped in front of Ruppert’s house.

“Remember the agreement you made,” the cabbie said. “I’m supposed to remind you of that. I don’t know anything about it myself, but I’d advise you to stick to whatever agreement you made. The organization does not care for unreliable people.”

“I will,” Ruppert said. He reached into his pocket, found the hard square of his wallet. “Do I pay you, or...?”

The cabbie laughed. “On the house, Jack. Now get out. Nice place you got here.” The car door beside Ruppert swung open, and Ruppert tried not to look too eager as he climbed out and stepped onto his driveway. He swayed on his unsteady feet; Terror must have tranquilized him for the ride home. He had no idea where he’d been imprisoned or how far away it was.

The cab’s door closed and the taxi drove towards the exit gate. The sky had already brightened a little; it must be morning instead of night. Ruppert stumbled for the front door, groggily aware that something was strung around his neck, swinging with every move. When the motion lights over his door clicked on, he saw it was a lei of fake

flowers. They'd dressed him in an absurd outfit, a bright tropical shirt and Bermuda shorts, as if he had just returned from an island vacation.

The front door opened and he continued into his house. Everything looked just as he'd left it; his house had not been searched and gutted like Sully's. It was hard to believe he'd been gone at all.

"Mr. Ruppert, you have one urgent message waiting," the house said in its pleasant female voice.

Ruppert shuffled into the living room and slumped onto the couch in front of his video wall. "Show messages," he said.

More than a dozen images appeared, but one of them blinked red. It showed George Baldwin, the Terror agent assigned to his GlobeNet office.

"Play the urgent one," Ruppert said.

The image of Baldwin swelled to take up the whole wall, then it animated. Baldwin was all smiles.

"Daniel," he said, "George Baldwin from work. Just a quick note to say we hope you enjoyed your vacation, and we're all looking forward to seeing you back at work on Monday. Rest up this weekend, and be sure and put some ointment on those jellyfish burns. Have a good day, and say hi to your wife for me!" Baldwin's grinning face froze, then vanished.

In his drugged, disoriented state, Ruppert had forgotten to worry about Madeline, but now an overwhelming fear washed over him. They could have done anything—kept her in custody as a means of controlling him, or brutalized her as a warning.

"Madeline!" he yelled. He went up the stairs, but his balance was poor and he climbed most of the way on his hands and knees. He lurched down the hall, leaning on the wall the whole way, and into the bedroom.

"Madeline?" He entered the master bedroom, and thought immediately of Sully's bedroom—the shredded mattress, the imprint of blood and hair on one poster.

His bedroom looked fine. Madeline lay in her usual place, the covers bunched up around her. He sat beside her, peeled back the blankets to look at her. She had no visible injuries to her face. He checked each of her hands, and neither of them bore the black tangle of scars that his did. As far as he could tell, she was unharmed.

He touched her dark red hair, then leaned down and kissed her cheek. "I love you, Madeline," he whispered, and even if it wasn't strictly true, she was his to protect and care for in a world that grew increasingly hostile, and he didn't want to see her harmed. They'd both survived this. They could heal from it together.

"Hmm?" She opened her eyes, and her lips snarled. She slapped at his face repeatedly with both hands. "Get back! Get away from me!"

Stunned, Ruppert barely managed to block her flailing hands as he retreated to the far corner of the bed.

"Look, Madeline, I'm sorry. Whatever they did to you, it's over now."

"They told me about it, Daniel."

"What?"

"Don't act innocent. They told me about her."

"Who?"

"You know who, Daniel." Her green eyes burned at him. "Your... girlfriend. How could you do that to me?"

“I don’t know what you mean.” Ruppert hadn’t slept with anyone but Madeline since their wedding. “Madeline, there’s nobody else.”

“They had video!” she screamed. “I saw you doing...nasty things with that ugly brown girl. Unnatural things. Putting it in unnatural places, Daniel.” She looked at the crotch of his Bermuda shorts, and then her lips began to tremble and she turned her head away from him, leaving a wall of red hair between them. “Places God didn’t mean for it to go.”

“It’s not true, Madeline. They can fake video. Easiest thing in the world. You can’t believe something just because you see it on a screen.”

“So what does that mean? You’re on the screen every night. I guess the news is all made up, too.”

“Most of it.”

She let out a screech and hurled a pillow at his face. He didn’t bother knocking it away. At least she had the presence of mind to pick a decorative pillow laden with buttons and beads, a couple of which gouged at his cheek when the pillow hit him.

“Madeline, I’m telling the truth. I never cheated on you.”

“They told me. I know it’s true.”

“Why do you trust them?”

“You have to trust *them*, Daniel.”

“Even when they kidnap you out of your bed? Did they interrogate you? What did they do?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Madeline—”

“I don’t want to talk to you, either.” She sat back against the headboard and drew the blankets around her. “I need to ask my counselor at church about this. I think it would be best if you slept in the guest room for now.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to talk about it?”

She just stared at him, her mouth a hard flat line. Ruppert stood and walked to the bedroom down to the hall, where he lay on top of the coverlet and throw pillows, but didn’t feel like sleeping. After a few minutes, it occurred to him that Madeline had been dressed in a bright, flowered blouse and a long grass skirt.



He awoke on his side, his right arm numb, daylight boring into his eyes from the guest room window. For a moment he thought it was a dream, that he would wake up again in the frigid Terror cell, and then he remembered how and why they’d brought him home.

He sat up, turned away from the window, and asked, “Time?”

“Six minutes until eleven A.M.,” the house’s voice said in its always-cheerful tone.

“Uh...what day?”

“Saturday, June 23, 2035.”

“Thanks.” He stood and stretched. His right arm was a rubbery dead weight. “Is Madeline here?”

“She is not. Her schedule indicates that she is attending her FaithCrafts group at church. Would you like to contact her?”

“No, that’s okay. Can you make coffee?”

“I would be happy to, Mr. Ruppert, but the coffee maker has not been prepared.”

“Forget it.”

Ruppert took a hot shower, scrubbing days and nights of his own filth off his body. He even used some of Madeline’s scented soaps and an exfoliant full of grape seeds to try and scrape his skin clean.

Afterward, he drifted from room to room in the house, not sure what to do. He figured out he’d only been gone for nine days, though it felt more like a year. The familiar walls and furniture of his home looked alien to him. He’d thought of his house as a safe place, barricaded by walls and digital security systems, but now he saw that any feeling of security was an illusion. The most dangerous people could get to him at any time. They might as well live out in the open, as Sully had.

Normally he would go out for a game of golf, but he wasn’t scheduled for anything this afternoon. He did not particularly want to leave the house, either. The world seemed full of danger. He wondered how Madeline had managed the drive over to church, if that was where she’d gone.

He took his wallet from the ridiculous Bermuda shorts. Everything had been replaced; he thought there might even be more cash than before. He slid out the plastic card Sully had given him, looked over the meaningless numbers and letters. Sully had said the person on the other end was a very close friend, somebody he cared about a great deal. If Ruppert contacted him, it would draw the attention of Terror. Of course, both he and the person on the other end clearly had Terror’s attention, anyway.

He remembered what Sully had promised him: “what you always wanted.” He still couldn’t guess what Sully might have meant by that.

He spent most of the afternoon laid out on the couch in the living room, conjuring up music and movies on the screen. He avoided the news altogether—it only offered confusion and lies.

Madeline arrived home in the evening, her makeup smudged and blotted. There was a dullness in her normally bright eyes that he hadn’t seen before. She sat in a recliner across the room.

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

“I’m...” Madeline’s voice was soft. She cleared her throat, then began to speak in careful, businesslike tones, as if dictating to a stenographer. “I met with my life counselor and told her about our problems.”

“You told her everything?”

“Of course not. Everyone seems to think we were on vacation somewhere, so I’m going along with that. I meant about the...the other woman.”

Ruppert wanted to protest again that there had not been another woman, but the hard, determined look on Madeline’s face warned him not to try.

“She pointed out that divorce is still a sin, and that a woman’s duty is to hold a marriage together. I don’t know if I’ll ever trust you again, Daniel, but we have to keep going.”

Daniel felt relief, but also a tinge of disappointment. Some little part of him had apparently been hoping she would leave him, but she would never do anything so strongly discouraged by the church.

“So what do you want to do?” he asked.

“She told me that the best way to heal a damaged marriage is to go back to the purpose of marriage, and that’s to create life.”

“You want to have a baby?”

“I want four.”

“What?”

“It’s not natural for people to put off children as long as we have, Daniel. I’m almost thirty. It’s our duty to have children, and anyway I’m tired of getting sneered at by the young mothers in my groups. I want to have so many children that nobody can question us. If we time it right, we can have at least four. She told me that I’d be so busy as a mother that I wouldn’t have time to be so self-centered and worried about my own feelings. So that’s what we’ll do, Daniel. I’m going to the doctor on Monday to get a schedule, and I expect you to make me pregnant.”

“Do I get any say in this?”

“You had your say when we got married.”

Ruppert didn’t feel at all excited about the idea, with Terror watching them so closely now. Children would make them even more vulnerable. Children would force them to be obedient citizens. He supposed that was the idea.

“Madeline, I really don’t think a child is going to solve our problems.”

“I’m not interested in your opinion. It is your duty to God to sire children, and mine to bear them.”

They sat in silence for a minute, and then Ruppert asked in a quiet voice, “What did they do to you?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“I’ll tell you what they did to me. They threatened to drown me. They electrocuted me. They nearly beat me to death. They kept me in a freezing cell—”

“I don’t want to know!” she screamed. She bolted from the chair to her feet.

“Maybe they were punishing you for your sins. Did you ever think of that? Did you ever think maybe you deserved it?”

“No, I never thought that.”

“They said you were a sexual deviant. They had proof. They made me swear again and again I would make sure you lived a clean and moral life. That’s what I’m going to do. From now on, we’re going to be a normal family.” She stalked out of the room. Her high heels clicked on the hardwood floor of the foyer as she crossed to the stairs.

Ruppert stared at the blank video wall, which he’d turned off, leaving it like a slab of polished obsidian in the middle of the room. He could see his own dark reflection looking back at him.

It wasn’t just the constant surveillance and the secret laws and the powerful agencies, he thought. It wasn’t just the state church, or the crushing weight of propaganda generated through every available medium, though all these were important tools. Ultimately their power was to colonize individual relationships, to use ideology to isolate those who questioned the state of the world from their own families and friends.

If you wanted any kind of intimacy or any kind of success in life, you had to play along. If you pretended to believe a thing long enough, eventually it just became easier to go ahead and believe the thing was true, especially when every mechanism of social and economic reward depended on you adhering to the prescribed beliefs.

“You guys really know what you’re doing, don’t you?” he said to his dark reflection. The reflection stared back at him, unblinking, and said nothing.

THIRTEEN

At the GlobeNet studio on Monday, a makeup girl painted over the bruises on Ruppert's face and the injuries to his hands, then sprayed on a fake tan. One of the producers hung a plastic lei around Ruppert's neck and told him they were going to "ad-lib" some chatter about Ruppert's recent vacation. Ad-libbing meant they would read some planned informal chatter, the type that reassured the audience that GlobeNet reporters were just regular folks like them.

When he'd settled in between Amanda Greene and the new, younger, hipper sports reporter, he waited for the theme music to pass and then read: "Good evening and welcome to GlobeNet-L.A.'s nightly news. I'm Daniel Ruppert, returning from a fantastic week on St. Lucia." This confused him—wasn't the lei associated with Hawaii rather than the Caribbean? Would the audience bother to notice?

"Looks like somebody wishes they were still on vacation." Amanda delivered the line as if it were perfectly spontaneous. Following the stage direction floating before him in giant holographic letters, Ruppert pretended to notice he was wearing the lei.

"Oops!" Ruppert said, holding up the plastic flowers with a finger. "I guess I had such a good time I forgot I was coming back to work!"

"I think we all feel that way on Mondays, Daniel," Amanda said.

"That's right, Amanda." Ruppert forced his charming newsguy smile. "Well, big news from the mayor's office: This year's Fourth of July parade is going to be bigger than ever, including tanks driven by the brave men and women at Fort Irwin and a spectacular air display courtesy of the fine boys at Los Angeles Air Force Base. Ten thousand flags will hang along Sunset Boulevard to celebrate." Video of workers hanging flags and bunting played as he spoke. "Police are promising to sweep up the homeless and the drug addicts to make the parade safe for good citizens..."

After the taping, a notice appeared on the green desk in front of Ruppert summoning him to George Baldwin's office. He trudged down the wide corridor, keeping his hands in his pockets to hide their shaking. The Terror agent's office was at

the end of the hall, walled with black glass where most offices had clear windows. His body seemed to grow heavier with each step. Could they be displeased with him already?

As Ruppert drew near the closed glass door, a glowing female face emerged from the black glass as if swimming up from deep waters—Baldwin’s digital assistant.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Ruppert,” she said.

“I had a notice to see George,” he told her.

“One moment please.” The beautiful face sank back into the darkness, then returned a few seconds later. “Please come in. Mr. Baldwin is ready for you.” The glass door slid aside.

From inside Baldwin’s office, you could see the hallway clearly through the black glass. The remainder of Baldwin’s walls were video panels. Images of paintings floated on them now—Baldwin appeared to have a strong affinity for the work of Hieronymus Bosch. The Department of Terror seal dominated the entire wall behind Baldwin’s desk, and its soaring silver eagle appeared six feet tall. Ruppert shivered at the sight of it.

Baldwin stood, all smiles, and shook Ruppert’s hand, grasping it just a little too hard. Ruppert tried not to look at the silver skull pin on the lapel of Baldwin’s black coat, remembering how the gleaming skulls had snapped at him in cyberspace. Baldwin was an imposing presence, taller and broader and no doubt stronger than Ruppert.

“Daniel!” Baldwin said, with a cheerful tone that implied they were old water-cooler buddies, though they’d rarely spoken. “Great to have you back. Have a seat.”

Ruppert did as he was told, facing the Terror man across a broad expanse of black desk.

“Can I order you anything?” Baldwin asked. “Water? Coffee?”

“I’m fine, thanks.” Ruppert’s knees were trembling. The wounds in his hands, now invisible under concealer, started to ache.

“I was so happy to hear from my director that you’re working with us now. I know there were some suspicions—you have to be suspicious, in a time of war—but I told them, no, not Daniel Ruppert. He’s a good, state-fearing man, a real patriot. He’ll be happy to help out. I said I’ve worked with this guy, I’ve *studied* him, and I think he will do anything his country asks.” Baldwin’s large hand slapped the glossy black desktop at the word “studied,” and Ruppert jumped a little in his seat.

“I appreciate it, Mr. Baldwin—”

“George.”

“George,” Ruppert said. “We all have to do our part to support our brave men and women in uniform.”

“That’s absolutely right. We live in dangerous times, Daniel. Enemies without and enemies within. The role of my organization is, as you know, to search out the enemies within. Now you have your part to play. I want you to know I’m here if you need any support on this.”

“Thank you...George. I appreciate it. I’m not entirely sure why I was chosen for this task—though of course I’m happy to help my country in any way I can.”

“Well, we didn’t do the choosing—I’d rather have kept you out of it, naturally, so you could focus on your work and family like a regular citizen. But they chose you, so now we have to play along.”

“Who are you saying chose me?”

“They. Them.” Baldwin waved a dismissive hand. “The enemies of the state.”

“I don’t understand.”

“That’s why you’re perfect for this, Daniel. You’re not meant to know very much about the situation, and you don’t. You’ll be able to play your role with great honesty.”

“You mean capturing the neo-Nazi guy.”

“Exactly right.” The graying, age-progressed image of Hollis Westerly appeared on one wall. The man had the glazed eyes of a corpse.

“I have to tell you,” Baldwin said, “This is a dangerous job. You’ll be exposed to all kinds of enemy propaganda. I’m sure you can hold up, but I want you to be warned.”

“I would like to know a little more about who this guy is, why you need me to—”

“No need for that. The op requires you to be unaware. You’ll act much more naturally that way.”

“Okay.”

“I know it’s difficult to understand. You just play along with whatever they offer you, and you’ll be fine. Now, have you attempted to make contact yet?”

“Not exactly. I was still recovering from—from my vacation, over the weekend.”

“Probably a smart choice. We need you at the top of your game. I’d suggest you wait another day or two, in fact, but no longer than that. We need to move while this is hot.”

“I understand.”

“We’re on the enemy’s ten-yard line here, Daniel. We just need you to take the ball and run it to the end zone. Remember, make contact, stay in character, go along with whatever they want. Keep your nose in the air for any word of this Hollis person. Do you have any more questions?”

Ruppert had a thousand, but not the kind Baldwin would care to hear. Ruppert's only concern was getting out of the Terror agent’s office as soon as possible.

“I think I understand what you want.”

“Perfect. Well, don’t let me detain you any longer. Remember, I’m available if you need me, day or night.”

“Thanks, George.”



Ruppert took some pleasure in skipping Revelation Review on Tuesday night. Let Liam O’Shea whine and moan all he wanted. Ruppert had already been hauled off in the night, tortured, and conscripted by the Department of Terror. O’Shea’s petty snitchery was not even on his radar anymore.

As he parked outside the Video Terminal on Sepulveda, this minor sense of triumph evaporated. He’d selected a low-end video café in the dirty concrete hell of Van Nuys to avoid any chance of encountering people he knew.

The blue-braided, multi-pierced girl who accepted his cash at the front booth didn’t seem to recognize him, either—obviously, not a big consumer of local news. Her appearance was a remnant of older, more freewheeling California. Had she been anyone of importance, the way she looked would be sufficient to convict her of dissidence. The truly poor and powerless were unofficially indulged a certain, limited freedom in minor

consumer matters, either because they influenced no one or, as Ruppert suspected, because it helped keep the upper classes properly frightened in their enclaves. Talk-show hosts and pundits needed somebody to attack and hold up as examples of immorality.

People with much darker skin than Ruppert was accustomed to seeing crowded the café, the sort of people men at his church would refer to as having “suspicious blood.” They clustered together around shared screens, drinking and smoking, pausing to glare at Ruppert as he passed. He’d tried to dress down for the occasion, but the designer jeans and the blue Oxford shirt, however rumpled and untucked, might as well have been a royal silk robe in a place where many dressed in scraps of mismatched cloth crudely stitched together.

He sat down in his rented video booth, which had flimsy blinder walls on either side of the screen but nothing behind him—any of the customers wandering by could see what he was doing.

Ruppert used a coffee napkin to wipe some of the unidentifiable crust off his screen, which was only twelve inches high and jammed with corporate logos jockeying for his attention, seeking to lure him onto their retail sites.

“Manual dialer,” he said. A classic QWERTY keyboard appeared as a two-dimensional projection on the narrow shelf in front of the screen, while a blank window opened on the screen itself. Ruppert removed the plastic card from his wallet and typed out the long string of numbers and letters. He took a breath. All of this—the shoddy café, the manual dialing—was a sham, intended to prevent Terror from monitoring a call that he was fairly certain they were waiting to monitor. The sham was aimed at Sully’s “close friend” who would answer the call. Ruppert was already lying to that person before ever speaking to him.

He touched the ENTER button.

The word “CONNECTING...” appeared inside the blank window. A second, smaller window opened inside it, displaying the same text, and then a third window opened, nested inside the other two. After a painfully long wait, text appeared in the smallest window:

WHO IS THIS?

Ruppert thought it over. How would he identify himself if he were trying to be discreet?

D RUPP, he typed.

After a few seconds, the reply came: SUNDAY NITE. NIXON STADIUM, 472. This had to refer to the early preseason game of the Los Angeles Archangels. The number referred to seats in the southeast nosebleed section.

OK, Ruppert answered.

The windows closed in reverse order, leaving him to face the page of ads. The conversation he’d been putting off for two months had lasted less than a minute, but left him with a new set of problems. How would he explain his night out to Madeline? He could hardly invite her to come with him. What if he was arrested by authorities while meeting with a dissident? Would Terror step in and protect him? He didn’t even know the name of the Captain who’d given him this assignment. At least he had George Baldwin from work.

He should report his plans to meet Sully’s friend to Baldwin, keep the Terror man updated on what he was doing, but part of him resisted the idea. Part of him wanted to

operate as secretly as he could manage, maybe hold open the door to betraying the Department of Terror if he found an opportunity.

He thought of Hollis Westerly—the man was clearly dangerous, probably insane. As much as Ruppert had learned to loathe Terror, even he couldn't argue with taking a man like Westerly off the streets. He would feel little guilt about turning Westerly over to Terror, and maybe that would settle things, and he could try to resume a normal life afterward.

The screen beeped and a new window appeared: TIME EXPIRED. PLEASE PURCHASE MORE TIME. Ruppert wished he could. Between Terror and the terrorist dissidents he'd been ordered to infiltrate, his chances of survival seemed miserably low.

FOURTEEN

“I know where you’re going,” Madeline said. She looked straight ahead at the car in front of them, avoiding his eyes. He was driving them home from Sunday church services.

“I’m telling you the truth, Madeline. You can call George Baldwin, the Terror man at GlobeNet. He said I have to help him with something tonight. He didn’t give any details, but—”

“Yes, Daniel. I’m sure your friend at work will cover for you.”

“He’s not my friend. He works for Terror.”

Madeline said. “I just hoped our vacation would put an end to it. I thought it would bring us closer together, like we used to be, but I guess nothing ever will.”

“What vacation?”

“St. Lucia.” Her face crinkled in anger. “I thought you’d forget about her.”

“Madeline, I was never seeing anyone else. And we sure as hell never went to St. Lucia. You know that.”

Madeline rolled her eyes and looked out the passenger window.

“We’re not in public, Madeline. You don’t have to do this.”

“Do what? Talk about your mistress?” She snorted. “Mistress. Almost sounds classy when you say it like that.”

“You never even thought I was having an affair until those Terror agents told you I was.”

“What does the Department of Terror have to do with anything?” Madeline snapped. “Just plan to stay home next weekend. I’m ovulating.”

Ruppert drove on in silence. The rift between them had widened into a gulf too wide to bridge. The most honest moments of their marriage had come just after Terror deposited them back at home. Now she’d cut him off, casting him in her mind as just another person to whom she had to prove her unquestioning faith and patriotism.

He could see their future from here, a continual retreat away from each other into their isolated, individual selves. Terror had severed whatever connection the two of them

had shared. He wondered if it was a strategy, breaking people apart so that they stood alone and powerless, or if they'd done this to provide Ruppert an ongoing reminder that nothing in his life was safe from Terror. A smoldering hatred rose within him as he understood that both he and Madeline had been violated so deeply that they might never recover.

They didn't speak again all afternoon.



The city of Los Angeles had never restored Malibu after the big mudslide of 2019, and neglected to repair any of the collapsed infrastructure of south L.A. after the earthquake of 2024, but somehow it had no trouble raising funds for Nixon Stadium, completed in 2027 with seventy thousand seats. At each of the four cardinal directions, a towering statue loomed at the upper lip of the stadium. The statues were identical: angels—or archangels, Ruppert supposed—their wings spread open like a canopy, their beatific faces bowed towards the playing field, their hands clasped in prayer.

Ruppert bought a ticket for section 469, then sat down in the middle row of 472. He had no competition for seating. The lowest levels were packed, but only scattered clusters of fans populated the top level. He had empty rows above and below him. Apparently there weren't many Packers fans willing to travel all the way from Wisconsin to watch an insignificant June early preseason game.

He waited impatiently through the first two quarters of the game, eating popcorn that tasted like salted Styrofoam. He kept his cap, stamped with the Archangels logo from three seasons ago, pulled low over his eyes, though he doubted he would encounter anyone he knew up all the way up here when much better seats were available below.

As the clock ran out on the second quarter, the Archangels were ahead 12-7, and it had not been a particularly eventful game. When the halftime buzzer sounded, a voice spoke directly into Ruppert's ear, making him jump:

“What did I miss?”

He turned to see a lean young man, maybe half a foot shorter than himself, with a mop of sandy hair. He wore a Green Bay Packers jersey. He had sat down just behind Ruppert and leaned in close to talk.

“Not much,” Ruppert said. “We fumbled in the first quarter, a little bit of a scramble, but your guys didn't take it. Other than that...” He shrugged.

“These early preseason games,” the Packers fan said, shaking his head. “I don't even think the players care.”

“I don't even think the *coaches* care,” Ruppert said, and the man laughed, then stepped over and dropped into the plastic seat next to Ruppert.

“You look taller on the screen,” he said.

“I'm always sitting down,” Ruppert replied.

“Maybe that's why. I'm glad you finally decided to meet me. It took you one hell of a lot of courage.”

Ruppert cast a few nervous glances around him, but no one seemed to be paying them any attention. All eyes were riveted to the half-time show set-up as stages wheeled

onto the field, along with the Tree of Justice, a five-story scaffolding with beams extending out in every direction. Most of the beams ended in a square platform, and on every platform stood a blindfolded man with his hands shackled behind him, more than a hundred men in all. Each man had a limp noose around his neck, anchored to a beam over his head.

“You’re Sully’s friend?” Ruppert asked.

“Yeah, we were...yeah.”

“Have you heard from him?”

“No. They have special places for people like me and Sully, you know. Personality modification. Behavior programming. Try to cut the sin out of us. If he’s lucky, they just killed him.”

“Jesus.”

“And I’d rather not talk about that anymore right now, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Ladies and gentlemen,” a voice boomed from every speaker in the stadium. “Please rise as the Ladies’ Choir of the Holy Kingdom Shopping Plaza Community Dominionist Church performs ‘The Battle Hymn of the Republic.’”

Ruppert and the young man both stood and applauded along with the rest of the crowd. Scores of women in white choir robes had arrayed themselves on the tiers of a stage at center field, their backs to the Tree of Justice.

“We have work to do,” the man in the Packers jersey said to Ruppert. “Look, this is a risk for me, too. As far as I know you’re working for Terror. But Sully believed in you, and I believe in Sully.”

“What is it you want from me?”

The choir began to sing, dozens of beautifully trained female voices:

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord;
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;
He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword:
His truth is marching on.

When they reached the first “Glory, Glory, Hallelujah,” a square platform near the top of the Tree of Justice dropped, swinging inward on hinges, and the prisoner standing on it fell until the noose snatched up taut. His legs splayed out, kicking, as he was hanged.

The crowd surged forward, roaring. They’d sat indifferently through the first half of the game, but now they were electrified. Ruppert imagined how they might look from above, a mass of thousands of people contracting inward to view the action at the center. On the giant digital billboards throughout the stadium, the crimes of the condemned rolled past: murder, arson, drugs, sedition, prostitution, immorality, sodomy, terrorism-related activities (details classified for national security), production of propaganda...

“It’s dangerous,” the young man said. “Your career will be over. Your life will be ruined. You’ll be on the run, in hiding, until you die. That’s if we succeed.”

“And if we don’t?”

The young man nodded towards the Tree. More of the platforms dropped away, leaving blindfolded prisoners dangling and choking and kicking and swinging. The pace of hangings accelerated as the song continued.

I have read a fiery Gospel writ in burnished rows of steel;
 “As ye deal with My condemners, so with you My grace shall deal”;
 Let the Hero, born of woman, crush the serpent with His heel,
 Since God is marching on.

Glory, Glory, Hallelujah...

Ruppert watched.

“Sully thought you had his disease,” the young man said.

“What do you mean?”

“The same a lot of us have. You don’t adjust. You remember all kinds of inconvenient things that don’t fit with today’s version of the truth. You almost want to scream it out at times. In front of a huge crowd, maybe.”

“Sully’s right. I do have that disease.”

“He had a good sense about people.” The young man wiped at his eyes. “He was ready to give up everything. Then it was just going be me and him, going up to Canada...” He shook his head, looked Ruppert in the eyes. “Sully picked you to take his place. What if you had your chance to speak the truth, an important piece of the truth, out to the world?”

“I don’t control content. The shows are prerecorded, they’re edited—we even have a Terror agent on site.”

“Forget the newscast. We have our own distribution. What we need is your face.”

“I don’t understand.”

The young man took Ruppert’s jaw in one hand. “Your face, man. The trusted face of the news from San Diego up to Fresno, right? Millions of people. They’ll believe it when you tell them.”

“What am I telling them?”

“Not yet. But I promise you, if you care about the truth, if you hate what’s happening out here, it will be worth sacrificing everything to let the people know what we’ve discovered.”

The man let go of him, but his eyes were locked onto Ruppert’s.

“What do you want me to do?” Ruppert asked.

“Go home.”

Ruppert shook his head. “I want to know more.”

“You’ll know more, man, but not today. Do you trust Sully?”

Ruppert thought the question over. As the choir sang the final verse, the last row of prisoners dropped two at a time.

He is coming like the glory of the morning on the wave,
 He is wisdom to the mighty, He is honor to the brave;

So the world shall be His footstool, and the soul of wrong His slave,
Our God is marching on.

“I trust Sully as much as I could trust anyone.”

“Are you in or not? This is your only chance to say no. You can go home and forget you met me. If we go any further, then change your mind—I hate it, but we have to be as ruthless as Terror sometimes. Too much at risk.”

“I understand.”

“Think it over. Your own life against the truth. Sully thought it was worth dying for.”

Ruppert remembered his old journalism teacher, Professor Gorski, one of Terror’s early victims. What had he said? *Power fears truth above all things—more than bullets, more than bombs, more than death itself, because truth can destroy powerful men even as they lie in their graves.*

A battery of cannons fired at the final note of the hymn, and the crowd screamed and howled and cheered, their bulging, hungering eyes transfixed by the grisly ornaments jerking and twitching on the Tree of Justice. All over the stadium they waved pointing foam fingers, giant New America flags, and small golden flags stamped with the Archangel team logo.

“I’m with you,” Ruppert said. “Somebody has show the world what it’s become.”

FIFTEEN

The room was gleaming white and extremely long, like a corridor stretching away into eternity. Ruppert sat alone in a chair. He had the impression that the room extended a long way behind him, but he did not turn to look.

Far in front of him, though it was difficult to judge distance in any meaningful sense, George Baldwin sat behind his black slab of a desk, which had somehow been transported into this strange, elongated room.

Ruppert felt comfortable and relaxed. He felt good. There were no secrets here, nothing to hide. He could get up and leave anytime he wanted. He was so sure of this that he had no need to prove it.

“You met him at Nixon Stadium?” Baldwin asked. His tone was pleasant and friendly.

“Yes.”

“What was his name?”

“He never said.”

“Describe him.”

Ruppert painted a verbal portrait of the young man in the green Packers jersey, noting the hazel color of his eyes, the slightly snubby nose, the ragged tennis shoes the man had worn. He mind functioned with extreme clarity, offering pristine, photographic memories.

As he spoke, Ruppert noticed dark, smoky curls wavering in and out of the space next to Baldwin, forming a suggestion of a shape, something like another man in all-black suit like Baldwin’s.

“Who’s there with you, George?” Ruppert asked.

“Nobody’s here, Daniel. It’s just you and me.” At Baldwin’s words, the dark traces hovering beside him vanished. “What did the man in the Packers jersey say to you?”

“He had a secret to share.” Ruppert’s voice dropped to a childish whisper.

“What kind of secret?” Baldwin leaned forward, smiling, eager to play along. They were just boys playing war games.

“No, no,” Ruppert wagged his finger. “Not for me, not yet.”

“For who, then?”

“For the world. The whole, wide world.” Ruppert cocked his head, half-remembering something important about his pal Georgie. “You’ve been playing a bad, bad game.”

“I have? Not me, Daniel. You know you can trust me.”

“You broke the rules. He wants me to call no fair how you broke the rules. Naughty, naughty.”

“What precisely did he want you to tell the world, Daniel?”

Ruppert dropped into his childish whisper again. “It’s a big huge secret. It’s too big for me to know yet.”

“That’s interesting, Daniel.” Baldwin reclined back in his ergonomic chair. “So what are you supposed to do now?”

“I wait for him to call me. Then we go and play.” Ruppert held out empty hands, palms up. “That’s all I know, Georgie.”

Baldwin turned and spoke in a low voice to the empty space where the other Terror man wasn’t standing, wasn’t there at all because it was just Ruppert and Georgie in the room. Ruppert could hear Baldwin’s words but not understand them, as if they entered his ears tilted at the wrong angle. Baldwin nodded, then turned back to Ruppert.

“That’s fine, Daniel. What you’re going to do is play along with him for now. It’s going to be a fun game, isn’t it?”

“Yes, Georgie.”

“Play along until it’s time to do what I told you. You remember what I told you to do, right, Daniel? What we talked about before?”

“I remember.”

“Good boy! You’ll be a good secret agent, won’t you, Daniel?”

“I am!”

“Now you have to forget this whole conversation. You’ll do what I said, but you won’t remember we ever talked about it. Right?”

“Yes, George.”

“Now, we’re counting up. Listen to my voice. One...two...three...”



“Are you still here, Daniel?”

Ruppert started at his desk. He’d been...what? Sleeping? Daydreaming? He glanced down to see a half-played game of solitaire floating on the digital surface of his desk. Amanda Greene stood at the door to his office, a puzzled look on her face.

“Amanda Greene,” he said. “With the weather.”

“Yeah...Are you feeling okay? It’s almost seven o’ clock. I’ve never seen you work this late.”

“Oh. Do you work this late?”

“Sometimes.” Amanda stepped closer to his desk. “You don’t look right, Daniel. Should I call your wife for you?”

“Yeah. No! There’s no reason. I’m just here.” Ruppert glanced at his desk calendar, which minimized to the size of a postage stamp when he wasn’t looking at it. The desk sensed his interest, and the calendar expanded until he could see the highlighted box representing today. It was Monday. “Just working.”

Amanda glanced out towards the hall, then whispered, “I saw you go into Baldwin’s office after the show. Is something going on around here?”

“Baldwin?”

Amanda raised her eyebrows and nodded in the general direction of Baldwin’s office.

“Oh,” Ruppert said. “Oh. *George* Baldwin. Nope, I haven’t seen him today. Was he here?”

Amanda’s brow crinkled, and she frowned at him. “Sure. All right. Good night, Daniel.”

“Night.”

Ruppert’s chair creaked as he leaned back. He remembered doing the newscast, even remembered that the main story centered on the pursuit of Sheik Muhammad al Taba, whose terrorist militia might have fled from Egypt, possibly as far as Addis Abbaba. The Hartwell Services contractor army might just have to follow. News reports had downgraded al Taba’s vast army to a small but intensely radical militia, though this downgrade had not been acknowledged or explained in any way to the public.

So he’d finished doing the report, and then...he must have come into his office. He must have been reading, or...playing solitaire, and dozed off. Something about this didn’t fit right, but he couldn’t identify exactly what it was.

Ruppert left his office, the lights dimming automatically behind him, and headed for the elevator. There was nobody left on his floor, as far as he could tell. He was accustomed to assistants whirling through the hallways bearing urgent messages, technicians with carts of equipment, visiting executives. The silence and emptiness unnerved him.

“Down,” he said to the elevator. He looked along the intersecting corridor toward the black glass of Baldwin’s office. If he walked down there, would he find Baldwin still inside? The idea that he might be alone with the Terror man bothered him even more than the after-hours silence.

When his elevator arrived, he jabbed the LOBBY button with his thumb, and kept jabbing it until the elevator doors had closed.



Ruppert arrived home to find Madeline on her hands and knees in the kitchen, furiously scrubbing bleach into the white tiles with a hard-bristled brush. Her hair hung in sweaty tails around her eyes, and her skin had an unusual, feverish glow. Rags, sponges, and more cleaning fluids and sponges were scattered across the granite kitchen counter, as if a maintenance crew had exploded inside their house.

“Madeline?” he said.

She looked up at him, her teeth bared, her lips locked into a smile under unnaturally wide and bright eyes.

“I quit my job,” she announced.

“You put in your notice?”

“I walked.” She turned her brush on its end to scrape the grout between two tiles. “I couldn’t take those dirty brats any more. I’ve done my part for other people’s kids. I want to focus on mine from now on. You make enough money.”

“Sure, if that’s what you want. But why...” He indicated the mess of cleaning fluids on the counter. “Didn’t Tiffany come today?” Tiffany was their regular housekeeper, a great slab of a woman in her late fifties.

“It’s not clean enough. We need it clean for the baby.”

Ruppert nodded and decided it might be best not to pursue the question. The church doctor had been injecting her with fertility hormones, a common necessity for couples who wanted to conceive. When he was younger, Ruppert had read about toxic pollution in the air and water, possibly interfering with fertility, but that kind of news had vanished.

“We have to be very clean from now on,” Madeline continued. “If we’re going to do these dirty things in the bedroom, the rest of the house should be extra clean.”

Ruppert mumbled an agreement with this logic and stepped around to take a bottle of Canadian water from the refrigerator, which also reeked of bleach. He watched her a moment longer as she scrubbed a floor that had remained spotless as long as they’d inhabited this house. He could not imagine conceiving a child at this point in their lives, when his own future remained in question. If he went along with Sully’s friends, he’d have to spend the rest of his life in hiding. Cooperating with Terror was no guarantee of security, either—once they had what they wanted, he would become an inconvenient detail to eliminate. They’d already targeted him for dissidence. Why keep him alive once he’d served his purpose?

He continued up to the bedroom, where he did as the Packers fan had instructed him. He packed his suitcase with several changes of clothes, a toiletry kit, an envelope of cash he’d drawn from the ATM. The Packers fan had told him to make a small withdrawal each day, no more than a couple thousand dollars at a time, because taking a big piece out of his spending account would trigger an alert at the bank.

He finished packing the suitcase, then wondered where to hide it. He decided plain sight was best, especially with Madeline’s new obsession with cleanliness and order. He returned it to the closet from which he’d taken it, taking pains to line it up perfectly with Madeline’s empty suitcase. In her bizarre psychological state, she might notice if the suitcases were even an inch out of line with each other.

Madeline cleaned for the rest of the day, washing the walls, vacuuming, scrubbing out faucets with a toothbrush, vacuuming the same carpets a second time, dusting—he felt exhausted each time he saw her. He sat in the living room and tried to watch something soothing on the wall, an old documentary about the Serengeti, but she insisted on vacuuming out the sofa and then rubbing some kind of foaming cleaner into the upholstery.

He retreated to his upstairs office. She was still cleaning when he went to sleep.

SIXTEEN

Ruppert considered skipping the Wednesday Men's Meeting altogether, since it was futile at this point to continue trying to prove himself a citizen of impeccable character. Unfortunately, Madeline insisted on attending her Wednesday groups, though she'd slept little and cleaned constantly for two days now, leaving her hands fidgeting and her eyes scurrying back and forth like nervous creatures. He did not feel comfortable letting her drive all the way to the Palisades.

After the stomping rally of the Men's Meeting, Ruppert made it almost all the way to the outer narthex door when Liam O'Shea tracked him down and took his arm.

"I've been praying about you a lot," O'Shea said. "Almost every night."

"That's great, Liam." Ruppert tried to edge forward, but O'Shea clung to his sleeve.

"I'm only starting out as a lay pastor. I think your problems are bigger than I can solve by myself."

"That's right, Liam. You wouldn't understand my problems."

Liam stuttered for a moment, his lips flapping but making no sound. He appeared off-balanced by Ruppert's honesty. He finally recovered and said, "After much prayer and reflection, I came to believe that Our King intended for me to submit your name to the lay pastor council, with the recommendation that they forward my concerns to Pastor John's office."

"Liam, I guess I should say I appreciate your concern, but I don't," Ruppert said. "And I don't think Pastor John is going to find your obsession with me that interesting."

"Daniel Ruppert?" A man's voice spoke behind him.

Ruppert turned to see a meticulously groomed young man in his late twenties, wearing a dark suit with a laminated badge clipped to one of the breast pockets, a golden cross with an eye at the center—one of Pastor John's legion of assistant pastors.

"Can I help you?" Ruppert asked. He felt his heart pounding. He was only a dozen steps from the exit. He'd almost escaped.

"Pastor John wishes to speak with you in his office."

A mealy grin curled across O'Shea's wide face. It was a personal victory for him, confirmation that his incessant pushiness was valued by the church, and that Pastor John might now have heard that Liam O'Shea was an astute monitor of the flock, able to sniff out the wayward.

"Are you sure it's me he wants?" Ruppert asked.

"Certainly. Please come with me."

Ruppert followed, making sure not to look back at O'Shea, who looked as proud of himself as a three-year-old who'd punched a smaller child and stolen his toy.

The pastor led him down a flight of steps into the warren under the Sanctuary, past the rooms where choirs dressed and undressed, the vast closets full of musical equipment and stage dressing. Ruppert's annoyance at O'Shea gave way to real fear about having a face-to-face with Pastor John.

Pastor John Perrish's weekly audience extended far beyond the thirty thousand or so congregants who physically appeared on Sundays. His sermons were piped into the hospitals, nursing homes, and veterans' organizations that Golden Tabernacle administered under their federal contracts and grants. They also remained available to the global web audience for seven days after he delivered them. Pastor John reached hundreds of thousands of viewers each week, and no politician could advance far in southern California without his support.

Ruppert could not imagine why such a powerful man would bother speaking to Ruppert. Ruppert might have some minor value as a television personality, but he could easily be replaced. Could O'Shea really be causing this much trouble just by reporting Ruppert? He wanted to go back, find O'Shea, and punch him in his flabby mouth.

The assistant pastor took him through an ordinary-looking pair of double doors into an elevator large enough to transport cargo, but lined with soft red carpet and oak paneling. They descended several floors—Ruppert guessed four or five—then emerged into a high, domed lobby that was a miniature of the Sanctuary overhead.

"Wait here," the assistant pastor said, and Ruppert sat on a cushioned bench near a small flower garden. He watched a kind of modernist-style fountain at the center of the room, where water gurgled over smooth black and white rectangles. Nobody had fountains anymore, not even the big commercial or state buildings. It was illegal to squander water that way.

The assistant pastor marched across the marble floor without making a sound, then leaned down to whisper to a powerfully attractive young woman at a glass desk at the front of the room. She nodded, and the assistant pastor turned and left the room, passing Ruppert as if he'd become an uninteresting piece of furniture.

Ruppert waited for several long minutes, taking in the large room. There were some religious magazines on the end table next to him, but he was too nervous to read and, for that matter, wasn't feeling particularly religious. He'd been raised a Presbyterian, in a loose, on-and-off kind of way, but now anybody of any importance belonged to the Dominionist church. After more than a decade, he still had only a vague idea of what the denomination was about. Sermons and studies focused heavily on Revelation, the holiness of war, the importance of morality and obedience to authority. He remembered the Gospels had figured pretty heavily in his childhood church, but Pastor John rarely referred to them. Not enough death and war in the Beatitudes, Ruppert guessed.

“Mr. Ruppert, Pastor John will see you now,” the woman at the desk said. She stood, checked her face in three angled mirrors mounted on her desk, then whipped her head to toss a heap of blond locks behind her shoulder.

She finally looked up at him. “You’re the guy from the news?”

“I am.”

She escorted him towards a recessed panel in the wall, which slid aside to reveal a long, narrow, mirror-lined hallway. They approached the double doors at the far end.

“What’s it like to be on GlobeNet?” she asked.

“Making the show is pretty much the same as watching it.”

“I’ve always wanted to be big onscreen.”

“Maybe you can have my job.”

She frowned at this. They reached the double doors, which folded inward to reveal Pastor John’s enormous office. The walls were all screens, depicting a lush rainforest.

The young woman stepped immediately to one side and curtsied towards Pastor John, who occupied a broad, hand-carved desk that looked as if it had been lifted from a medieval cathedral, dark wood engraved with hard-faced angels and leering gargoyles.

“Mr. Ruppert to see you, sir,” the woman said.

“Thank you, Alexa. Bring us a pot of tea and you can go home for the night.”

Pastor John rose from his chair and shook Ruppert’s hand. “Good evening, Daniel. I hope you don’t mind sparing me a few minutes this evening.”

“Not at all, sir.” Ruppert was trembling. He’d never been so close to the man before, had really only seen him as a small figure in the distance and a gigantic face overhead. In person, Pastor John moved like an electric eel, fluid and effortless, the whole room thrumming with his energy. He did not make a sound as he returned to his high-backed chair.

“You may sit,” Pastor John said, and Ruppert took one of the row of hard wooden chairs facing the desk.

“Now,” Pastor John said. “I understand that you’re facing some difficulties.”

“I don’t think I’m any worse than anyone else, sir. Liam O’Shea is ambitious. He just wants to prove himself.”

“We are not going to bother discussing this Liam character’s concerns.” Pastor John’s halogen-blue eyes were magnetic, commanding Ruppert’s attention. “He’s been a member of this church for some time, and he is an employee in my Social Services division. I know as much as I require about him. What we are discussing today is your situation with Terror. Thank you, Alexa.”

The attractive receptionist leaned close to Pastor John, letting her breast brush his shoulder as she poured two cups of strong green tea. She sat one in front of Ruppert, but he did not feel inclined to drink.

Pastor John remained silent until the receptionist had left and the door closed behind her. He took a painfully long time to lift his tea, wave the cup under his nose, sample a taste, nod his head, set it back on the desk. Then he looked at Ruppert, letting his eyes bore into Ruppert’s skull, as if perfectly aware of the unsettling effect he was inflicting.

“Now,” the Pastor said. “You have been chosen for a valuable assignment. You will serve your country and Our King in Heaven by carrying this out.”

“I’ll do my best, sir.”

“I am certain that you will.” Pastor John stared at him for another long moment. “However, in times of tribulation, it is often the case that we are tempted. The devil is everywhere, Daniel Ruppert, and he wears a multitude of forms. He can tempt you, he can lure you, he can whisper poison in your ears as you sleep. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I want to talk to you about the devil within, Daniel.” Pastor John tapped the side of his own head. “The devil that whispers. This devil can deceive you. He can draw great illusions over your eyes. Do you know how he deceives you?”

“With...temptation?”

“No, Daniel. That is a lesser devil, the devil of the belly and the loin. That devil is for simple men. You are not a simple man, Daniel. The devil in your mind, Daniel, deceives you with questions.” Pastor John leaned back from him. “That’s all. That is his most powerful instrument. He pours questions into your mind day by day, asking questions about your God, your faith, your beliefs. He makes faith itself seem weak. He tells you that the truth is a lie, that lies are the truth. When you walk in righteousness, he whispers that perhaps you are deceived, perhaps even this very church works deception against you. In reality, of course, he is the deceiver, and this church is the truth.

“I do not try to deceive anyone, Daniel. I lead them to walk in the only real truth, the only truth that matters, and that is the truth of Our King, for whose coming we must subdue and ready the world. I have tried to keep you on this path, Daniel. I have tried to keep you in the way that leads to salvation. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I pray that your faith is strong enough to guide you through all temptation. You will soon embark into a world of darkness, of lost souls and damnation. You must keep your faith strong within you during this time. You must pray, even if it is not safe to say your prayers aloud. And you must do as you have been told. You must not succumb to the devil within, but stand tall and act for your King. You must not falter. You must not stop to question. You must do the righteous thing.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You are on a road, Daniel. The road will lead you to life. But if you stumble, if you turn, if you walk the opposite way—that road, I promise, leads only to destruction. If you choose the road of destruction, even I cannot help you. Do you understand?”

“I understand, sir.”

“If you have any doubts, now is the time to share them with me. I’m here to counsel you through this and bring you to life everlasting.”

Ruppert thought it over. Of course he didn’t believe a word Pastor John said, and he wasn’t entirely clear how the church was so intertwined with the Department of Terror. He knew he would be of little use to Terror after he carried out their orders, but there were others in his life to think about.

“I’m worried what will happen to Madeline.”

“Madeline?”

“My wife. Once I do what you want, I won’t survive long. I understand that.”

“Nonsense.” A beaming smile broke out on Pastor John’s face. “You will be protected by Our King.”

“Okay,” Ruppert said. “But as you said, I’m going among dark forces, and I could physically suffer or die for it. Of course Terror would never hurt a patriotic citizen like me, but the enemies of the state that I contact might. I accept that. But I have an obligation to take care of Madeline—as the church teaches—and I won’t be able to provide for her if I’m gone.”

“Do you not have a life insurance policy?”

“If the insurance company can declare I died in questionable legal circumstances, they can deny the claim. I want to make sure. Madeline’s never done anything wrong. She lived by your rules. I’ve watched her break herself to pieces to fit into your rules. She hates me, but she’s my responsibility. I need assurance of her security. It will help me do my part.”

Pastor John reached across and squeezed Ruppert’s arm just above the elbow. “You have my promise as the pastor of this church and servant of Our King.”

“I’m going to need something more concrete than that.”

“You want money, then.” Pastor John pulled back, sighing. “That’s what this is about. You feel you should be paid for carrying out your duty to the King.”

“It’s only for my wife’s sake. I don’t think I’ll survive to enjoy it.”

Pastor John regarded him with cold eyes, his fingers steepled in front of his mouth. “How much?” he finally asked.

“Enough to pay off the mortgage and keep her comfortable.”

Pastor John remained silent for another long moment. “It troubles me that you would be so concerned with material issues when performing an act of a spiritual nature.”

“I saw pictures of your Beverly house in People magazine. It looks nice.”

“Yes, I entertain often—”

“It mentioned you also had a place in Colorado, one in Florida, a yacht—”

“I gather your point, Daniel. Fine. I will personally arrange a transfer of funds in recognition of your concern for your wife. She will be cared for, provided you perform the task that has been assigned to you. However, if you try to take the money and run, as they say, you will find that you can go nowhere. The eyes of Our King are everywhere, and no man may buy or sell without His approval.”

“That’s from the Bible, right?”

“We are living in Biblical times, Daniel. The forces of darkness are loosed upon the Earth. For the sake of your soul—and for your wife’s—you must bring the light of the King forward into the wastelands, and carry out His will.”

Pastor John stood, and Ruppert hurried to his feet. The pastor shook his hand again, but this time with crushing force. Ruppert thought he could hear the bones of his fingers creaking under the pressure. Pastor John’s eyes seemed to have darkened.

“Our King is vengeful to those who transgress against him, Daniel, and His wrath is without end. Remember that.”

SEVENTEEN

Friday evening, Ruppert was in his office upstairs reading a bad murder-mystery novel when he heard a shattering crash from downstairs, followed by the sound of Madeline screaming. He'd been on edge, not believing he'd actually extorted money from Pastor John, though the man certainly had the resources. The money had magically appeared in the joint spending account he shared with Madeline—two million dollars. He had no doubt that it could disappear again just as easily, but he'd done the best he could for her.

Gathering his bathrobe around him as a pathetic form of armor, Ruppert hurried downstairs towards his wife's shrieking voice. He did not own a gun, although he probably could have qualified for one, at least before his recent troubles with Terror.

He rushed down into the foyer, where Madeline hurled porcelain decorations from a side table at two unannounced guests. A broken lamp and two demolished vases lay on the floor near them.

"Out! Get out of my house, you whore!" Madeline screamed.

Ruppert recognized one of the two visitors—it was the sandy-haired Packers fan, though today he looked much more rough, with the tattered and stained shirt of a street person and a few days' growth of beard. His Packers gear was gone. Ruppert did not recognize the young woman with him, apparently the target of Madeline's wrath. Her skin had a dark caramel tone, which was enough to trigger anger or fear in Ruppert's neighborhood. Suspicious blood, possibly tied to Neocommunist or Mercosur forces. She deftly blocked the flying porcelain objects with her forearm, which was fortunately clad in a leather sleeve.

"Benny," she said, "What's with the hostile wife?"

"I don't know!" The Packers fan--whose name was Benny, apparently--noticed Ruppert and scowled. "You said she had church groups every Friday night."

"She had them almost every night, but she hasn't been going," Ruppert said.

Madeline saw him on the stairs and her lips curled into a snarl behind the tangle of dark red hair smeared across her face. "You told her to come over, didn't you?" Her

hand scabbled across the rosewood side table, but she was out of ammunition. She growled her frustration, then overturned the entire table.

Ruppert approached his wife. “Madeline, just calm down. I have to go somewhere with these people.”

“I know where you’re going and what you’re going to do!” Madeline struck out at him, trying to claw at his face with her fingernails. “They showed me. They had video!”

“We don’t have time for this.” The dark young woman raised what looked like a standard handheld remote control for the screen, but heavily modified, with strange buttons and loose, dangling wires along the sides. Ruppert was aware of beeping from the small screen next to his front door, but he was busy trying to fight off Madeline’s attack.

“Will you just listen, Madeline?” Ruppert said. “I have to go now. You’re going to be fine. There’s plenty of money in the bank—”

“I don’t want money,” she hissed. “I want my baby. I’m on a schedule, I’m on a schedule, and now you’re going to go spray it all over this...this Jezebel-whore!”

“Excuse me?” the woman asked. There was a rush of crackling static from the screen.

“Madeline, I don’t know her...Madeline, listen. I might not be able to come back. I want you to know I love—”

“Don’t come back!” Madeline jerked away from him, walked backwards towards the kitchen. “I don’t you want back, ever.”

“Madeline, that’s what I’m saying—”

She stomped into the kitchen, letting out another frustrated scream.

“We have to get moving,” the Packers fan said.

“I’m just trying to explain—” Ruppert noticed his screen. Numbers and symbols raced across it, too fast for his eye to read. The woman with the remote control inserted a circular plastic plug into the data jack beside the screen, the place where Ruppert would plug in his camera to upload video. A sticker showing a jaguar was plastered onto the plug. The screen began to sputter and flash, then turned black. “What the hell are you doing?”

“A carnovirus,” she said. “It’s washing your house. I don’t want any records of my face. If Terror tries to dig around, they’ll just get an ugly infection.” She removed and pocketed the carnovirus plug. “Let’s go.”

“I just have to tell Madeline—”

“There isn’t time,” the Packers fan said. “Where’s your suitcase?”

Ruppert looked between them, then heard the crash of appliances breaking in the kitchen. “One second.”

After he returned with the case, the two ushered him out of the house.

“Drop your wallet,” the woman told him. “Leave everything here but cash.”

“Who is she?” Ruppert asked the young man.

“Lucia,” the Packers fan said. “She runs extractions. You should do what she says. They can track you through your wallet.”

Ruppert emptied out the cash compartment of his wallet, reached out to lay the wallet unit on his front steps, then hesitated. Without his wallet, he couldn’t prove his identity, couldn’t access his accounts, couldn’t reach anyone on his contact list. He would be completely at the mercy of the two strangers who were taking him from his

home. Beyond that, he was supposed to use the "weather" icon on his wallet screen to contact Terror. Leaving it meant breaking his bargain.

"Look," the Packers fan said. "There's no point in keeping it. It's no use to you anymore."

"Would you hurry him up?" Lucia snapped. "The police will already know his house has gone funky."

"Sorry." Ruppert held his wallet a moment longer, then tossed it up to the top step. His knees felt a little weak.

A patched, rusty station wagon idled in his front driveway. Ruppert couldn't help wondering how much the neighborhood association would fine him for keeping a car like that in front of his house. The neighbors must have noticed by now. Likely one or another of them would call the police on suspicion.

The Packers fan opened a rear door of the station wagon and lifted out a puffy, hooded coat that reminded Ruppert of a life preserver.

"Put it on," the Packers fan said.

"Why?"

"You might have a tracker implant, too," Lucia said. "That blocks the signal until we can check."

"I don't think I have a..." Ruppert stopped and considered how much time he'd lost while captured by Terror, the blacked out time he couldn't remember. They might have done anything to him. He slid the coat over his shoulders, buckled it, drew the hood in around his face.

"Good luck," the Packers fan said. "Thanks, Lucia." He climbed into the driver's seat of the old station wagon.

"We're not going with him?" Ruppert asked.

"We take your car. It's got hard resale value, even if we have to chop-shop it. I'm driving. Don't argue."

Inside the car, she drew a small toolkit from her pocket and used a small flathead screwdriver to pry open his uplink console.

"I disabled that," he said. He felt odd—he couldn't remember ever sitting in the passenger seat before. "I disconnected the fuse."

"Not good enough." Lucia dug the screwdriver in underneath a circuit panel, then cracked it loose. She lifted it free and threw it out the window onto Ruppert's lawn.

"They install backup batteries now. You have to get rid of the whole thing."

Lucia stepped on the accelerator, and the Bluehawk launched backwards, crashing through the low cactus hedge banking his driveway. They flew out into the street, and Lucia spun the steering wheel and stomped the brake. The car screeched to a stop just before hitting his neighbor's mailbox. The stink of roasted rubber poured in through the air conditioner vents.

"This is a nice car," she said. "Good pick-up."

"Okay...where are we going?"

"The desert."

As they hurtled towards the neighborhood exit, Ruppert looked back at his retreating house, wondering if he would see it again.



As they drove east into the Mojave desert, the layers of smog gradually peeled away overhead, and Ruppert was stunned at the sight of the great vault of the sky overhead glittering with billions of stars. He had spent so much of his life surrounded by concrete, walls, and security fences that the sky had become a meaningless detail, just a dark brown smudge you might happen to notice high overhead if you happened to look up when you happened to be outside. Here the sky arced from horizon to horizon—and he realized the horizon itself was the truly unfamiliar sight, land reaching out into the night further than he eyes could follow.

He'd spent far too much of his life in enclosed spaces. Even on vacations or the occasional business trip, he and Madeline just rode inside an airplane to a another city or, at best, a walled resort on a U.S.-controlled island. Spending time in the raw wilderness was considered the height of antisocial behavior. Anyone who didn't care to be crowded in all times by other humans was deemed suspect.

He looked over at the strange woman driving his car. Lucia had remained quiet except to tell him to keep watch for highway patrols and National Guard, and she cranked up the stereo to the breaking point—Mozart, maybe. He didn't know classical very well.

He guessed her age at somewhere in her twenties, probably a couple of years younger than Ruppert, about Madeline's age. It was hard for him to tell; her black eyes and long, straight dark hair marked her as a disfavored minority, probably Latino, possibly Native American. He couldn't help feeling a little uncomfortable about that. What if he inadvertently said something that offended her, and she attacked him? She had a stern, serious look about her, an attitude that spoke of surviving long nights in dark and dangerous slums.

“You do this a lot?” he finally asked.

“What?” She turned down the radio.

“Our friend said you ‘run extractions.’ You do a lot of this?”

“Just something I fell into.” She shrugged, glancing in the rearview. They were alone on the highway. “Do it once, suddenly you're an expert. People start coming to you for help. It's sort of self-fulfilling.”

“How did you get involved with them?”

“Who?”

“With this...organization. Is that what it is?”

“Not really. I mean, it's not like we have a name, or a logo, or meetings, kind of thing. You organize, they infiltrate. They disappear the leaders and turn over your membership list to the Freedom Brigades.”

“And the Brigades really do work for Terror? We always report them as a vigilante group.”

“Bullshit. They're paramilitary, state-sponsored. What planet have you been living on?”

“The one we just left.”

“There's not an organization,” she said. “Just people you meet. Trying to survive. You learn who to see about fake identicards, who's good at hacking security networks.”

“Like what you did at my house.”

“And your gate. A friend of mine made this remote for me. It's good for most residential security, for cookie-cutter suburban systems like yours. Some liquor stores, too.”

“What do you do when you're not kidnapping journalists?”

“We survive.” She looked at him a long moment, then said. “You meet people who are real radical idealists, but they don't agree on ideas. Mostly it's just people on the run from Terror, or who've lost someone in their life to Terror. Terror makes its own enemies. And we help each other get by. Occasionally, like what you're doing, there's an opportunity to act.”

“It doesn't sound like much of a revolution.”

“Is that what you expected? Nobody wants to get hung at a football game. Anyway, information is the most powerful weapon. You should know that.”

“Because I work in news?”

“You call that news?”

“I read what they tell me to read.”

“And you're comfortable with that?”

“It's not what I wanted to do with my life. I wanted to be—to do, essentially, the exact opposite of what I'm doing.”

“But you do it anyway.”

“It's the only work left. The kind of journalism that interested me doesn't exist anymore. I just took what I could get.”

“Did pretty good for yourself, though. Topline car. House in Bel Air.”

“Actually, Bel Air isn't as nice as it used to be.”

“Most people in the world live in tin and cardboard shacks.”

“Yeah...” Ruppert looked out at the dark expanse of the desert, the scrub cactus and occasional angular Joshua trees. He liked driving out here. He wished they never had to stop. “Yeah, I know that, I just forget to think about it. It's strange how your mind closes off after awhile.”

“I'm sorry to inconvenience you.”

“You hate me already?”

“I've hated you since I first saw you on the screen. You're a liar. You just flood the world with their lies, and you smile while you do it.”

“I don't write the stories myself. It's just a job.”

“It's just a job for the people who do write them,” Lucia said. “It's just a job for the people who make them up. It's just a job for the people who set the psy-op policy. It's a gigantic system that's nobody fault, because everybody's just doing their little job.”

“I know, but—”

“No, you don't! Without your propaganda, people would never accept any of this.”

“If I didn't do it, somebody else would.”

“You're right. I do hate you. I hate all of you up there drinking blood for a living, and then shrug and smile and say it's not your fault, there's just so much of that fresh blood to drink and all you take is a sip. Besides, it's just Latin blood, Asian blood, Arab blood, African blood—it's not like it's real people being tortured and murdered to make you rich. Is it?”

Ruppert didn't say anything.

“Do you know how many people your machine has killed just this century?”

“It must be thousands.”

She rolled her eyes. “You are an idiot.”

“I told you I was.”

She whipped her head towards him, her eyes glinting. “You’d better not be doing this to screw us over.”

“I’m not.”

“I’ve killed men bigger and uglier than you.”

“I believe it.”

“I’ve thought about cutting your throat before,” she said. “Every time I see your newscast.”

“Who did they take from you?” Ruppert asked.

“What?”

“You said most people lost something to Terror. I lost my friend Sully.”

“Nobody said I lost anybody.”

“So you’re just one of those radical idealists?”

“I don’t like talking to you.” She turned up the stereo and fixed her eyes on the road.

EIGHTEEN

They drove for hours, stopping twice at unmanned fuel pumps and paying with Ruppert's cash. When they were so deep in the desert he couldn't see even a tinge of city lights either ahead or behind them, Lucia left the paved road to follow a dust-filled, barely visible track. She turned off the headlights, and the world ahead of them turned solid black.

"What are you doing?" Ruppert asked.

"We don't want any sky patrols to see us."

"Okay...but how do you know where you're going?"

"I'm navigating by the stars," she said.

Ruppert couldn't tell if she was kidding or not.

After another half-hour, Lucia steered the car along a tall rock formation tall enough to block out the sky on the driver's side of the car. She slowed, then turned the car and eased it underneath a jutting overhang.

"We're going to get stuck under here," he said.

"Stop complaining." She let the car coast ahead several yards before stopping. They would be out of view of any satellites or helicopters. "We're here."

Ruppert opened the passenger door, but the rock wall of the cavern blocked it halfway. He sucked in his breath and managed to squeeze out of the car. Lucia climbed out on her side and closed the door, and the car's interior light winked out.

Illumination flared from a small flatlight clipped to Lucia's belt, throwing a harsh white glare that created a supernatural look to the cavern, turning the craggy stone walls the color of bone while the cracks and recesses in them remained pitch black.

"This way," Lucia said. They walked to the front of the car and then continued along the sloping cave floor. He followed her down a side passage as cramped as a chimney and nearly as steep, floored with a slippery layer of loose sand.

The passage twisted another hundred feet underground, then opened into a spacious cavern with a soaring ceiling. Off to his left, the rock floor dropped off into a sheer cliff. On the opposite side of the cavern, the partially-gutted body of an old trailer,

or maybe an RV, rested against the wall. The rest of the room was cluttered with shelves and boxes filled with bits of machinery, dusty file folders, and hundreds of books and magazines. Some areas were portioned off behind makeshift curtains.

The center of the cavern looked, oddly, like anybody's living room. There was a threadbare couch, four or five mismatched chairs, an ancient record player, a writing desk that looked like it had barely survived a house fire. The only light source was a lamp mounted into the desk, which shone on an elderly man who was now standing up to meet them.

He wobbled, then steadied himself on a walking cane. The man's silver hair was balding at the top but long and shaggy at the sides, and he also had an unkempt beard. Ruppert couldn't remember the last time he'd seen a beard on a white man, or at least an employed one.

"Lucia," the man said. "It is so good to see you." He hobbled towards them, keeping his head high and spine straight despite his ungainly walk. Lucia ran towards him and hugged him—Ruppert couldn't tell if she was excited or just trying to spare him a few steps.

"You don't have to get up," she said as she embraced him.

"Having a good reason to stand is worth the trouble of doing so," the old man said. "I swear, Lucia, if I had my former life back, I would marry you today and take you to Paris tomorrow."

"No," Lucia said. "You'd just keep me as a mistress on the side. Until I got too old and ugly."

"Impossible."

"It happened to you."

"I stand humiliated. Who is your friend?"

"He's not my friend. He's a propagandist for GlobeNet-L.A. His name's Daniel Ruppert."

"Is that right?"

Ruppert took the man's offered left hand. The old man's rheumy, pale blue eyes took him in with a long, searching gaze that was uncomfortably reminiscent of Pastor John's penetrating stare.

"I'm retired now," Ruppert said, forcing a smile.

"My name is Dr. John Smith." The old man returned the smile, and it did not look forced at all. "Not actually, but my given surname is a bit well known, not to mention an object of some shame for me personally, and in any case I've abandoned its use."

"I understand," Ruppert said. "Um, nice to meet you."

"This is the man Sullivan recommended?" Dr. Smith asked Lucia, but without taking his eyes off Ruppert.

"That's him," Lucia said.

"He appears reliable enough to me."

"You haven't watched his newscasts."

"And thank God for that," Dr. Smith said. He inspected the coarse, heavy coat Ruppert was wearing. "Do you know where they bugged you?"

"I'm not even sure if they did."

“Best to be safe, though. Lucia, will you help the gentleman into the exam room, please? And give the lights a few turns.”

“Over here,” Lucia said. She led Ruppert to the old RV against the wall, which they entered through a curtain made of the same material as Ruppert’s coat. The interior was completely lightless. Ruppert heard a ratcheting noise off to his side, and then a pair of surgical lights stuttered to life overhead. Lucia was turning a hand crank mounted into a metal box on one wall of the RV, apparently to generate electricity.

A low steel operating table occupied the center of the RV, banked by mirrors, a few clunky, boxy display screens, and an assortment of medical equipment that might have been salvaged from a hospital sometime in the early 1970s. Scalpels and assorted bottles of fluid were arrayed on the RV’s kitchen counter. The ceiling, walls and floor were all shrouded by more of the heavy material that composed Ruppert’s coat; it looked like burlap bags fixed in place with yards and yards of duct tape.

“What is this?” Ruppert asked.

“Don’t worry,” Lucia said. “You might not be bugged.”

Dr. Smith stepped up into the RV with a cardboard box tucked under one arm. He heaved it onto the table in the RV’s breakfast nook and began digging through the tangled nest of wires and cable inside.

“You can remove your coat,” Dr. Smith said. “We’re safe enough in here.” He fished out an object Ruppert couldn’t identify, a plastic yellow box the size of a deck of playing cards, with metal antennae radiating out at one end.

Ruppert shrugged off the coat, glad to be free of its weight, and tossed it onto one of the booth seats in the breakfast nook.

“Remove your shirt as well,” Dr. Smith said. He lifted out one end of a wire from the box and inserted it into a row of plugs on the side of the crankbox. “Lucia, a few more if you don’t mind.”

Lucia worked the crank, and soon the little yellow box sputtered to life with a series of sharp beeps. Dr. Smith lifted the device and rapped his knuckle a few times against the side.

Ruppert was slowly unbuttoning his shirt, distracted by the squawking device.

“There,” Dr. Smith said. He looked up at Ruppert. “Well, don’t be shy.”

“Sorry.” Ruppert hurried to strip himself to the waist.

“Step closer, if you don’t mind.” Dr. Smith held out the device toward Ruppert, and it began to beep more rapidly. “Oh, yes. Someone in this room is definitely being tracked. Would you turn around?”

Ruppert rotated to show the doctor his back, making very brief and awkward eye contact with Lucia as he turned. The device’s beeping accelerated into one long, piercing note.

“Here it is,” Dr. Smith said. “Right scapula. Perfect. Mr. Ruppert, we’re going to need you to lie face down on the table.”

“For what?” Ruppert said. His eyes darted to the rack of chunky, obsolete surgical instruments on the kitchen counter. They looked clean and bright, but terribly sharp.

“I’ll have to perform some very minor surgery,” Dr. Smith said. Ruppert whirled, half-expecting the old man to be wielding a scalpel at his bare back. Smith gave a warm smile. “You’re lucky it isn’t cranial.”

“You’re going to cut me open?”

“We’ll use a local anesthetic,” Smith said. “Don’t worry, I can enter laparoscopically. You can watch on the screen.”

“I’m not sure this is a good idea,” Ruppert said.

“It’s a simple procedure,” Smith said.

“You want to wear that coat the rest of your life?” Lucia asked. “There are millions of ex-prisoners who’d cut their own grandmother to get their trackers removed.”

Ruppert looked at the old man. He seemed sane, even kindly. If Terror had implanted a tracking device in his body, Ruppert definitely wanted it out, but he wasn’t sure he was ready to let a bearded old man who lived in a cave perform surgery on his toe, much less an area close to his heart and spine.

“You’re really a doctor?” Ruppert asked.

“I served as a Navy medical officer in two campaigns,” Dr. Smith said. “Iran and Tajikistan. I was once issued an M.D. is from the Yale School of Medicine. The Department of Terror has implanted a device in your body which allows them to pinpoint you at any second of any day, and such devices are often fitted with a tiny bubble of lethal toxin that can be broken open by remote control. This bubble, if present inside you, was manufactured by government contractors.

“Now. Do my qualifications meet with your approval, or would you prefer to contact your insurance provider?”

Ruppert looked between them. What choice did he have?

Following directions, Ruppert lay facedown on the cold metal plate of the operating table, which was only about a yard off the RV’s floor. Dr. Smith checked his blood pressure, then worked with the implements on the kitchen counter, while asking mundane questions that made the situation feel almost normal: How recently had Ruppert seen a doctor? Age? Height? Weight? Allergies, previous surgeries?

The old doctor eased into a low chair on Ruppert’s right side. He had sheathed his hands in latex gloves and tucked away his beard and hair behind a green cap and mask.

“I hope you’ll excuse my sitting down for this,” Smith said. “It’s rather difficult to perform while leaning on this ridiculous cane. Lucia, would you swab him here?” Ruppert felt the cool liquid on his bare upper back. “Now activate the screen.”

The thick, boxy old screen in front of Ruppert blinked to life, but only displayed meaningless gray blurs.

“Good,” Dr. Smith said. “Now hand me that syringe of anesthetic—no, the other—no, Lucia, the other end of the rack.”

“Is she qualified for this?” Ruppert asked.

“Not at all,” Lucia said as she passed a glass syringe to Dr. Smith. “Did you mean this pointy thing, doctor?”

“She’s only trying to scare you,” Dr. Smith said. “Miss Santos has sufficient experience. I require assistance, and here, that’s either Lucia or the nearest coyote. And I don’t believe you’ll find a coyote with a medical license. Though I understand Harvard has lowered their admissions standards considerably.”

Ruppert felt the needle puncture his skin, and his right shoulder fell numb.

“We’ll give that just a minute to settle in,” Dr. Smith said. “Tell me, Daniel, have you been approached by anyone...unusual, in recent days or weeks?”

“Besides you two?” Ruppert asked.

“I was thinking of someone from the opposite side of things.”

Ruppert immediately decided against telling them about his imprisonment by Terror—it might raise their suspicions, because Terror very rarely released anyone. He opted for a partial truth. “I did get called in to see my pastor at church. Someone decided I didn’t look devoted enough to the One King. That’s what they call God. I assume they mean God.”

“Keep still,” Dr. Smith said. “I’m cutting now. Do you feel any pain?”

“Nothing,” Ruppert said. He was numb from his neck to his knees.

“Are you in the habit of speaking to him?” Smith asked.

“No, we never spoke before.”

“Dominionist?” Smith asked. “One of those big stadium churches?”

“Yes. Golden Tabernacle. His name is John Perrish.”

“I don’t know that name. Not that it matters. I assure you the man is a psycho.”

“He didn’t seem crazy to me,” Ruppert said. “Definitely creepy, though.”

“He’s clueless,” Lucia said.

“Remain very still,” Dr. Smith said. “If you look on the screen, you can see the edge of your shoulder blade.”

Ruppert looked up at the image on the screen, but it was still grainy blurs to him. “You’re inside me?”

“I am.”

“I hope you can see that stuff better than I can.” The image on the screen advanced from one blurry area to the next.

“I can see what I need,” Dr. Smith said. “You’re completely unfamiliar with PSYCOM, then?”

“With what?” Ruppert asked.

“Lucia, would you help explain? I’m certain he would prefer I concentrate on the task at hand.”

“Please,” Ruppert said.

Lucia pulled up a chair in front of Ruppert. She’d tied her long hair back from her face.

“You have heard of psy-ops, right?” she asked as she sat down to face him.

“Psychological operations run by the military, or intelligence, or politicians?”

“Right,” Ruppert said. “Like dropping leaflets on other countries when we attack them.” He thought of his own job. “Or planting stories in the news.”

“Sure.” Lucia said, rolling her eyes. “If this was World War I, maybe.”

“What else?” Ruppert asked. “The churches, that’s what you’re saying?”

“You must understand that no government rules by violence alone,” Dr. Smith said. “A state must appear legitimate to its population—at least, a substantial portion of its population. We calculated that one-third of the population is sufficient for absolute control, provided that the remaining two thirds remain factioned and quarreling. Ideally, of course, you would prefer to have majority compliance, but this is nearly impossible to effect reliably over the long term.”

“I’m not sure I’m following you,” Ruppert said. He watched as the viewpoint onscreen nudged past a swollen blob that might have been muscle tissue.

“Someone explained it to me like this,” Lucia said. “What’s the difference between a king and a warlord?”

“What?” Ruppert asked.

“It’s like a riddle.”

“I don’t know. A king wears a crown?”

“He’s not so far off,” Dr. Smith commented.

“The difference,” Lucia said, “Is that a king has priests who back this crazy claim that he's the king and should be obeyed.”

“And a warlord?” Ruppert asked.

“He just has guys with guns.”

“A question of legitimacy,” Dr. Smith said. “Ordained by the gods, or forced by bloodshed, you see. The priests who cooperate inevitably grow quite wealthy and powerful themselves. They feed upon the system.”

“You’re saying the Dominionist churches are propaganda tools,” Ruppert said. “But that's obvious.”

“You’re skipping over the point,” Dr. Smith said. “In ancient times, a priesthood sufficed to legitimize the king. Ruling the modern world requires a complex information machinery. Priests, as you’ve mentioned, but also public relations professionals, historians, publishers, news reporters, teachers. The absurd rigmarole of voting and elections. Public rituals to make the commoners feel they are a part of things. Hold your breath and refrain from moving.”

Ruppert heard a mechanical clatter somewhere behind him, then a hissing, sucking noise close by his head.

“Stay where you are,” Dr. Smith said. “When fighting a war, a ruler has two goals in the area of public opinion. Generate support among your own population and discord among the enemy’s. We’ve done tremendous research in both areas. Eventually, you come to see all populations, enemy or ally, as the same, because in all circumstances the goal is to generate support for you and hostility toward the enemy.

“We learned to wage information war. We developed methods of infiltrating and subverting key information institutions in a society—the news media, yes, but also the long-term indoctrination structures of education and religion. We learned to exploit a culture’s myths, because myths are easier to manipulate than facts. Let’s have a look at the little beast. You can sit up now.”

Ruppert did, turning to face Dr. Smith, who was lifting a vial from a rattletrap machine connected to a long, thin hose that lay limp on the table, its metal tip wet with Ruppert’s blood. Smith held out the vial towards him.

Inside, at the very bottom of the container, lay what looked like a narrow, blood-smudged coil of wire no wider than Ruppert’s smallest fingernail.

“It’s still active,” Dr. Smith said. “Lucia, would you mind?”

Lucia set the vial into a holder at the end of the kitchen counter. She lifted an eyedropper and squeezed out a small stream of clear fluid into the vial. The little device smoldered.

“Acid,” she told Ruppert. “You want to make sure you destroy them.” She corked the vial containing the melting tracker.

“How were you involved?” Ruppert asked Dr. Smith, who still occupied the low chair beside him. “You keep saying ‘We.’”

“Yes.” Dr. Smith removed the pointed tip of the laparoscopy hose, opened a low kitchen cabinet, and pitched it into an empty paint bucket. “It’s an old problem, you see. We ran these operations separately. You’d have intelligence serving their purposes, military branches and divisions serving their separate purposes, and of course the official culture with the diplomats. The politicians scrambling things up here and there. The psy-ops would clash against each other in unplanned ways. Originally, they were only a sort of *ad hoc* tool, you understand? There was very little coordination.”

Ruppert nodded.

“The liquid skin,” Dr. Smith said. “And a bandage.” Lucia brought what he requested. “Turn that way and I’ll patch you up.”

Ruppert turned. His back was still completely numb, and he didn’t feel the doctor working on him.

“Eventually the decision was made to centralize all these different little operations,” Dr. Smith said. “In a global media environment, you need global coordination. That’s why the Psychological Command was created. We received enormous budgets and minimal oversight. Operations and research, each operation a new social experiment. We developed procedures for manipulating societies.

“In our own country, we turned public schools into cultural laboratories. We mapped electrical patterns in the human brain. . . Our goal was the manufacturing of consent. It was always easy enough to arouse a population to war, for example, but these fevers broke much too early. The question was how to manufacture a long, slow-burning fever, one that might ebb and flow but never die out, one that created a permanent climate of strict obedience, the unending emergency.

“You’re old enough to remember how these institutions arose together—the Department of Terror, the Department of Faith, the Dominionists, the Freedom Brigades.”

“Because of Columbus,” Ruppert said. “That’s when the world changed.”

“You’re exactly right,” Dr. Smith said. “These were parallel operations, deployed in a synchronized fashion to envelop the citizenry in a permanent illusion. We manipulated the local myths to serve our purposes. And now we will have tea, if Lucia will help me to my feet.”

They moved to the mismatched chairs in the living room area, where they drank strong black tea from a chipped, battery-operated kettle that occupied a worn barstool near Dr. Smith’s desk. They drank from chipped novelty mugs. Ruppert’s featured an image of the video game character Mario.

“So what was the point?” Ruppert asked. “Why change things so drastically?”

“It was necessary to fully implement our strategy,” Dr. Smith said. “We wanted a system that granted absolute control over people and resources. The country was slipping, you see. The state was losing its grasp on the population. We needed an opportunity to assert authority, to stave off a potential anarchy. A strong blow, to induce a state of shock, to weaken the resistance of the public mind.

“We grew to understand that the link between god and state, used properly, brought the greatest potential for a long-term system. The Byzantine Empire lasted a thousand years. The Egyptian, much longer. We wished to install such a permanent system.

“And we called our goal the ‘pharaohnic’ state, in which the state itself becomes the object of religious adulation, the holy thing ordained by the heavens. Our research told us a god-state must appear omnipotent, omniscient, and above all, terrifying. Modern communication systems made near-omniscience entirely viable. That was the easiest part.

“The key is manufacturing fear. Then offer the frightened people a story that makes you the protector. If you simply accept the official truth as your own, you can believe that the state’s enemies are your enemies, and further that the state’s power is your power. When our new model state crushes another human being, or another nation, the faithful believe it is they who are doing the crushing. Are you following me?”

“Yes,” Ruppert said. “The churches, the news media to soak people in ideology, and then the Department of Terror for those who resist, am I right?”

“And most people are stupid enough to believe whatever they’re told,” Lucia said.

“I’m not sure I agree with you,” Dr. Smith said. “At some level, most of the obedient population know that what they adore is the power that can destroy them. They glorify what they fear, forcing themselves to believe they are somehow special and exempt, that the persecution will always be suffered by others. It’s the only way to avoid confronting the truth, which is that they are powerless.”

“But after a while they really believe it,” Lucia said. “I’ve seen people go into a rage when I try to point these things out to them.”

“Their anger betrays their lack of real belief,” Smith said. “When they lash out, they are externalizing the struggle against truth that goes on deep inside their own minds. We rule two-thirds of the world, directly or through proxies, yet we are not an empire. We pulverize entire cities, but we are bringing them freedom. We slaughter millions, while we proclaim a man who forbade the use of violence as our God.

“This is obvious to everyone, at some level. So we offer an external dramatization of their internal conflict—those who die in public executions, and those we destroy through war, represent the doubts and fears inside the people of our nation, that internal urge towards truth while we force ourselves to believe lies. The slaughter and bloodshed does not really resolve the inner turmoil, because it does not resolve the basic problem of denying reality. This is by design. Can you see why?”

“Because it allows you to do anything,” Ruppert said. “As long as we’re in a state of war, you can claim a state of emergency at home. Right?”

“And they can call it holy war,” Lucia said. “Holy war, holy government...just don’t ask any questions, or you’re a traitor-heretic-thought criminal.”

“That’s the pharaohnic state,” Ruppert said.

“Precisely,” Smith said.

“But why did you do it?” Ruppert asked. “I mean, who did it, exactly? Who has all this power? Who’s standing above it looking down on us ignorant peasants?”

“There is no single ruler,” Smith said. “There are many who profit. My family, among others. We have something of a tradition in the intelligence and defense industries. That is why I was appointed to the psy-op coordination task force, which grew into a think tank, before ultimately mutating into that most eloquent expression of power, an unsupervised and officially nonexistent bureaucracy. The North Atlantic Psychological Command. PSYCOM. The Department of Terror, for example, is merely one face of our operations. One of our American faces.”

“This is too much,” Ruppert said. He was beginning to feel dizzy, and struggled to keep his balance despite the fact that he was already sitting down. The dim living room lamp grew painfully bright to his eyes.

“I’m very sorry,” Smith said. “It’s a great deal to take in after surgery.” He heaved himself to his feet, drawing heavily on the cane. “I’ll show you where to sleep.”

“I’ll take him,” Lucia said.

“Would you mind? I’ll just escort myself to my own apartment. Make yourself at home, Lucia. You’ve had a long drive.”

Lucia led Ruppert to one of the cluttered walls and drew aside a tattered paper screen decorated with fading ink sketches of Chinese woman gathering water at a well. The small room contained a cot wedged in among more of the cardboard boxes, which served as the room’s walls.

“This is a nice spot,” she said. “I think there’s some clothes in these boxes by the door. Water’s pretty scarce. If you have to piss or something, go into the cave behind the blue curtain out there and follow that all the way until it dead ends. Actually, you’ll probably want to stop before you get to the very end. You know.”

“Thanks,” Ruppert said.

She lingered, studying his face.

“What is it?” he asked.

“When did they get to you?” Lucia asked.

“Who?”

“Terror,” she said. “I can tell. How long did they keep you?”

“I don’t...I’m not...” Ruppert was so tired he could barely think. He did not know how to handle the question: Lie? Confess? Somewhere in between?

“Don’t worry about it,” she said. “We can talk later.”

“Thanks.”

She stepped away from him, then slid the paper screen back into place.

The cot creaked as Ruppert lay down on it. He doubted he could rest well in such a strange location, but he was asleep before his eyes were fully closed. His dreams were dark, and he sweated in his sleep.

NINETEEN

Ruppert awoke to the scratchy, hiss-filled melody of Billie Holiday singing “Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans?” on the record player. He nudged aside the paper screen and joined Lucia and Dr. Smith in the living room area, where Lucia was eating spinach from a can. Smith sat in a threadbare recliner and tinkering with the back of a bulky screen mounted atop an easel.

“More water, more batteries,” Smith was saying. “I can’t have too much of either.”

“I’ll let someone know,” Lucia said. “What about food?”

“I’ve got more than enough to last the rest of my life.” Smith scratched at his beard and looked at Ruppert. “How’s my patient? Swelling? Discomfort?”

“I feel fine,” Ruppert said. “Actually, I haven’t slept that well in years.”

“Have some breakfast.” Lucia handed him a rectangle of metal fitted with a pull tab.

“Sardines?” Ruppert asked. He peeled back the lid to see a dark orange mass under a layer of thick oil.

“Tinned cheese,” Lucia said.

“Can they do that with cheese?”

“They did it. Dig in.” She handed him a spoon.

Ruppert scooped out some of the mushy cheese material, but before he put it in his mouth, he tilted the spoon to let the oil spill back into the tin. The cheese tasted rank and had a slimy texture—it seemed to wriggle around his teeth as he tried to chew it.

“Good?” Lucia asked.

Ruppert forced himself to swallow. “Sure. Thanks.”

She shook her head. “It’s foul.”

“Then why do you get spinach?” Ruppert asked.

“You think it’s any better?”

“Don’t tell me you hate the cheese, too.” Dr. Smith leaned over, scooped out some of the cheese with his own spoon, slurped it down. “What’s wrong with that?”

Ruppert slid the tin across the table, closer to Dr. Smith.

“What are you doing here?” Ruppert nodded at the bulky easel screen.

“It’s just a focusing device,” Smith said. “You may not be out of Terror’s pocket yet. We’ll need to check you for programming.”

“You think I’m a computer?”

“Your brain is,” Lucia said. “And they know how to install controls. And if they took you long enough to put in a tracking device...”

“We’re not blaming you if they did,” Smith added. “It’s a necessary precaution on our part. Terror runs all kinds of strange games, and we have to be careful.”

Ruppert looked at the blank screen. “You told me you were involved in creating the PSYCOM.”

“I was one of the first psychos,” Smith said. “That’s what we called ourselves.”

“Why did you change your mind?” Ruppert asked.

“You mean, why did I abandon wealth, influence, and an intimate knowledge of the world’s greatest secrets in exchange for a hole in the ground?”

“Seems like a reasonable question,” Ruppert said.

“Only the poor and the animals are free, as I think George Orwell wrote,” Smith said. “My old life involved power, duty, secrecy. Now I am free.”

“What changed your mind?” Ruppert asked.

“When I saw our designs unfolding in the real world,” Smith said. “Prior to that, it felt like an abstract intellectual exercise—how to theoretically attain full-spectrum psychological dominion...if one wanted. After Columbus, I watched things we had discussed in comfortable chairs at a conference table begin to unfold, the whole architecture imposed from the top down—the Emergency Detention Centers, the Department of Faith, and of course Terror. When those awful Freedom Brigades began their rampages, burning down neighborhoods and shooting people in the streets, that’s when I left.”

“You just quit?”

“I wish I could have.” Smith chuckled. “No, death was the only way out for me. So I engineered that. Or an illusion of it, as you can see.” Smith glanced down to the cheese tin. He had eaten most of the contents. “I apologize. Have the last piece.”

“It’s all yours,” Ruppert said.

“I like it better here,” Smith said. “I can grow out my hair like some kind of radical. And there’s time to read. I never had that before. I’m even writing a book on PSYCOM and its programs, so maybe that will be of some service to the country. It won’t be available in bookstores, naturally.”

“There are plenty of ways to get information around,” Lucia said.

“Which brings us back to Mr. Ruppert’s purpose here.” Smith tilted the easel screen so that it faced Ruppert directly. “I will need to place you into a hypnotic trance. If I were still a psycho, I would use drugs to help things along, but I would rather you remember this as clearly as possible. My only purpose is to seek out any secret instructions and to help you remove them.”

“I did receive secret instructions,” Ruppert said.

“Excuse me?” Smith asked.

Ruppert told them about his capture and detention by Terror. “They wanted me to go looking for this guy, this crazy neo-Nazi guy, named Hollis Westerly—”

“Shit,” Lucia said.

Smith held up his hand. “Go on.”

“—they said Sully’s friend might lead me to him for some reason. They wanted me to contact them as soon as I had the guy’s location.”

“This is blown,” Lucia said. A knife with a black, glassy blade appeared in her hand—Ruppert could not tell where it had been sheathed. She sprang from her chair, the blade high. Ruppert drew back and put up his hands, ready to fend her off.

“Wait.” Smith touched her arm, and she relaxed, but remained standing. Her mouth was a hard, flat line, and her black eyes burned at Ruppert.

“How were you to contact Terror?” Smith asked him.

“My wallet.” Smith touched his empty pocket. “Which I left on the front steps of my house.”

“He’s a spy,” Lucia said. “I should cut his throat and bury his body in the desert. I’ve been wanting to do it for the last two years.”

“Lucia’s not a fan of my news program,” Ruppert explained to Smith.

“I don’t believe that will be necessary,” Smith said. “Mr. Ruppert, thank you for telling me this. It’s going to save time. What else did they want you to do?”

“That’s it,” Ruppert said. “Just the Westerly guy. I didn’t want to help them, but they said they’d send us to labor camps, send Madeline to work at that meltdown site in Texas—”

“And if you helped out, you get to keep on living the good life, because you’re one of their guys. Right?” Lucia asked.

“If they thought I was one of them, they wouldn’t have tortured and threatened me,” Ruppert said. “You’ve seen the scars on my hands.”

“Could be fake,” she said.

“Check them out.”

“Could be real but you agreed to it, and they doped you on painkillers first.”

“If I was that dedicated, why would I be telling you now?”

“He was going to put you under,” Lucia said.

“Without drugs,” Smith pointed out. “It would require his cooperation.”

“Then maybe you should use the drugs,” Lucia said. Her eyes had narrowed as she examined Ruppert. “Just to be safe.”

“Fine with me,” Ruppert snapped back at her. “I’ll take the drugs.”

“Both of you need to calm down,” Smith said. “So far as I understand, I am the only certified medical doctor in this room, and I will make the medical decisions. Now. I don’t think it will be necessary to drug you, Daniel. I believe you wish to cooperate in removing any directives Terror may have planted within your mind. Am I correct?”

“Yes,” Ruppert said. He and Lucia continued glaring at each other.

“Lucia, avoid agitating him. It creates more work for me.”

Lucia stalked away towards a shelf crammed with magazines.

“Make yourself comfortable, Daniel,” Smith said. “Ease back in your chair.” He activated the easel screen. A constellation of electronic dots appeared, then slowly faded into another arrangement of dots, and then another.

“Now, keep your eyes on the screen, and allow yourself to relax,” Smith said. “I am going to count down from ten to one, and you will grow increasingly calm, clear, and relaxed. Ten, relaxing now...nine...”

The dots on the screen continued to fade in and out of existence, and the constellations fell into repeating patterns. Ruppert felt his eyelids dropping, and his body seemed to grow heavy. It was actually a very soothing experience, as if he were on the edge of sleep and momentarily forgetting his worry and fear...

"Now," Smith's voice said. Ruppert could not see him anymore. He supposed his eyes had closed, though he could still see dim afterimages of the slowly shifting dots. "We will look at a few of your memories. You will experience these like video files playing on a large screen. You will have full power to reverse, advance, pause, or stop any memory. The choice is yours. Do you understand?"

"Sure, doc." Ruppert's voice drawled out thick and slow.

"We are going back to the time when you were in the custody of the Department of Terror."

A barrage of jagged, disconnected images assaulted Ruppert. Armed men in black masks raiding his home. The burning of his hands, the Captain electrocuting him, the guards beating him. A scream rose in his throat.

"Remember," Smith said, in a voice that was calm and reassuring and seemed to glow with kindness. "These are just old videos. You have complete power over them. You are perfectly safe."

"Okay," Ruppert said.

"Good. Now, Daniel, we are looking for the secret conversations, the ones they told you never to remember."

Ruppert slumped in his chair in the interrogation room, his wrists and ankles strapped into place, facing the cold blue eyes of the Captain across the table. There was something wrong with Ruppert's arm. A needle. They'd inserted an IV into the inner crook of his elbow, and cold fluid dripped in through it, his arm aching as the coldness spread through it.

"You will remember none of this," the Captain said. "You would rather hurt yourself than remember—"

A rush of bad memories filled Ruppert's mind, apparently selected on the basis of their ability to stir emotional trauma. Eight years old, kneeling in the street in front of his parents' house in Bakersfield, his black lab Guppy sprawled on the asphalt in front of his neighbor's SUV. Ten years old, peering down at his grandfather's body in a casket while his mother wept beside him. Ruppert heard a man screaming across a long distance.

"Now, steady yourself," Smith's voice said. "Nothing can hurt you now. You are free of these things. You are at peace now."

The avalanche of painful memories began to ebb. Ruppert actually did feel better now, as if Smith's voice had the power to make things real just by saying them. He was free of these things.

"Let's try again," Smith said. "We're back in the interrogation room—"

And Ruppert was. A scorching pain flared in his muscles and in the cores of his bones. He twisted in the interrogation, but there was no escape.

"You will remember nothing," the Captain said again, through grinding teeth. The Captain looked less human somehow, as if a dark supernatural force inhabited his body. The shadows across his face were longer and deeper, and his blue eyes looked as unfeeling as painted rocks. "Nothing...you will not remember..."

Ruppert's eyes fixed on the skull-and-bones pin on the Captain's uniform, the insignia of Terror. The silver skull grew to fill his entire vision. The crossbones broke at right angles to form a swastika, and it began to rotate counterclockwise, giving the impression of a spiral.

The swastika began to multiply, filling him with horror. He saw them everywhere, made of bones or painted in blood, thousands of them now and they brought dread and terror with them because he knew what they meant he knew deep deep down that the devil could make itself real in the world and it could hide behind any symbol, any flag, any words, and you might not even know it was there until it had done its evil and moved on—

"You," the Captain snarled, and with each word he spoke, a fiery stab of electricity seared Ruppert inside and out. "Will. Remember. Nothing." That wasn't how it had really gone, but that was how it was going now, with Dr. Smith and the Captain wrestling for Ruppert's mind, the Doctor outside him, the Captain within.

The thousands of swastikas crunched back together and assembled like puzzle pieces into the shape of Hollis Westerly, a big hulking man with a balding mullet-style haircut and strange tattoos along his hairy arms, Ruppert read the words on one and the words said "Odin Rising" but they didn't mean anything to him.

Ruppert was in a dark place facing Westerly, who was not a pic or a hologram now but an incarnate person. The Captain stood in the deep shadows behind Ruppert and whispered in his ear.

"He's a wicked man," the Captain said. "Just look at him."

"Wicked," Ruppert agreed.

"He shouldn't be allowed to live."

"No, he shouldn't."

"Look around and see what you can use," the Captain said.

Ruppert looked, but there was only darkness.

"A gun, a knife, anything," the Captain said. At his words, both a revolver and a dagger appeared, floating in the void nearby. Ruppert plucked the knife out of the air.

"Make sure his throat is cut," the Captain said. "Remove his tongue if you can. Don't leave him alive. There is nothing more important this."

"Yes." Ruppert stepped towards Westerly, lifted the blade, and skewered the neo-Nazi's throat.

"Good boy," the Captain said.

Ruppert blinked, unsure where he was. His empty hand was extended out in front of him, as if maybe he was reaching for something.

"What?" he asked, as if someone had spoken to him.

"I said, you're awake," Dr. Smith replied. The room suddenly made sense. He was in a cave in the desert. The old doctor occupied a recliner just behind and to the left of Ruppert.

"You snapped out of it," Smith told him. "You woke yourself. What do you remember?"

Flashbacks of his torture experience skittered across Ruppert's vision, along with, oddly, the image of his pet dog from childhood.

"Guppy was a great dog," Ruppert said.

"Excuse me?" Smith asked.

“Nothing. What happened?”

“I’d hoped you would remember,” Smith said. “We’ll have to repeat this process. Twice a day until you remember everything.”

“What am I supposed to remember?” Ruppert asked.

“That you’re a hit man,” Lucia said.

Ruppert looked at her with disbelief.

“I’m just as shocked as you,” she said. “You’d think they could find someone more qualified.”

“Is she serious?” Ruppert asked the doctor.

“Yes, and far more so than I believe healthy,” Smith said. “But that is beside the point. Daniel, they programmed you to kill a man, if that word can be applied to Hollis Westerly.”

“They want me to kill the Nazi guy?” Ruppert blinked several times. He felt like his brain was stuttering. “But is that really so bad? I mean, he’s a wicked man. Just look at him.”

“The exact words spoken by your programmer,” Smith said.

“Who was it? The Captain?”

“That is how you referred to him.”

“They’ve got the whole thing figured out,” Lucia said. “We can’t do this. We should eliminate him.”

Ruppert understood the “him” to mean him.

“Not necessarily,” Dr. Smith said. “We have many advantages here.”

“Like what?” Lucia snapped. She stalked back across the room, still holding an unopened issue of *Architectural Digest* in one hand. “They know everything.”

“No,” Dr. Smith said. “They want to give the impression of omniscience. Don’t buy into their image. And, please, try to relax for one minute. Or even an entire hour. Would you like me to hypnotize you?”

“Forget it.”

“The first thing we have,” Smith said, “Is their assassin working with us. You are still working with us, correct, Daniel?”

“If Lucia doesn’t kill me first,” Ruppert said.

She scowled at him and flipped open her magazine.

“The second thing we have is knowledge of their intentions,” Smith said. “What can we deduce, Lucia? Consider it from a counterintelligence perspective.”

“Fuck.” Lucia sighed and slapped the magazine closed. “All right. So the psychos program Danny boy here to kill Westerly. We know why.”

“Why?” Ruppert asked.

“Later,” Smith said. “Lucia, why program an assassin? Are they lacking in hired killers?”

“No, they’ve got plenty of those,” Lucia said. “Usually it’s because they want to keep their hands clean, right? Like if they assassinate a prime minister or president somewhere.”

Smith nodded. “But...”

“But Hollis Westerly is not rich or famous or powerful,” Lucia said. “He’s about as nobody as you can get.”

“So why not just send in the Terror men, or a Freedom Brigade? Or even a couple of Hartwell cops, in a pinch?”

“Because...they sent in this guy as poisoned bait instead. So we'd take him to Westerly ourselves. And that means...” Lucia bit at her lip for a moment, then broke into a smile. “They don't know where Westerly is. They must not have a clue, if they're going to this much trouble.”

“That's the only reason I can see,” Smith said. “If they just wanted him dead and they knew where he was, they would just send someone after him. And we know they just want him dead. So...”

“Did I mention yet that I wanted to know why the psychos are trying to kill Westerly?” Ruppert asked, but nobody seemed inclined to answer him.

“So we're still on course, aren't we?” Lucia asked.

“For the moment,” Smith agreed.

TWENTY

They repeated the hypnosis again in the afternoon, and then twice the next day. Time passed slowly in Dr. Smith's cave, but the doctor gave him something to read, a crumbling paperback copy of George Orwell's *1984*. Ruppert tore into it with enthusiasm. It had been one of the first books blacklisted by Terror, and he'd never gotten around to reading it before it was outlawed.

As the hypnosis sessions progressed, memories began floating up to the surface of his mind like icebergs in a dark ocean. He recalled the powerful, hallucination-inducing drugs the Captain had injected into him day after day. Ruppert's memories of his imprisonment had been disordered and murky, but with the missing stretches of time gradually filling in, his recollection grew more linear and logical. Of course the Captain had instructed him to kill Westerly. How could he have forgotten?

He also remembered how George Baldwin, the terror agent at GlobeNet, had put him under a couple of times to confirm his instructions. Baldwin didn't have to drug or hypnotize Ruppert, though—he just had to speak one code word programmed by the Captain, *Racca*, and Ruppert would drop right into a trance.

In his memories of Baldwin, a second person began to take shape, someone else who'd been in Baldwin's office. This man wore the black-on-black suit of a Terror man, and he was much older than Baldwin, even elderly, though his lean, rigidly straight figure indicated he'd not gone soft in old age. He'd said very little, mainly just watched Ruppert with blue eyes as pale as water.

The third night, Lucia invited him for a smoke outside. He declined the cigarette but went up with her anyway. He was itching to get outside the cave, spacious as it was, but mainly he felt relieved to see she was no longer so intent on murdering him. Then again, maybe she was going to kill him right now, and just didn't want to get blood on the floor. He let her lead the way and kept an eye on her as they climbed the steep slope up to the ground.

She sat on the trunk of his car beneath the overhang, looking out towards the night sky, and lit a Marlboro.

“Bad habit,” Ruppert said.

“I’m down to one a day. All you can afford these days, anyway.”

“You want to walk outside?”

She shook her head. “Sky drones patrol the desert. Thermal sensors. We’re okay under here, though.”

“How much longer are we staying?”

“Till Doc says.”

“And then?”

“We move on.”

“I’m feeling a little underinformed here.”

“It’s fine. It’ll be good for your mission.”

“You’re just like Baldwin.”

“What? Your Terror handler?”

“He said the same thing. They were keeping me in the dark because it was good for the mission. It would help keep me believable.”

She didn’t say anything, just looked at him over the burning tip of her cigarette. Flecks of starlight glimmered in her black eyes.

“You never told me how you got involved with all of this,” Ruppert said after an uncomfortable silence.

“Why do you want to know?”

“You know my story.” He shrugged. “Forget I asked.”

“My boyfriend,” she said. “He was a doctor, from Mexico. It was illegal for him to practice medicine here--we were in Texas then--because he learned from his father and grandfather, not from a school. But he came to help in the border camps, the refugees from the civil war in Mexico. Terror declared them terroristic. You remember?”

“That’s why they put up the Barrier.”

“I was nineteen, and he wasn’t much older. He taught me to help him, with the wounded and sick. And helped me learn English.

“They hit us with the drones first, at two in the morning, burning down every tent in the camp. Then Hartwell Services raided us to kill off the wounded. Terror men came after, and they took Fernando. He was on their list. I escaped. Later, on the news, they called it a Neocommunist training camp, Latino terrorists secretly financed by China. I never met any Neocommunists. I don’t think they exist.”

“Did you ever see him again?” Ruppert asked.

“No. And our son was born six months later.”

“What?”

“Little Nando. I kept him for almost five years...but they always catch up with you.”

“Who?”

“Terror. It was Child and Family Services, but I know it was Terror behind that. They found us in New Mexico. They knew who the father was! They say I cannot keep him, I am unmarried, I have ties to terrorism...and because his father was a known terrorist. Fernando was only a doctor. He helped victims of that stupid war.”

“They took your son?”

“So I start trying to find out what they did with him. Five years ago. It's impossible. They lock up the Social Services networks as tight as military systems. Lots of people trying to find their families.”

“That's terrible.”

“You don't have a child, do you?”

“No. My wife, Madeline, she wants to, but...”

“Yes. The charming one.”

“She doesn't always scream and throw furniture,” Ruppert said. “She has her good points.”

“Like what?”

“She's very...organized.”

Lucia snorted out a laugh, then covered her mouth. “I don't mean to laugh. I'm sure she is very organized.”

“I'm serious. She arranges my shirts from lightest to darkest.”

Lucia laughed again.

“She alphabetizes the soups.”

“You're joking.”

He shook his head.

“Does she have kind of...you know...” Lucia gestured towards her own head. “Sickness?”

“I don't think so. She takes a lot of pills.”

“Sounds like it.” Lucia jumped from the car and landed gently in the sand. “We should get back. Maybe we can organize the doctor's soups.”



It was another two days before Ruppert could remember his programming sessions with the Captain and, with Dr. Smith's help, eliminate the commands. Smith declared him a “free agent,” with his power of choice and self-direction restored.

“As much as I have enjoyed the company of both of you, I believe you're ready to move on,” Dr. Smith told them over a meal of vegetable stew thickened with dried grains. “Lucia, do you feel safer working with him now?”

“I never worried about my own safety.” She cast a long look at Ruppert. “I guess he's okay.”

“Thanks,” Ruppert said.

“Daniel,” Smith said, “I want you to understand something. Until this point in your life, you've served a dangerous master, but one that more or less protected you for your usefulness. You have no protection now. You have made yourself an enemy of the state. You must remain alert and guarded at all times.”

“Sounds like my old life,” Ruppert said.

“No,” Lucia said. “Your old life was a safe little walled suburb. You're not a pet anymore. I sprung you from the cage, but now you're out in the wild.”

“I think I'm liking it,” Ruppert said.

Lucia glanced at her watch. "Sunset. We have to get going." She and Ruppert began to gather up their dishes.

"Don't worry about it," Smith said. "Scrubbing them will distract from my abject boredom."

Lucia hugged the old man.

"You stay alert, too," Smith said, looking Lucia in the eyes. "This is on your shoulders now."

"I can handle it," she said.

"If I had any doubts about that, I would not have put you in charge. Promise me you'll return when you can."

"I promise," she said.

Dr. Smith shook Ruppert's hand, then gripped it tight and looked him directly in the eyes. Again Ruppert was reminded of the intensity of Pastor John's stare.

"The older man from your memories," Smith said. "The psycho in George Baldwin's office who observed you."

"Yeah?"

"I am almost certain his name is Dr. Reginald Crane—the 'doctor' refers to economics, not medicine. I believe he is the PSYCOM agent in charge of your case. It's his mess to clean up, after all. I sincerely hope that you will never find yourself in the same room with him again. But if that unfortunate event does come to pass, you should address him as 'Duckers.'"

"Why?"

Smith broke into an impish grin. "At prep, Reggie lived in Eton House. Behind Eton House was a small duck pond. One April morning, a 6th grade science class and two teachers--on a nature walk, you understand--discovered him on the bench by the duck pond, cutting class, official school trousers unzipped. He was in full John Hancock position, as one boy called it. They called him the, excuse me, Lucia, the 'Duck-Fucker,' which, by process of evolution, abbreviated to 'Duckers.' He hates it."

"Was he actually fucking a duck?" Lucia asked.

"No," Smith said. "However, they said, the ducks were watching. Thank you, Daniel, for helping us," Smith said. "Be careful out there."

Lucia drove them out of the cave, again without headlights. There was more moonlight tonight, enough that Ruppert could discern the shapes of the rock formations among which they passed at an alarming speed. If he remembered correctly, it was almost half an hour until they would reach a paved road.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"North. It's going to take most of the night. I might even let you drive some of it."

"My own car? Thanks."

"Tomorrow," she said, "you're going to meet Hollis Westerly. You really, really need to not kill him when you see him."

"I won't." Ruppert thought about it. "Keep me back from him anyway, just in case."

"Oh, I'm definitely doing that," she said. "Please, Daniel. Don't make me take a stab or a bullet for this prick. That's going to be very hard for me to do."

"I promise." Ruppert leaned back and watched the stars pass overhead.



Ruppert smelled moisture in the thinner, cleaner air as they climbed north, up into the mountains of northern California. Lucia navigated the twisting roads in the early morning dark, while searching through radio channels for an alternative to the Dominionist preachers and angry talk shows that dominated the airwaves under the Department of Faith and Values approval process. She found a 1950s-style doo-wop station, sighed, and let it play at low volume.

“I never think to bring music,” she said.

“Try the satellite.”

“I tore out your uplink, remember? You can tell by the way we’re not being chased by Hartwell Services and Terror.”

“Right. Do I get any clues where we’re going, or what we’ll be doing there?”

Lucia pulled the car off the road, onto a dirt patch marked as a scenic overlook. She parked and killed the engine.

“You didn’t have to stop.”

“Look ahead.” She pointed.

Ruppert looked for a long moment before he could see a pulsing blue aura at the edge of the trees and rock faces ahead.

“What’s that?”

“Roadblock,” she said. “We almost drove into it.”

“Why would they have a roadblock in the middle of the mountains in the middle of the night?” he asked.

“Either they’re sweeping for smugglers, or they’re looking for someone specific. Hopefully not us.”

“What gets smuggled through here?”

“Everything. Drugs, books, people.”

“You think they’re looking for us?”

“I don’t want to find out. I’ve got a solid ID with me, but we don’t have one for you yet. And they’ll run your car, and then Terror will know where we are.”

“Great.”

“We should have gotten rid of it already,” Lucia said. “I was planning to do that at our next stop.”

“Let’s go back, then,” Ruppert said. “There must be another way around.”

“There might be,” she said. “Maybe smaller roads. We could check a map, but...” She gestured to the cavity where the satellite uplink had been. “I just don’t know my way around here. I’d kill for a phone right now.”

“You don’t have one?”

“You think I’m on the grid? A phone is just a portable tracking and listening device. I’m not paying money to bug myself for them.”

“Mine’s back at my house.” Ruppert thought it over. “What about those emergency call boxes?”

“They just link to the state police,” Lucia said. “Who we’re sort of trying to avoid right now.”

“But they hook into the grid, don’t they?” he asked. “Can you break into them?”

“Wait,” Lucia said. She opened her battered duffle bag, next to Ruppert’s Italian leather suitcase on the back seat, and removed the highly mutated remote control, along with a palmtop computer. “That might work, actually.” She connected a data wire from the computer to the remote. “But if it doesn’t, we’ll be telling them where we are.”

“What were our other choices?”

“Wait here until the roadblock breaks up,” she said. “Which could be a couple of hours, and they might send patrols down this way. Or we can go back and try to find another road, and get ourselves totally lost.”

“Do you think you can handle tapping the call box?”

Lucia shrugged. “Decent chance, as long it’s configured like a normal data system.”

“Let’s do it.”

They put the car in neutral and pushed it as far as they could to the edge of the clearing, and a little beyond, so that it hugged against the dense trees. Then they locked it up and began the downhill hike back the way they’d come, walking in the woods but keeping watch on the road.

It took fifteen minutes to reach one of the yellow call boxes mounted into a telephone pole by the side of the road. They moved towards it, then scrambled back into the undergrowth when a hulking pick-up truck barreled around a sharp corner.

“Hope he slows down before he hits the roadblock,” Ruppert said.

“I hope he crashes right into a Hartwell supervisor,” Lucia said. “That’ll distract them.”

They slipped back to the roadside, and Lucia opened the call box. Inside was a very old-fashioned telephone, the kind that sat in a cradle and was connected by a wire to the main console. The console itself had only one button.

“It doesn’t even have a screen,” Ruppert said.

“It’s ancient,” Lucia said. “Probably a copper line, too. Let’s see what we can do.”

Lucia opened the small toolkit she’d used to pry the uplink out of Ruppert’s car. She lifted the receiver very slightly, then took Ruppert’s hand and positioned his fingers to keep the latch depressed.

“Hold it down,” she said. “It may signal as soon as you lift the phone.”

Ruppert watched as she checked over the receiver unit, shook her head, then worked the flat tip of a screwdriver into the seam between the mouthpiece and the rest of the handset. She tried to pry it loose, grunted, then inserted it into another spot, and then another.

“This is taking too long.” Ruppert glanced in the direction of the roadblock.

“I can’t help it.” She continued working at it until, finally, the mouthpiece popped loose, trailing long strands of a clear, gummy glue after it. She lifted the microphone and wires from inside. “This is like something built by a caveman.”

“Can you do anything with it?”

“I’ve got a couple of programs that might work. This won’t help.” She tucked the modified remote control into the pocket of her jeans. Her fingers worked quickly to

patch the phone into her palmtop computer, but to Ruppert it felt like centuries were passing. He could imagine them finding his car up the road, and uniformed cops, possibly even bearing the Hartwell Civil Defense Services logo on their shoulders, poking around the Bluehawk, calling it in to their commanders.

“That’s the best I can do.” Lucia inserted an audio plug into her ear, then tapped at her palmtop. She frowned, tapped again. Frowned, tapped again. Ruppert felt sweat all over his body. His eyes twitched back and forth between the phone and the road.

“Okay,” she said. “Let it go.”

Ruppert released the latch. Lucia tapped at her computer again. Ruppert waited forever for her to speak.

“This is the courier,” she said. “I have the package, but—no, I’m calling from an emergency box. I know, so keep it quick. We’ve got a roadblock across our path—no, up ahead—no, they haven’t spotted us as far as I know, but—look, I just need an alternate route.” Lucia quickly described where they were, then paused for a painfully long time, listening. “But there must be something. I’d rather backtrack a hundred miles rather than—well, tell me quick, then.” There was another long, tense pause, during which Lucia stared at Ruppert with wide eyes.

“What’s going on?” he whispered, and she gave him an exaggerated shrug.

“Oh,” she said. “Is that—no, it’ll work, it just seems a little—okay, how long will that take?”

Ruppert saw very bright headlights around the next bend, approaching from the direction of the roadblock. Blue lights flashed through the trees.

“Lucia—” he said, but she waved him off.

The headlights brightened. It sounded like multiple cars approaching, and the lead one was turning the corner ahead. They were about to be spotted.

Ruppert grabbed Lucia around the waist and pulled her into the shadows. They stumbled for several feet, then lost their footing and rolled down a steep hill littered with sharp rocks, crashing through brambles along the way, finally coming to rest against the broad trunk of an old redwood.

“What the hell, Daniel?” she snapped, trying to disentangle her arms and legs from him. He clapped a hand over her mouth and pointed.

Up the hill, blue lights pulsed from the area where they’d been standing, sweeping out like sheet lightning through the trees and brush above them. He heard crackling voices from multiple radio channels.

“Right here,” a man’s voice said. “Yeah, someone’s been monkeying around back here. We must have just missed them. Their console’s still attached.” The man paused. “No, sir, we haven’t found a vehicle yet. I’ll have some men—yes, sir. We’re going to need more men for a foot search. I’ll radio—thank you, sir.” There was a brief pause, then the unseen police officer began belting orders.

Search beams flared, filling long swaths of the woods with daylight. Ruppert and Lucia crept around behind the redwood, flat on their stomachs, just as one of the beams flashed onto the tree’s wide trunk. There was blinding light on either side of them, but they were hidden for the moment.

“We should have taken my computer,” she whispered. “If they can trace where I called, then the whole deal is blown. Wow. That was stupid.”

“We should get moving,” Ruppert whispered. Already he could hear boots crunching through leaves as they descended the slope towards them.

They crawled along the ground, moving straight downhill from the redwood, the only direction along which they had any hoping of concealing themselves. Narrow shafts of light streaked across the woods ahead of them, either flashlights or gun lights.

Ruppert’s hand reached ahead into empty space, and he toppled forward. Lucia grabbed onto him, which slowed his fall but did not break it. They went over the edge of what he first thought was a ditch, until they slid down a muddy bank and splashed into frigid, running water, deep enough that Ruppert’s shoes only brushed against the pebbled bottom. They’d fallen into a creek.

Ruppert grabbed onto exposed tree roots to keep himself from drifting away, though he wondered if drifting might not be the best option. Lucia clung to the bank a few yards downstream, and she was looking at him with wide eyes, pressing one finger to her lips.

“Watch your step there,” a man’s voice spoke directly above them. Ruppert heard several branches snapping, and a clump of loose earth tumbled from overhead, between Ruppert and Lucia, and into the creek.

The narrow beams played along the surface of the water, dangerously close to them. The police were about ten feet over the heads, and only the darkness of the waning night and the shadows of the forest protected them.

“Kill the lights,” a voice said. Then, several seconds later, “I’m not reading anything on thermal.”

Ruppert believed it; he and Lucia were neck deep in what felt like the runoff from a glacier.

“We’re gonna need more feet down here,” another voice said. “Get some guys downstream, too. They might be swimming.”

Then a sound like a clap of thunder boomed in the distance, echoing down all the ridges and canyons of the mountains around them.

“The hell was that?” one of the cops asked. They muttered among themselves.

The crackling crosstalk of the police radios ended, replaced by a single commanding female voice. “All units, all units, we have a possible T1 on Diablo Mountain,” she said. “Repeat, Diablo Mountain, possible T1. All units respond.”

One of the cops began to speak: “Sarge, we think we might have these hackers on foot.”

“Forget it,” a voice crackled back. “Emergency boxes are lighting up all over the valley. It’s a distraction.”

“Ten-four.”

The boots and the beams of light retreated up the hill, and then they were gone.

Lucia hauled herself from the cold water and climbed up on the creek bank.

“Come on,” she said. “Let’s get your car.”

“What happened?” Ruppert began to climb the muddy slope.

“They set off a bomb somewhere to break up the roadblock,” she said. “Terrorism takes priority.”

“That was nice of them.” They hurried up along the steep hillside.

“It’s a lot of trouble,” Lucia said. “And it could draw federal attention. Everyone’s going to hate me. I just hope no one gets caught.”

They climbed back up to the emergency phone box, but Lucia's computer had been severed and confiscated. They hiked back up along the road, keeping to the trees so they could jump out of the way at a moment's notice. They found the car intact and undisturbed. The police probably hadn't had time to find it, and it was not very visible from the road. Ruppert looked ahead, where the edge of flashing blue light had disappeared.

"Let's go," Lucia said. "We're as safe as we'll ever be."

They drove for thirty minutes among winding roads, eventually turning off on an unmarked, unlined street that became a dirt track. Lucia stopped in front of an overgrown brick gate thick with vines. She stepped out of the car and approached the gate on foot, where she pressed a button set into an ornate frame.

"We're here," she said. "If anybody's listening."

After several seconds, the gates creaked open, folded inward and squealing with the sound of badly rusted machinery.

They drove through overgrown fields of wild vines and thorny brambles. At one intersection of dirt tracks, a young dreadlocked black man stood with his hand raised. Lucia stopped, and he climbed into the back seat.

"Turn left," he said. "We're stashing the car in the old fermentation building."

At his directions, Lucia drove them into a long brick building with boarded windows. They parked among machinery draped in tarps, then got out, swept the tarp from one of the machines, and covered up Ruppert's car.

"Is everything all right?" Lucia asked.

"It's all right," the man said. "We just had to distract the police force of Sonoma County and get it away with it. Did I mention we had no time to prepare?"

"I'm sorry," Lucia said.

"Don't ever, ever do that again. Now we have to deal with Hartwell sniffing around. Through here." The young man approached one of four giant cylinders against a long wall. He took hold of the circular pressure gauge, which was as wide as the man himself, and wrenched it around like a large dial. A section of the metal cylinder screeched as it opened outward, revealing brick stairs that spiraled away underground. He led them down, closing the hatch after them.

"What is this place?" Ruppert asked as they stepped into an underground room made of brick and stone. Racks of dusty glass containers lined the walls, under rows of grow lamps with empty sockets.

"Somebody used to have another operation going on down here, back in the 1970s, 1980s," the young man said. "Plants more profitable than grapes. You should wait here." He left through a faux-medieval door made of thick wooden slats and brass bindings.

"Friendly people," Ruppert said.

"They're cleaning up *our* mess," Lucia said.

"You don't think they hurt anybody?"

"I'm sure they just detonated an old building or something. Already wired in advance. They do have contingency plans."

"An old wooden water tower, actually." A familiar face entered along with the young black man. It was the "Packers fan" Ruppert had met at Nixon Stadium. "No water was injured, I promise."

"Archer, I'm glad you made it," Lucia said.

"Your name's Archer?" Ruppert said. "I thought it was Benny."

"Benny's what I go by when I'm out among the sheeple," Archer said. "And Archer's what I'm going by this year. And this is Turin." Archer clapped the dreadlocked man's shoulder. "Because he's a miracle worker. Every call box for eighty miles--pow!"

Turin nodded at Adam. To Archer, he said, "Big lady thinks we should go ahead now, since he's here. They'll keep watch for the Harty boys."

"Great," Archer said. "Daniel, background. We've got him thinking that we're doing it for him—like a final request before the cancer eats him up. He thinks you're still with GlobeNet, and this is going to go large onscreen. The story he believes beyond that, too complicated, you don't need to know. Can you play along with that?"

"Not a problem," Ruppert said.

"Should I come?" Lucia asked.

"You'd better," Turin said. "You go upstairs, she might rip out your throat for the storm you just stirred up. And we don't need her distracted right now. Anyway, the man hasn't seen you before, so we're calling you the GlobeNet camera operator."

"I don't have any equipment."

Archer handed her a tall silver cylinder with a 360-degree lens band.

"And you," Turin said to Ruppert. "You need to look like you're on the job. I'll find you a suit upstairs, but maybe..." He pantomimed a few swipes at his own face.

Ruppert touched the heavy stubble on his chin, then nodded.

"Bathroom's down the hall, fourth door on your left," Turin said.

A few minutes later, having shaved his face and splashed some water in his hair, dressed in a dark brown wool suit that might have been fashionable in the 1920s, Ruppert met back with the others. Lucia had gathered her hair back into a ponytail and changed into a long-sleeved blouse and ankle-length skirt, the way a modern Dominionist woman dressed in the workplace, but they looked ridiculous on her.

"Okay, Daniel." Lucia powered up the holographic recorder. "Let's go and make your life worthwhile."

Turin led them through a dark warren of rooms lit by a few spare bulbs, down another set of stairs, then unlocked a sheet-metal door. "Don't let him rattle you," he said to Ruppert. "And try not to mind the stink. He won't sponge himself off, so we just have to hose him down every couple of days."

The door swung open, and Ruppert stepped into a cinderblock room dominated by a large iron cage, like a monkey house at an old city zoo. A man reclined on a heap of filthy cushions, his leg attached to one of the cage bars by a long chain. His hair was longer, grayer, and more scraggly, and he smelled like a rhinoceros, but Ruppert recognized the swastika tattoos on his flabby arms and bare torso. The man leaned forward and smiled at him through teeth clotted with dried, black blood.

This was Hollis Westerly.

TWENTY-ONE

The underground room was floored with a concrete slab, but a few worn rugs and swatches of carpet softened the interior of Westerly's cage. Scattered inside the cage were a small chemical toilet, a few bottles of water, a cot, and a few highly illegal magazines of the kind that featured people performing sex acts. Westerly rose from the pile of cushions at the middle of the cage and approached Ruppert, his chain skittering along the floor behind him.

His smile was crooked, missing teeth.

"I know you," he said. "I seen your show before."

"Always nice to meet a fan," Ruppert said.

"Didn't say I was a fan or not." Westerly looked at Turin. "Now give me one."

"That'll be three today, Hollis," Turin said.

"You said I could have one when he got here."

Turin shrugged, then produced a crumpled pack of Chesterfield cigarettes. He passed one of them to Westerly through the bars and lit it for him.

Westerly took a deep pull, then hacked loudly. It sounded like gravel being ground to dust inside his chest. He looked back at Westerly with watering eyes.

"They got a colored boy deciding when I smoke, when I eat, when my shitter gets emptied," Westerly said. "How do you like that?"

"It must be difficult for you," Ruppert said. The muscles in his arms and fingers twitched as if they had a mind of their own. He wondered if some part of him was still programmed to murder Westerly, despite Smith's efforts.

"Difficult, hell," Westerly said, then coughed again. Blood splattered out from his lips. His eyes drifted to Lucia, who was setting up the cylindrical silver holorecorder on a tripod a few feet outside the cage wall. He took a long, slow look up and down her body. "Whose 'at?"

"Oh," Ruppert said. "This is, uh, Karen. Karen Andrews...son...Anderson. My camera tech."

Westerly continued to leer at her. “She don’t look like no Karen Andrewston to me. She looks more like a Maria Gonzales. That your name, Maria Gonzales?”

Lucia ignored him and spoke to Archer, staying in character: “Can we get any more light in here?”

“Tell that Maria to come over here,” Westerly said. “Tell her come right up here and onto her knees.”

“She’s busy right now,” Ruppert said. “Mr. Westerly—is that correct? Mr. Hollis Westerly?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m Daniel Ruppert with GlobeNet-Los Angeles evening news. We understand you have a very important story to share with us tonight...this morning.”

“Ragnarok.” Westerly smiled his bloody grin again.

“Excuse me?”

“Ragnarok. The end of time. When the wolves eat up the sun and the moon,” Westerly said. “We recording yet?”

“Are we ready?” Ruppert asked Lucia.

“Best we can do in this light,” Lucia said, giving Ruppert half a smile.

Ruppert sat in a folding lawn chair Archer had brought in for him. Westerly hunkered right at the cage wall, sucking down the last bit of the cigarette before grinding it to pieces on the concrete floor.

“What all did they tell you?” Westerly asked.

“Very little,” Ruppert answered, honestly. To be even more honest, he said, “Everybody thought it would be better if I walked into this without much information.”

“That’s all right,” Westerly said. “To tell you the real story of Ragnarok, I got to tell you about Brother Zeb.”

“Who is Brother--”

“You just shut up and listen, cause I want my goddamned blue pill. I got picked up in Detroit back, oh, twenty years ago now, winter of 2014, 2015. Me and a buddy of mine knocked over this Korean liquor store. It was supposed to be quick, you know, grab up the cash and a few bottles and get out. Then the little yeller creep starts gabbing at us, all that crazy kinda talk they have, so I hit him once or twice with the butt of my shotgun just to quiet him down some. They said I broke his jaw in five places, but I didn’t believe ‘em, cause his jaw was so small it didn’t look like he’d have five places to break.

“Anyhow, just cause of this little Korean squirt, they gave me forty years up at Ionia. Don’t know what happened to my buddy. But anyway, so I got up to Ionia about the middle of 2015, almost summertime, and I got up with some of my brothers there.”

“Brothers?” Ruppert asked.

“You know, the white freedom movement. I was in the Social Nationalists down around Mississippi, but this group up in Michigan called themselves the Aryan Whitehammers. Anyhow, they followed after this big bastard named Trace McCully. So I settled in up there.

“Well, I’d been there two, three months when Brother Zeb first checked in. Nobody knowed at first what they got him for, but it turns out, the story went, he gunned down about six gang-bangers right out in open daylight. They say he only had five bullets in his gun when he did it, which is just the kind of thing you could believe about Brother Zeb.

“What I mean is, Brother Zeb weren’t one of your regular felons. He was real quiet, almost so you couldn’t hear him when he walked, if he didn’t want you to. He had like a puddle of quiet all around him. I remember just a couple days after he first come to the prison, one of these big homeboys decides Brother Zeb needs to be taken down a little, not that Zeb was a big mouther, not one bit, but you got this feeling he could turn water into ice if he pissed in it.

“So this big colored man, I mean four hundred or more pounds sort of big, he moves on Zeb on the way from the cafeteria. And Brother Zeb, who’s about half his size, don’t even look over to see who’s after him. He just reaches out one hand and takes that boy’s arm and rolls it up like a newspaper. I swear, right up to the shoulder. I never seen nothing like it. And Brother Zeb, he just kept on walking, didn’t even look back to see what he’d done.

“Brother Zeb, we knew he was one of us, had the marks, like this Viking swastika right over his heart. And most of us never met anyone like him. I thought I knew some things myself, back then, but Brother Zeb, he’d quote chapter and verse from big people like Darwin and what’s his name, German fella, Nietcheese, and like that, and he’d go on explaining how history all fits together and how the white race is supposed to rule the world. I mean, he was deep, he musta read a hundred books or more.

“Well, some of us got to hanging around Brother Zeb, listening to all his ideas, and that made old Trace McCully more than a little jealous, because here’s all these people start listening to this other guy, who everybody knows is smarter than Trace. Question is, is he tougher than Trace? Trace was all gut and muscle.

“Finally Trace tells us we can’t talk to Brother Zeb no more, cause he’s trying to mess with our heads and all, but everybody knew Trace was jealous about maybe he wasn’t alpha wolf no more. And the day after that, the guards find Trace tied upside down on the door of his own cell, all cut open and bled out, kind of like Jesus only with his feet in the air. And nobody could prove Zeb did it, not even them guards, and it told us a couple things about Brother Zeb. First off, he was tougher than Trace, by a long sight. Second off, he was sneakier than oiled shit to pull a trick like that without getting caught. And third, the way he done Trace, it was almost respectable, not like shiving a man in the back at lunch or what have you. It was an honor killing, if you understand.”

“Sure,” Ruppert said. At the moment, he felt particularly grateful to have metal bars between himself and Westerly.

“After that, we spent lots of time with Brother Zeb, listening to him preach about the white man’s natural rights over all them mongrel races. He talked about how the liberals and Jews control the media, and they used it to confuse us about our real place in history, and to hide all the animal ways of the lower races. He was a good talker, Brother Zeb. That’s why we got to calling him Brother, anyhow, cause he was like a real holy man. A white prophet.

“The whole time, it was like being in prison didn’t matter none to Brother Zeb. He could get what you needed. He talked against drugs, said we ought to keep ourselves pure for the upcoming race war, but still, if you needed a little something, he could always get it for you. High-grade stuff every time.

“Brother Zeb was always going and having long talks with his lawyers. He was only there about five, six months before he got out. I guaran-damn-tee ya these weren’t

no public defenders, cause those fuckers never want to talk to you about nothing but signing some deal with the prosecutor.

“Then we started to see how there was more to Brother Zeb than he let on. In the three months after he left, those of who was closest with him, about twelve of us, we each got out of prison one way or another. Some folks got paroles they wasn’t expecting, and things like that.”

“How did you get out?” Ruppert asked.

“That was the strangest thing. Here I am, first year in a forty-year stay, and Brother Zeb calls me on the phone—I wasn’t even allowed to take phone calls at the time, cause the guards was mad at me over some damn thing or other—but somehow they decide to let me take this phone call from Zeb. And he says he’s bought this big farm out there in Idaho, and he’s looking to build up something called the Church of the White Creator, about protecting the heritage of the white race, and would I be interested in helping him out there?”

“Well, Zeb, I said, I sure would, but I ain’t getting out until I’m an old man. And then he said, it was like scary how calm and quiet he said, ‘Anything can be arranged.’ But, he says, I got to promise to stick with him no matter what, which by then I woulda done anyhow, I reckon.

“And I don’t know, two, three days later these funny lawyer fellas show up wanting to talk to me. Three of ‘em. They said they was from the Liberty and Sanctuary Foundation, and what they did was go around the country looking at arrests and trials and seeing how to get folks out of prison cause of the government’s mistakes. They got together and went over it with a judge, and I never understood a damned thing they was talking about, and to tell the truth I weren’t even there for most of the time they talked to the judge. But the upshot was I got out of prison on what they said was a ‘semi-permanent trial basis,’ which wasn’t like parole cause I only had to check in with these lawyers instead of a regular P.O. It meant I could always go back to prison, any time, but I might never. I never heard of nothing like it before or since. Tell you the truth, I never heard of the Liberty and Sanctuary Foundation before or since, neither.

“So them lawyers give me an envelope with three hundred dollars cash and a bus ticket out to Eden, Idaho. By then I was so hell-bent to put the back of my ass to the state of Michigan that it didn’t occur to me just how it was them lawyers knew where I was going.

“Turned out Brother Zeb’s place was a house and some big barns on a lot of land, away from everybody. All walled in, too, big wooden walls all around the place, like a damned Civil War fort.

“Most of the others from prison was already there by the time I showed up. They throwed me a big welcome party, lots of beer, roasted a pig, even had a few stripping girls Zeb brung in from the city. I never had a time like that in my whole life.”

“What were they doing up in Idaho?” Ruppert asked.

“Training, mostly. Brother Zeb said we had to get ready for the race war, which was gonna be the final conflict for white dominion. We learned to use some different machine guns, sleek things out of Asia, and we learned about explosives. There wasn’t nothing Brother Zeb didn’t know about. He taught us things like how to avoid the police out on the road, and get through all kinds of security, surveillance-type set-ups. How to

move around in big cities without getting caught, cause he said the race war would be urban war.

“We trained like soldiers for Brother Zeb. And he made each of us into what he called a Knight of the White Creator, a race warrior. He made a big deal out of that. You’d go out into this little barn back behind the main house. You have to cut open a hog’s throat, and he’d paint these bloody swastikas all over you, you’re naked with all them other guys watching you. And you had to say all these big things about loyalty and death, and things like that, but real fancy. But we was all believing in him then, and I guess it meant something to all of us, being part of a thing like that.”

“Did you ever check in with your lawyers?” Ruppert asked.

“Naw, Brother Zeb said he’d take care of all that. Said them lawyers was friends of his. You was grateful to him for getting you out, but sooner or later you also figured out it meant he could send you back to prison if you got him sore at you. Didn’t none of us worry about that once he made us into Knights, though.”

“Where did the money come from in all of this?” Ruppert asked. “How was he paying for it?”

“Some of us did talk about that, a little,” Westerly said. “A few said he musta got it from drugs, but I never thought that. He never flashed anything around. I never saw a dollar in his hand the whole time. Things just showed up. There was always plenty to eat, plenty to drink, plenty of ammo.” Westerly gave another blood-clotted grin. “Plenty of women, too. He’d bring in a whole group of ‘em every once in a while. Sometimes it was just a few and we had to share, but that was all right.”

“Where do you think he got the money?”

“At the time I figured he was born rich. He talked so fancy and all, and just had that easy way. Of course, now I’d say it was probably your tax-payin’ dollars at work.”

“Why do you say that?” Ruppert asked.

“Well, I was gettin’ to that point, if you’d let me talk for one minute.”

“I apologize,” Ruppert said. He glanced over at Lucia, who slumped in a folding lawn chair next to the holorecorder, staring at Westerly with bulging eyes, utterly indifferent to her alleged camera operation duties. Her hands gripped the arms of her chair, as if she were feeling ill. It might just have been the hoggish stink in the room.

“It was about the summer of 2016 things started to change around Brother Zeb’s place. It started with the visitors. These fellas in good black suits come by any hour of the night and hold these long secret meetings with Brother Zeb. We kept asking him what it was all about, and one of our study nights, instead of looking at *Mein Kampf* or whatnot, he up and told us.

“Brother Zeb, he said we got more support than we ever knew about. He said there was powerful men from way high up who wanted to help us along, but thing was, they had to be secret about it cause of all the Jews and coloreds and liberal media and so on. He told us about it was gonna take a great big national emergency to really get the whole thing rolling. He called it Ragnarok, the end of history. He said after Ragnarok, it would be a, what did he call it? ‘A new order for the ages.’ He said Ragnarok was our sacred duty.

“Then it all got real strange. The compound went into lockdown, gates sealed up, no one in or out without Zeb’s permission. No more stripping girls from the city, neither, I’ll tell you.

“And I don’t know how to tell the next piece except to just say it right out. One morning in June, musta been, these two big Move-It trucks pull up to the gate. A buddy of mine used to call those ‘Move-It-Your-Damn-Self’ trucks. Anyway, Zeb let ‘em in, and they parked inside the barn out behind the main house. That’s when Brother Zeb said Ragnarok was comin’.”

Westerly broke down into a chain of coughs that wracked his whole body. He wiped the blood from his mouth, looked at it, smeared it across the grizzled gray hairs of his chest.

“Hurts to talk anymore,” Westerly said. He looked to Turin. “Gimme one of them pain pills. The good blue ones.”

Turin removed a brown pill bottle from his jacket. He popped the lid, looked inside, shook it around. “I’ll give you a white one for now.”

“Aw, come on, there, homeboy.”

“You can have a blue one when you’re done.”

“But I need a blue one now,” Westerly whined. “Come on.”

Turin tipped the bottle, and a white capsule rolled out into his palm.

“Just the white one,” Turin said. “When you’re done, you can have two blue pills, if you want.”

Westerly grunted, accepted the white pill, and chased it down with water from one of the bottles scattered around his cage.

“Are we getting all this?” Ruppert asked Lucia

She checked the recorder. A three-dimensional image appeared to one side of it, a miniature Ruppert listening to a miniature Westerly. “Looks fine.”

“Mr. Westerly, can you continue?” Ruppert asked.

“Shit. Guess I can.” Westerly drank more of the water.

“What was in the moving vans?”

“Well, I’ll tell you,” Westerly said. “The men driving them turned out to be soldiers.”

“The Army?”

“Hell, no. They was in all black uniforms, and that’s no part of the military I know about. But like that, all the same.”

“Like Terror men?” Ruppert asked, thinking of the Captain.

“Well, yeah, like them, only there weren’t no Department of Terror back then, least as I know of. What I’m saying is they was soldiers or agents or ninjas or some damn thing, you could see that plain. Now, Brother Zeb, he picks out four of us, two teams of two, and he called us the ‘primary’ and the ‘back-up.’ I was on the back-up team.

“These agents, or whatever they was, they took the four of us in the back of one truck and showed us this thing mounted up in there, a big old metal tube inside kind of a cage setup. And they said, this here’s a nuclear bomb, and we’re gonna show you how to set it off. And that’s what they did.”

“You’re claiming,” Ruppert said. “That some kind of government agents, similar to Terror men, gave you, a white supremacist compound in Idaho, a nuclear weapon?”

“Damn-shit yes they did,” Westerly said. “And it was real easy to blow up, way they had it set. You had to push three buttons on this remote control. Push ‘em real fast in the right order, and that’s all there was. Any dumbass coulda did it.”

“What did they want you to do with it?” Ruppert asked.

“I’m gonna tell ya, if you just gimme two seconds to get a word in. After them soldiers left, Brother Zeb set us down on the floor of his office, up in the main house, with some maps out in front of us, and he showed us how one of us teams was gonna take one of them moving trucks and drive her all the way to Columbus, Ohio—”

“Wait, wait.” Ruppert was up and pacing now. “You’re saying you did Columbus? *Columbus*?” The second time he said “Columbus,” Ruppert was no longer talking about the city itself, but everything the name of the city had come to mean in the years since.

Ruppert remembered what Dr. Smith had said: *You’re old enough to have noticed how these institutions arose together—the Department of Terror, the Department of Faith, the Dominionists, the Freedom Brigades.* Ruppert had noticed. It had all been a response to Columbus, the nuclear destruction of an American city by never-quite-identified foreign terrorists.

He rubbed at his head. He could feel a sledgehammer of a headache coming.

“No, that ain’t what I’m trying to tell ya, stop actin’ stupid,” Westerly said. “What I’m saying is, he made us memorize this one particular drive to Columbus. He even told where we was supposed to stay along the way, a little motel in Nebraska, run by what he called ‘friendlies.’ He told us we’d take turns driving, three hours at a time.

“Then we spent some more hours looking at a map of downtown Columbus, and he showed us right where to park the van, at the City Center Mall. Said if we go by his schedule, it should be about lunchtime when we got there. We was just supposed to lock it up and leave it. He said some friends of his would pick us up right there, and they’d take care of getting us back home to Idaho.”

The feeling rushed out of Ruppert’s legs, and he had to sit down to stop their shaking and wobbling. It was obvious. PSYCOM had all its plans ready to roll out. The Articles for the Continuation of Democracy, six thousand pages long, was passed the day after Columbus, but it must have taken months to write. They didn’t position all their pieces, then just sit around hoping for an opportunity to come along.

“Why did you agree to do it?” Ruppert asked. “What about all those people—a million people?”

“I weren’t thinking about them, I guess,” Westerly said. “It was holy war. It was everything Brother Zeb had been preaching about. I was just doing my part for the country.”

“You were proud of it.”

“Yeah. But I didn’t get to do it, anyhow. The first team got going on, I can tell you the date exactly, July the third of 2016. We was all sitting at the house just waiting for them to check in, cause Zeb give ‘em a cell phone and tell ‘em to call every three hours.

“On the Fourth, Zeb said he had to run off and meet with some people, and he’d be back in the afternoon. We didn’t think so much of it, cause the bomb weren’t supposed to go off ‘til midnight. We was mainly upset he took the phone with him, but nobody would fuss about it to Brother Zeb.

“I am here and breathin’ today because of the dumbest turtle-shit piece of luck. We decided we needed a couple cases of beer for Ragnarok, and we’d start tearing it up soon as the fireworks went off in Ohio. Now, Brother Zeb, he gave us strict orders that day, nobody in or out at all, everybody stay in the main house, all locked down. But we

couldn't get hold of Zeb, and we figured maybe he didn't know we was out of beer, so I took one of the farm trucks into town.

"I still remember the look on the kid's face at the convenience store. Skinny runt, lot of zits, mouth just dangling open. I brung all that beer up to the counter and he didn't say nothing. He was looking at a portable television, one of them big heavy kinds they used to have, and right there on the screen it showed that mushroom cloud sitting on top of Ohio."

"I was in Social Studies class when it happened," Ruppert said. "Tenth grade. My teacher threw up right on the chalkboard."

"Well, I was buying beer in Eden, Idaho, and my first thought was 'Them dumb bastards went and blowed their asses off.' Cause it was too early, just about lunchtime, and they shoulda just been getting to Columbus. They had to be right near that van when it went up, or maybe still inside it.

"I went back to the truck, but I didn't even get her started when I saw this big convoy, I mean eight, ten of them big black sport-tilities everybody drove when gas was cheap, and they just tore through town right toward Brother Zeb's place. The windows was all black so you couldn't see nothing inside, even the windshields, and I mean tinted windshields weren't legal even back in those days. And if I hadn't noticed that, my dumb ass would have gone right back to the farm to tell the boys about the bomb.

"But I could see what was happening. We was set up. They done blowed the van with J.T. and Billy still inside, and then they was sending these others to kill off the rest of us. And that's why old Brother Zeb hightailed it out that morning, to make sure he didn't get shot up along with us. He fucked us and throwed us out, just like a used-up rubber."

"This is crazy," Ruppert said, pacing again. "What did you do?"

"Same as you or anyone would have done. I put the beer in the truck and I drove off the other way. They been huntin' me ever since." Westerly heaved a more loud, violent coughs. "I done run from Terror all these years, and the damn cigarettes caught up with me anyhow."

"Did you ever see any of the others again?" Ruppert asked. "From the compound?"

"Oh, hell no. I doubt none of 'em survived that Independence Day. We wasn't expecting nothing to happen to us, and especially nothing like that big hit squad they sent out in all them sport-tilities. I never seen Brother Zeb again, neither. If I did, I doubt I'd be breathin' right now."

Ruppert struggled to think of another question, but he was too shocked to concentrate. He steadied himself by thinking of all the viewers who would eventually see the video, unknown millions around the world. What would they want to know?

"How did you manage to evade Terror so long?" he finally asked.

"Just keep to the poor places, mainly," Westerly said. "Places they don't have time to watch too carefully, cause there ain't nothing worth watching. Keep outta the big cities, that's the most important thing."

"What do you think about all this, now that you know what it was really about? And after Zeb's betrayal?"

"I'm glad we did it," Westerly said. "I think it was a good thing, in all. An important thing." Westerly sat back, sighed, and coughed up a fresh spatter of foamy blood, which dribbled down his chin. "It was real important to everybody, wasn't it?"

TWENTY-TWO

After the interview, Turin carried the holorecorder into another room to burn copies onto discs and cartridges, to begin the distribution process. A mass of copies would be made for the safest the method of distribution, hand-to-hand, and eventually the interview would be uploaded to websites and newsnets throughout the world.

Archer led Ruppert and Lucia upstairs to the main house, where they emerged from behind the false wall of a closet in a dusty first-floor bedroom. They sat at a plastic-coated redwood table while Archer busied himself frying eggs and toasting bread. Ruppert was exhausted.

"I can't believe any of that," Ruppert said to Lucia. "Do you think it's true?"

"We know it is," Lucia said. "We spent the last two years searching for him."

"How were you able to find him when Terror couldn't?"

"Terror is best at watching the obedient," Lucia said. "We're better at finding people running for their lives, since we usually try to help them out."

"This non-organization is sounding more and more organized," Ruppert said.

"People make their own order." A wheelchair-bound woman with long, graying hair rolled into the room. The first thing Ruppert noticed was the stunning beauty of her face, and the second thing he noticed was that she looked strangely familiar.

"Order must be made and abandoned as we go," she continued. "Don't burn my stove down, Archer."

"I don't believe you can burn a stove, Mrs. Kendrick," Archer replied. Ruppert tried to remember: Kendrick, Kendrick...

"If anybody could..." She shook her head, then focused on Ruppert. "This is our reporter?"

"Yeah," Lucia said. "Daniel, this is Maya Kendrick. This is her vineyard."

"Not much of a vineyard any more," Maya said.

"Maya Kendrick!" Ruppert said, then felt himself blush. He'd actually fantasized about this woman when he was a teenager. "You're the movie star, aren't you?"

"I was an actor, when the world was different," she said.

"I thought they took you in the purges," Ruppert said.

"They did," she said. "I took a bullet in the back from the Freedom Brigades. And the bastards killed my husband."

"Jorge Mendez, right?" Ruppert asked. "The director?"

"He saw the hammer coming down," Maya said. "I used to laugh and say he was paranoid. Then they started posting Terror agents at all the studios, and then the purges... By the time they finished, there was nothing left but cowards and fools." She raised an eyebrow. "Present company excepted, naturally."

"No, I've been a coward and a fool," Ruppert said. "I'm trying to change that."

"Once this interview circulates, they'll come after you," Maya said.

"They've been after me already," Ruppert said.

"Not like this. You're showing the world the rabbit hidden in their hat."

"What do you think people will do when they find out?" Ruppert asked.

Maya smiled. "Rise up, revolt, destroy the system. Start anew, with better ideas this time. That's what you're hoping I'll say, isn't it?"

"How else could they respond?"

"Denial," Maya said.

"What is there to deny?" Lucia asked. "It's the truth."

"Never doubt the human capacity for self-delusion," Maya said. "Terror doesn't. That's how they rule."

"Then what's the point?" Ruppert asked.

"Not everyone will refuse to believe," Maya said. "The truth will be available for those who risk looking for it. It will take time. It may not even happen in our lifetime. But now there's a record of what Columbus really was, and who was behind it. And in the end, I don't think an armed revolt will be possible. Or necessary."

"But there's no other way to stop them," Lucia said.

"Eggs, overeasy," Archer set plates in front of Ruppert and Lucia. "Toast, gently blackened."

Lucia wolfed her food. Ruppert poked his fork at the greasy, pepper-sprinkled whites of the eggs, not convinced he had an appetite.

"Did you ever learn about the Soviet Union? How it collapsed?" Maya asked.

Ruppert nodded. "It was because of a weapons race."

"Not precisely," Maya said. "Some people say it collapsed because it lost a war, or because of poverty, but I think they're wrong. I think it really fell apart once the Russian people stopped believing what they read in the newspapers."

"And you think people will react that way when they see the interview?" Ruppert asked. "They'll stop believing?"

"In the long run, truth is powerful because it doesn't change. Lies fade, and political lies are the weakest kind, because they so rarely make any sense in the first place. Westerly's confession takes Columbus away from them. It removes the keystone from their false reality. It will change minds."

"But not enough minds," Ruppert said.

"Possibly not," Maya agreed.

"Clear out!" Turin burst into the room wearing only a shirt and his briefs. He was fumbling his way into a dark suit. "Cops! Front door!"

The room erupted around Ruppert, chairs overturning as Lucia and Turin scrambled to their feet. Maya rolled backwards into the main hall of her house, looking towards her front door.

"How many?" she asked.

"Three cars," Turin said. He hurried to buckle his pants. Lucia and Archer grabbed plates, glasses, silverware from the kitchen table, slopping the contents into the sink before hurling the tableware into the dishwasher.

"Hurry!" Archer snapped at Lucia.

"Is it Terror?" Maya asked from the hallway.

"Just Hartwells," Turin said.

"Thank God for that much," Maya wheeled back into the room. "You two have to get downstairs—"

Booms echoed from the front door. It sounded like the police were knocking with a wrecking ball.

"—right away," she finished. Turin rushed by her, on his way to answer the door.

Ruppert felt a compression against his skin, as if all the air in the room had suddenly turned heavy, and then a loud crack echoed through the house. The police forced the front door with a pressure gun, blasting it from its hinges.

"You! Down! Hands on head!" a rough voice shouted from the front doorway. Ruppert heard the two thuds as Turin's knees slammed into the floor.

"I just work here, sir," Turin said.

Maya pointed towards the short hall leading to the bathroom and the front parlor. Ruppert took Lucia's hand and pulled her in that direction. Following Maya's hand gestures, he opened a folding door to reveal a recessed alcove with a washer, dryer, and a towel shelf.

He looked back towards Maya, but she only shrugged and turned her chair towards the table, where one plate of half-eaten food remained, as if she'd been eating alone.

Ruppert and Lucia climbed up on top of the laundry machines. They drew their knees to their chests, and sat with their backs pressed together in the compact space. Ruppert eased the folding door along in its track, closing it, willing himself to move slowly to avoid making noise.

"Hands up! On your knees!" a man's voice bellowed, much closer.

"Sir, I'm unable to leave my chair," Maya said. "If you want me on the floor, you'll have to put me there."

"Throw her down." More boots approached. Ruppert heard Maya gasp, then a thud as police dumped her on the floor. "Search the wheelchair for weapons."

The confined space in the laundry room grew hot and suffocating. Ruppert could feel the sharp points of Lucia's shoulder blades digging into his back, between his own shoulder blades. She squirmed against him, her skin blazing hot. She was probably angry, resisting the urge to leap out and protect the paraplegic woman. But that would only get everyone killed.

"Took you a long time to answer that door," the cop said. "What were you hiding from us?"

"I didn't hear you knock, sir." Maya spoke in a low, submissive voice.

"And the black guy in the hall?"

"He helps me around the house. And with my groceries."

"Answers the door for you?" asked the same cop, apparently the leader of the group.

"Yes, things like--"

"He's doing a real shit job of it."

"Yes, sir," Maya said.

"What do you know about the bomb last night?" the policeman asked.

"Nothing, sir."

"Really? You didn't hear an explosion late last night? Nothing?"

"No, sir. It must have been after my night meds."

Ruppert tilted his head as far to one side as he could, and he was just able to peer out between two of the wooden slats composing the folding door. He immediately wished he hadn't. One of the black uniforms approached the laundry door—a young man, his head shaved down to stubble. Ruppert could see the golden Hartwell badge on his chest, the "H" with the hollow heart in the crossbar looming closer with each step.

"How many people currently in the house?" the cop asked Maya. "Including visitors and employees?"

"Just me," Maya said. "And Eldred, the young man in the front hall."

"He works for you?"

"Yes, sir."

The young, shaven-headed policeman passed by and into the bathroom, only three feet from Ruppert, where he urinated noisily without bothering to close the door.

"Then I'll need to see your employer permit and his worker permit, won't I?" the cop asked Maya.

"I'm certain they're in the state database," Maya said.

"I don't want to check the database. I want to see your permits in my hand."

Ruppert held his breath, and he felt the muscles in Lucia's back tighten. She fell completely still. Though she couldn't see anything but towels and detergents from where she sat, she was responding to Ruppert's own reaction, sensitive to his nervous energy.

"Have you seen anyone unusual in the area?" the policeman asked Maya. "Any foreigners? Anyone from out of town? Anyone handing out political literature or media?"

"Sir, I've hardly left the house in ten years," Maya said.

The laundry room door rattled. The young policeman was coming back, trailing his fingers down the wooden slats. Ruppert craned his neck and was able to see the man looking carefully at the door, then leaning forward, hands cupped around his eyes, to look between the slats.

Ruppert and Lucia froze.

"Why don't you have a screen in this house?" the cop asked. "What do you watch?"

"I have an old box in the living room. Movies on disc. I just don't like people to see me when I phone them."

The lead cop ordered a full search of the house--fortunately, he called away the bald pisser to search the upstairs. He continued asking Maya about her personal, political and religious affiliations, though the police would have all that information on file.

Ruppert and Lucia remained folded up against each other in a hot, tense silence, neither willing to risk even a whisper. The sounds of the police slamming doors and overturning furniture spread through the house.

After the sounds of their searching had died down, Ruppert relaxed a little, breathing deeper, and then the folding door suddenly rattled open.

“They’re searching the outbuildings now,” Maya said. She’d managed to climb back into her wheelchair. “Hope the rust gives them all tetanus. You better get underground.”

Lucia slipped away and dropped to her feet. Ruppert hurried after her to the back bedroom with the false closet wall, and down to join the others underneath the house. They huddled together in the dark, eight people who did not want to be found, and they waited.

TWENTY-THREE

Though the bomb had only demolished a rotten, long-disused water tower, and there were no victims, Terror never missed an opportunity to flex its muscles. Over the following days, the swarm of local Hartwell cops gave way to the black coats of state and federal Terror agents, knocking on doors, inviting themselves into homes and businesses if nobody answered. Helicopter formations patrolled the sky.

Ruppert and Lucia remained underground with the others. They lived off the only available food, which happened to be a pantry of canned vegetables and rack after rack of aged wine. Occasionally Turin brought down a loaf of bread or carton of milk. They slept on nests of blankets and clothes—Ruppert had a bare foam pallet. Nobody spoke more than necessary, and never above a whisper.

On their third night underground, Ruppert and Lucia slipped off to a remote room that might have been a well or cistern in the forgotten past. They shared Lucia's last cigarette.

"What do we do now?" Ruppert whispered. "Do we have a plan?"

"When Terror finishes beating their chests, and gets tired of kicking in doors up and down the valley, we'll leave here with copies of your interview. We'll pass them along to others by hand, and we'll upload them to some people we know internationally. We have to send it everywhere."

"People like me, or whoever has my job now, will just ignore it," Ruppert said. "If it ever got too well-known to ignore, they just call it enemy propaganda. They'll bring in experts from Terror and an Ivy League university or two, who will explain just how fraudulent it is."

"You don't think I know that?" Lucia snapped. "We just have to put it out there. Let people make their own decisions."

"He who has ears, let him hear," Ruppert said. It was an expression of Pastor John's—and, if Ruppert remembered correctly, Jesus.

"Terror will want you to die," Lucia said.

"I was a little concerned about that, too."

“You’ll go north, into Canada.” She didn’t need to say why they wouldn’t go south—they would never make it through the walls, land mines and guard towers along the Barrier. Originally built to keep out immigrants and refugees from the Mexican civil war, the Barrier was equally good at keeping people in. “Archer will take you, probably.”

“You aren’t going?”

Lucia shook her head. “I don’t know anything about the escape routes. Compartmentalization. And I always have more work to do.”

“I could stay and help you.”

“With Terror out for your blood? You wouldn’t really be an asset. Sorry,” she added.

Ruppert felt a gnawing discomfort in his gut. He’d lost his entire life, and even as unhappy as he’d been, he felt rootless and without any purpose. Going north might be his best hope of survival, but then what? He’d be alone in some remote, frozen place—he would never be able to return to a city, with all the security systems picking up his image. Terror could find him as easily in Vancouver as they could in Los Angeles.

He thought of Liam O’Shea, the pudgy man with the rubbery smile who worked at Child and Family Services. Ruppert had been thinking about him off and on since they’d stayed with Dr. Smith in the desert.

“I can help you,” Ruppert said. His voice was very low.

“You’ve helped us enough,” she told him. “You should go north.”

“I mean about your son.”

She shook her head and turned away from him. “Don’t talk about that. I should not have told you.”

“I know someone,” he said. “A senior case analyst manager, or some arrangement of those words, in Family Services. He’d have access to their databases, probably even from home.”

Lucia looked back at him. Her mouth was trembling, from anger or from fear. “He would help me?”

“No. I think I could make him help.”

Lucia stared into the dark, then shook her head. “It won’t work. Terror will be looking hard for you, and he’ll know that by now.”

“That’s not the point. I have an idea of how we could—”

“Don’t speak about this to me again.” Lucia glared at him. Her eyes were wet. “Never mention my son.” She threw the cigarette stub on the floor and left the room.



Lucia stopped speaking to Ruppert. After several days, Terror lost interest and the agents in black faded away. According to Turin, the news media had settled on blaming unspecified Chinese agents, allegedly trying to spread fear and disorder along the West Coast. There would likely be more attacks, or so the Department of Terror warned the nation.

“Fear,” Turin muttered as he recounted the official narrative. “Keeps the swine in line.”

The underground rooms had initially seemed to Ruppert like a good and fortunate place to hide, but he was beginning to feel more like a prisoner. There was a restroom but no bathing facilities, and everyone looked dirty and unshaven. They slept in the same clothes every night, and the rooms took on an odor of sweat and stale air. Lucia still refused to talk to him, and that made the dark rooms even more suffocating.

At last, Maya judged that the federal dragnet had ended, and people could soon begin to leave. Each one would leave in a different direction, smuggling thousands of tiny discs on which Turin had copied the interview. Ruppert heard there was more evidence on the disc, linking Westerly to a high-level official in the Department of Terror. He didn't ask to look at it. He'd done enough journalism.

Ruppert visited the room he'd avoided since the interview, where Hollis Westerly remained locked in his cage. Westerly looked more decayed than ever, coughing up lumps of black and letting them drizzle through his beard stubble onto his scabby chest, staining an image of Thor's hammer there. The air smelled sick and greasy, like rotten fat.

Ruppert thought about those around the world who would see the interview. Ruppert and Westerly would be linked together for all of history, if history survived Terror. It wasn't exactly the legacy Ruppert would have chosen for himself.

"Looks like we're going to be famous," Ruppert said to him. Westerly looked up with hazy eyes under drooping lids. A cigarette with a two-inch ash rested in the crotch of his fingers.

"Ain't you famous no how?" Westerly asked.

Ruppert remembered that, as far as Westerly knew, Ruppert was still a working newsman. Apparently it had never occurred to Westerly that the news was as scripted as any sitcom, and a real story like this would never break there.

"Did they put me on the TV?" Westerly asked.

"Not yet. We're putting together a special event."

"Like the Super Bowl?"

"Yes."

"Always wanted to be big onscreen.

"Tell me something..." Ruppert began, then hesitated. He wasn't sure he wanted to hear the man's answer. "Don't you ever have any regret?"

"For what?"

Ruppert wanted to scream and kick at the man's cage. "What you did. Columbus."

"Well, sometimes you do," Westerly said. He noticed the long ash in his hand and shook it, breaking it into gray dust. "Yeah, people died. But that's war."

"Even if you helped start the war?"

"We didn't start it. White man got to struggle to survive, against them others."

"You realize that it was a psychological operation? You were a pawn? It actually had nothing to do with your personal cause or beliefs. You were completely manipulated. You get all of that?"

"Hey, I get it...somebody had to do it, though. Needed to be done. Fetch me them blue pills." Westerly gestured towards a folding table littered with medication and empty food cans.

Ruppert looked at the shrunken, dying man with the Nazi insignia tattooed into his flesh, frightening and ludicrous all at once. Anyone could see Westerly was sick in

the head as well as the body. But was he really that different from anyone who was happy to see millions die for the sake of his own sacred brand of stupid bullshit?

The man Westerly called Brother Zeb, whom Ruppert assumed came from the PSYCOM group Dr. Smith talked about, had gone into prison to recruit disposable men. He waved the proper symbols, and Westerly and the others obeyed him like trained dogs. Entire nations could be manipulated in the same way. Ruppert had done it himself, for a living.

"Pills. Now. Son of a bitch," Westerly growled.

Ruppert found the clear bottle of strong, dark blue pills and snapped off the lid. There were about fifty left, surely enough to kill a man. He pushed the bottle through the bars and turned it upside down, raining them down onto Westerly's pissed-stained mats and rugs. A raw, feral glee lit up Westerly's eyes as he scrambled after the rolling pills and sucked them from the floor.

"Knock yourself out," Ruppert said, and he left.



In the early morning dark, as Ruppert slept on his now-dirty foam pallet, something grabbed his arm, and a hand closed over his mouth. He could hear the snoring of two or three other sleepers.

"Quiet," a woman's voice breathed into his face. Lucia. "Promise me you say nothing."

Ruppert nodded, and she removed her hand.

"We're leaving," she whispered. "Come with me." She shoved cool leather into his hand—the strap on his suitcase.

Ruppert was groggy and confused, but he'd been through enough danger with Lucia that he wasn't about to ignore the urgency in her voice. He followed her to the room with all the disused lamps, where they'd first entered the underground rooms from the fermentation building.

"What's happening?" he finally whispered. "Shouldn't we get the others?"

"We're going AWOL." Lucia showed him a plastic keycard studded with copper bumps. "And we're stealing Archer's truck."

"What do we do about my car?" Ruppert did not want Terror finding it and picking up his trail.

Lucia opened the heavy wooden door to reveal the concrete steps that spiraled up into the old fermentation cylinder in the building above.

"We're leaving to Archer as payment." They started up the stairs.

"Does he know Terror will be looking for it?" Ruppert asked.

"Yeah, I figured that was worth leaving a note about. He'll just scrap it. Lots of expensive parts in there. Help me turn this."

She placed his hands onto a metal wheel, and together they wrenched it around, opening the cylinder.

Ruppert's eyes adjusted to the gloom, and he saw the room had changed since they'd arrived—there were wine crates, more machine parts, and generally a lot of scrap

piled into the room, leaving only narrow footpaths. Turin and the others must have started on it just after Lucia and Ruppert arrived. The police hadn't found the vehicle stashed here, probably because you didn't intimidate people much by kicking around in their garbage.

"Over here," Lucia whispered. They began stacking crates and moving aside machine pieces, including what appeared to be the entire flank of a tractor.

The work took thirty very long minutes, and then they stripped away a canvas tarp to reveal a sand-colored Chevrolet Brontosaur, a great hulk of a truck with a reinforced grill and a hardtop covering the payload. Two bumper stickers were plastered to the rear: an American flag captioned "Vote for the President," and another that read "When the Rapture Comes, Watch Out for My Big Old Truck!"

Lucia started for the driver's side door with the keycard. Ruppert, remembering a few of the sharp, high turns waiting out in the Sonoma Mountains—and how recklessly she'd taken them—offered to drive instead.

He steered the truck up and over heaps of scrap wood and steel mesh, grateful for the truck's four-wheel drive. Within minutes, they were back on the road, the sky open and full of moonlight above. Ruppert felt dangerously exposed—he'd grown accustomed to life underground. He wondered if rabbits and voles felt the same way when they ventured out of the warren for a snack.

Still, he rolled down the window and breathed in the fresh night air, high above the pollution line. This, too, must be how burrowing creatures felt. More vulnerable to predators, maybe, but relieved to be out of the dank air and the reek of close, crowded bodies.

It would be a long drive back to Los Angeles, the city that was more dangerous for him than any other place on Earth. He looked over to Lucia. She had opened her window, too, and sat back with her eyes closed against her long black hair, which the wind lashed into her face.

Ruppert knew he'd made a mistake. Even if they did learn where to find Lucia's son, the boy might be anywhere on the planet by now. Would he even recognize his mother? How long ago had Lucia lost him—five, six years? Meanwhile, Terror would see Ruppert's interview, and they'd launch a nationwide manhunt to find him.

Still, he drove on, south towards the city.

TWENTY-FOUR

The return to L.A. was jarring. After his time in the desert and the mountains, he could really taste the bitter poison of the smog, and even feel airborne chemicals burning and staining his skin.

In Hollywood, hordes of people choked the sidewalks and the narrower streets, hawking stolen jewelry, drugs, purified water, quick-fried food, Catholic icons, booze, rugs, art, and pieces of computers and automobiles. A rivulet of car traffic crawled through the center of the marketplace.

They stopped at a narrow, clutter maze of a thrift store, the sort of place where they preferred bartering to money, but would still accept cash, if you had a large enough stack of it. Lucia bought clothes—all black, including sunglasses. The illusion wouldn't hold up on inspection, but at first glance, she would resemble a Terror agent.

She picked out a particular accessory for him to wear, something intended for nightclubs or costume parties, a spiky chain collar festooned with blinking red lights. He also bought some cheap outfits for himself, and an extra pair of shoes. Then he stopped at a dumpster and threw out the three changes of clothes he'd been wearing for the past several weeks.

Liam O'Shea lived in a sealed neighborhood in Santa Monica similar to Ruppert's. The exterior wall, running southeast along Lincoln Boulevard, resembled a that of a fortress—a high concrete barrier, regularly sand-scrubbed by maintenance staff, topped with steel points and coils of shockwire, all to keep the barbarian hordes at bay.

Lucia's modified television remote convinced a neighborhood entrance gate to open for them. They proceeded into a suburban oasis of clean, unbroken sidewalks, manicured lawns thick with trees, and big pueblo-style homes.

"Which one?" Lucia asked. "They all look alike."

"Keep driving. I think it's further back."

"You don't know which house?"

“I’ve only been here once,” Ruppert said. “For a soda-punch social. I didn’t want to come here that time, either.” He followed the gentle curves of the main road towards the larger houses along the neighborhood’s back streets.

They parked in the driveway next to Liam’s Ford Cherub, a short bulging car with rounded doors. Lucia stepped out first, clad in her new black “Terror” outfit, then crossed to open the passenger door and haul Ruppert out of the truck.

She escorted him to the front door, her hand clamped on his bicep as if he were her prisoner. Loud shrieks and squeals echoed from Liam’s back yard.

“Let’s try around back,” Ruppert whispered. Lucia nodded and steered him toward the arched wooden gate in the stucco wall surrounding Liam’s back yard. They entered quietly.

Liam’s eight-year-old son and ten-year-old daughter, along with six or seven others, jumped and wrestled in a plastic wading pool, and as well as in the wide circle of mud that had formed around it.

Liam stood a few yards back, spraying them down a garden hose as they played. From the swampy condition of the yard, he must have used a citizen’s full monthly water ration just that morning, a massive violation of the Western Resource and Energy Committee’s ration system. He held a can of beer in his other hand, and like the kids, he’d removed his shirt, exposing an engorged, pasty white belly dropping over the waistband of his Bermuda shorts.

“Get him, Peter!” Liam shouted. “Rub some down his back!”

“Hi, Liam,” Ruppert said.

Liam jumped at his voice. When he saw Ruppert, his eyes seemed to double in size behind his thick glasses.

“You, you’re...” Liam sounded like he was choking. The beer can slipped from his fingers, and fell to the ground, chugging its foamy contents away into the grass.

“There’s a Terror alert for you. Pastor John says.”

“They already found me,” Ruppert told him. “This one wants to ask you about—”

“Quiet!” Lucia jabbed an elbow into Ruppert’s gut, knocking the breath out of him, and he folded up and dropped to his knees. She hadn’t bother pulling her punch.

“I apologize, citizen,” Lucia said to Liam. “This criminal will not speak to you again. If he does, I will decapitate him.” She jerked on the leash attached to the chain collar around his throat.

“Thank you,” Liam said. “I always knew he was dangerous. I tried to report him. You can check the records.”

“We know,” Lucia said. “That’s why we need to question you about him.”

Liam just stared at Ruppert. The hose had drooped until he was only splattering his own sandals, and the children howled in protest.

“We must speak privately,” Lucia said. “This is very confidential.”

“Of course, ah... There’s my office, that’s soundproof.”

“Immediately,” Lucia said. She yanked Ruppert’s chain, and he rose to his feet. Liam led them in through the open patio door, from which cold, conditioned air billowed out into the yard. That would be a Western Resource and Energy Committee violation, too.

They passed through a cavernous kitchen, and Ruppert glanced through the open door to the dining room. From his previous visit, he did remember the mural there: a

bearded, muscular, possibly oiled man in a loincloth, apparently the Second Coming, fire blazing from his eyes and mouth, riding the winged horse Pegasus, apparently, down from the night sky. Ruppert wondered how many meals the O'Shea children had eaten under the burning eyes of that angry god and his goofy steed.

They followed Liam to the office door at the end of the upstairs hall. Liam pressed his index finger to a doorbell-sized plate beside it.

"Have to keep the kids out," Liam said to Lucia. The door beeped and popped open. Liam cast a quick, worried look at Ruppert, then scurried inside.

Liam had a spacious home office with a sitting area, a mini-fridge, and a bathroom with a shower stall. A high leather chair faced a full-wall screen displaying the logo of Child and Family Services—a tall adult stick figure holding the hand of a small, child-sized stick figure, a red, white and blue banner swirling around them in what appeared to be a stiff digital wind.

Ruppert sprang at Liam, shoved him back against the wall, and pressed his hand down on Liam's mouth until he could feel the shape of the man's teeth through his rubbery lips. He had to prevent Liam from uttering the "safe word" that would galvanize his home security system into action, firing off emergency messages to the neighborhood security provider, the local Hartwell police office, and probably the security personnel at Child and Family Services. Possibly two or three "emergency contact" relatives, on top of that.

Liam squirmed, and Ruppert applied more pressure. He could feel Liam's jaw working, trying to bite, and Liam's tongue smearing across his palm. He looked towards Lucia.

"Are you ready already?" he asked.

"Give me a second." She stood at Liam's wall screen, shuffling through the pages of his home security system, disabling each function.

"We're safe," she finally announced. Ruppert released Liam, but kept himself between Liam and the only door out of the room.

"You're not with Terror." Liam wiped sweat and saliva from his mouth with the back of his hand. "They haven't really caught you yet."

"Not yet," Ruppert agreed.

"What do you want?" Liam asked.

"Access," Lucia said. "Open the Child and Family national database."

"No." Liam looked back and forth between them. "Oh, no. You need level six security rating to see that. It's national security."

"Need to see my credentials?" Lucia unsheathed her glassy black obsidian blade from her belt, closed in on Liam, and slashed it across his immense, pale stomach. A drooping red smile appeared in the blade's wake, leaking trickles of blood into his navel and down the front of his shorts. The blade had cut only fat, but deep enough to scar.

Liam gaped down at the wound.

"The database," Lucia said.

"I can't," Liam whispered.

"I didn't hear you." Lucia lifted the blade, pointed the tip at Liam's left eye. "Say it again."

"I can't!" Liam whined. He began to sob. "They'll kill me."

Lucia jabbed the knife forward. The tip of the blade pierced through the center of Liam's left ear, pinning it to the wall.

Liam shrieked and batted one hand at Lucia, but Ruppert grabbed his arm and held it to the wall.

"Give up, Liam," Ruppert said. "She can break bones with her bare hands. I've seen it happen."

"But Terror..." Liam blubbered.

"How many lives have you destroyed, here, from this room?" Lucia hissed. She worked the blade back and forth, widening the new hole in his ear. "I think it's just your turn," she whispered. "I think it's fair. If you don't give me what I want, I will kill you. You already know that. But you don't know what I'll do next. I will saw your head away from your neck, I will carry it downstairs, and I will throw it into the little wading pool out there, in front of your children. Why should they suffer less than my son?"

Ruppert had been acting. He realized Lucia wasn't. She really would do as she said if Liam didn't cooperate.

Lucia sliced through the side of Liam's ear, slicing it into two bleeding flaps, and pulled her blade free. She jabbed the tip of the blade up into the soft tissue under his chin, hooked his jaw, and drew his face toward hers until their eyeballs nearly touched.

"The database," she said again.

Liam's mouth worked silently for a few seconds, and then he said, "Open national placement database."

"Retinal, please." Liam's office computer system spoke with a high, soft Italian tenor that Ruppert found immediately irritating.

Lucia steered Liam toward a coin-sized green lens mounted in the wall. She moved the blade from his chin to his carotid artery. Liam leaned forward and opened his eyes wide, raising his eyebrows and drawing his mouth into a deep, exaggerated frown.

"Access approved," the soft Italian voice said. Ruppert could have sworn it was sighing.

Millions of miniature cubes, folded into each other, appeared on the wall screen. The database.

"I'm taking him out of here," Ruppert said. Lucia gave a very slight nod. She wasn't really listening. She stared at the data in awe, like a desperate addict stumbling into a giant batch of her drug.

Ruppert took Liam down the hall to the master bedroom.

"God won't forgive you for this," Liam said. "God sees everything, and He won't forgive you. Why are we going into my bathroom? What will you do to me in my bathroom?"

Ruppert pushed Liam into the long walk-through closet connecting the master bed and master bath. He shoved a washcloth into Liam's mouth, then bound his hands and feet behind him with bed sheets. He left the man lying on the tiled floor of his bathroom, bleeding from his stomach and the side of his head, whimpering. Ruppert turned out the bathroom light and closed the door.

Back in the office, Lucia knelt on the floor, weeping, no longer the murderous creature she'd been only minutes earlier.

"What's wrong?" Ruppert dropped to a knee beside her and lay a hand on her back. She turned, flinging her arms around his neck, crushing herself against him.

Ruppert looked up at the wall screen. A large window occupied most of it. The window displayed a picture of a handsome boy of nine or ten, with the same black eyes and light caramel skin as Lucia. He had a shaven head and wore a tan military-style uniform. The picture was captioned GEORGE LIBERTY.

"Nando," Lucia whispered. "They even gave him a new name. A stupid new name."

"It will be all right," Ruppert said. He read the text underneath the picture. George Liberty, or Nando, had been raised at the Goblin Valley School for Males in Goblin Valley, Idaho. At Ruppert's request, a further description of the school appeared: "Proactive specialized pre-training in desert and mountain combat. Counterinsurgency. Central Asian linguistics and geography."

Further down the list, he saw George Liberty's "discarded name." Fernando Luis Santos.

He asked for an expanded health report, and the screen presented him with details and pictures from Fernando's last medical inspection.

"He's in really good health," Ruppert said. "What's wrong?"

"He does not know his name," Lucia whispered. "He will not remember me. They have remade him into one of them."

"Not everyone takes to the program. We can go to this school place. We can get him. You're his mother, you have rights." Ruppert ordered the computer to print laminated maps of the Goblin Valley compound, annotated with the details of their security system.

"Rights? Are you serious? Are we calling a lawyer first? Is that how you would handle this?"

"We can get him out," Ruppert said. "That's what you do, right? Disappearing people from Terror's screens? Extractions?"

"That is a full-fire military school, Daniel," Lucia said. "In the middle of the desert. Thousands of armed boys trained to kill. We would need a large team of very good people. And a helicopter. And also, half the team would need to be at least a little suicidal."

"Terror's going to kill me anyway, right?" Ruppert gathered the maps from Liam's printer. "So, really, I don't have to worry about death anymore. Today, this week, next month--whenever. I'm already dead. It's really like being invincible, if you think about it. Like you're already acting from the beyond the grave."

"Quiet," Lucia said.

"I could be in Vancouver right now," Daniel said. "Smoking hash with Eskimos. But we came back for Nando. If you're thinking about going to get him, I just happen to have nothing to lose."

Lucia pushed herself to her feet. "Oh, no. We're going to get him. Helicopter or not."

Something crashed in the master bathroom down the hall, perhaps Liam's gilded toilet-paper stand. Ruppert checked the time on the screen. O'Shea's wife could be home any minute.

"We need to get out of here," he said.

"One minute." Lucia inserted the "jaguar" virus-injection plug into a jack in Liam's desk.

The image on the wall screen wavered, broke into chunks, and vanished. The screen flickered and flashed random colors. A screeching sound tore through the room's speakers.

"Irregular function, irregular function," the soft Italian tenor sighed.

"Do we have time for this?" Ruppert asked.

"I need the carnovirus to destroy the remote server at Child and Family, too," she said. "If they know what we searched for, they'll know where we're going."

When the screen turned lifeless and black, Lucia finally pulled the jaguar plug. They hurried towards the stairs, but she paused on the top step.

"Did you loot him?" she asked.

"What?"

"Did you check the weird fat man for cash?"

"It didn't cross my mind."

"Wait here." Lucia returned down the hall, into the master bedroom. Ruppert stood on the steps for what felt like hours, watching out the plate-glass window for Mrs. O'Shea to come home from whatever club or social activity she was attending at Golden Tabernacle.

Lucia finally returned, holding up a roll of greenbacks. "Twelve hundred seventy," she said. "That's worth waiting for."

"Do you mug everyone?" he asked as they rushed down the steps.

"A bushel of my enemy's grain is worth twenty bushels of my own," Lucia said. "Sun-Tzu."

"Who?"

"You ever read anything that isn't teleprompted?"

They jogged out into the backyard, where the children were fighting over control of the still-running garden hose. They hurried to the arched wooden gate, but Lucia turned back. This time she approached Liam's children, unsheathing her black knife.

"Don't!" Ruppert called after her. "What are you doing?"

She ignored him. The children saw her approaching, and they dropped the hose and backed away from her, staring open-mouthed at the blade.

Lucia knelt down next to the wading pool and sliced it open from lip to base. The pool deformed into an oblong as gallons of water poured out the deep cut in its side.

Liam's daughter watched the water escape with mounting horror. She looked up at Lucia, whose eyes were still concealed behind the dark glasses, and she screamed. She turned and ran into the house, calling for her father.

Lucia ran towards Ruppert. "Hurry up, let's go!" she shouted.

"Why did you do that?" he asked as they passed through the gate to the driveway.

"No adults," she said. "Kids can drown in those little pools."

"Great," Ruppert said. "We have about fifteen minutes before Hartwell-brand cops come flying in from everywhere."

"Less than that." Lucia snatched the keycard from his hand. "Better let me drive."

TWENTY-FIVE

Ruppert had been exhausted after the eight-hour drive from Sonoma to Los Angeles, but now the threat of Terror kept his adrenaline high. Lucia drove, leaving him nothing to do but tap his fingers, search the radio, and check the rearview for police. In the past weeks, they'd kept to back roads and out of the way towns, but today they rode interstate 10 to put the city behind them as fast as possible. The sprawl scrolled on and on: West Covina, Pomona, Upland, Rancho Cucamonga...and he still felt caught in the city's tentacles. He hoped they didn't hit a checkpoint.

He activated the display screen in Archer's dashboard and found that Archer had decent mapping software. No GPS, of course, which would have required an uplink and left the truck vulnerable to tracking, but plenty of road and terrain maps assembled from last year's satellite images. Once they were well away from the city, they could make a good part of their trip off-road. Lucia had been smart to steal Archer's truck.

At last the concrete gave way to sand and rocks. They again would cut through the Mojave Desert, but Lucia did not want to detour and check on Dr. Smith.

"He might tell me this is a bad idea," Lucia explained. "He might even change my mind. I can't risk that."

They stopped in the town of Yermo for fuel and basic supplies. Water, crackers and dried fruit would have to sustain them for the rest of their drive—every stop was a risk. Lucia entered the gas station to pay with some of Liam's cash, while Ruppert slumped in the passenger seat, a baseball cap low over his eyes, hoping he didn't get picked up on a stray security camera. Terror could look out through any digital eyes, and they could automate an ongoing image search for his face. Or so he'd heard.

They left the highway and kept to worn back roads as they traveled northeast through the desert. Again he enjoyed seeing the rich vistas of sand painted in warm tones by the late afternoon sun, which glowed fat and orange in the rearview. It was like another planet, a beautiful place where nobody was watching you.

Lucia found a Spanish-language station playing traditional songs, and in time the cheerful music and the fantastically empty desert soothed Ruppert's overstrained nerves,

and gradually lulled him into a light sleep. When he woke again, he asked Lucia where they were, then checked the map.

“That can’t be right,” Ruppert said.

“What?”

“It looks like you’re taking us right through Las Vegas.”

“That is the fastest way,” Lucia said.

“It’s too dangerous.”

“Daniel, you have to switch your brain around,” she told him. “What is safe and what is dangerous have changed places.”

“I don’t think Vegas is safe no matter whose side you’re on. Do we have any weapons?”

“I have my blade.”

“Great. We couldn’t be more prepared, then. One stone knife.”

“Good for evading metal detectors,” Lucia pointed out.

“But that’s not what I’m worried about.”

They stopped for a restroom break by the side of the road—once they got close to Vegas, they wouldn’t want to stop. Then Lucia claimed the driver’s seat again, and they continued driving. Within minutes, the towers of Vegas became visible, illuminated by red sunset reflecting off the acres of glass windows.

The city looked attractive until you drew close enough to see the burned-out cars heaped along the sides of the road, turning the Vegas strip into a shooting alley. They drove between high ramparts of rusting vehicles. Ruppert watched the car-piles for snipers.

They passed a giant black pyramid, a medieval fairy-castle, Statue of Liberty, the Empire State building. All looked frayed at the edges, their facades chewed by years of bombs and machine gun fire. Scattered open-pit fires provided the only lights in the deepening gloom.

Las Vegas was a corpse of a city. Its demise had been brought about in part by a zealous Secretary of Faith and Values in Washington, who outlawed prostitution and gambling nationwide; in part by the Western Resource and Energy Committee’s stringent water restrictions on Nevada; and ultimately by water riots in the streets. Now trash filled those streets, sometimes narrowing the strip to a single lane, and gangs of armed men and women inhabited the great husks of theme parks and casinos.

In front of a replica of the Eiffel Tower and the Arc de Triumph, the street narrowed again, and iron gates spanned between the piles of rubble, blocking the road. Men flanked the gate, armed with machine guns, dressed in berets and lacy, puffy, beaded coats that looked like they’d been designed during the late Bourbon dynasty, just before its bloody, frilly end.

Lucia slowed down as several of the longhaired, unshaven men stepped forward, signaling with velvet-gloved hands for Ruppert and Lucia to stop.

“This is not good,” Ruppert said.

“Don’t worry,” Lucia said. “I doubt they’re Terror informants.”

“That hadn’t occurred to me yet, but thanks.”

A bearded man approached Lucia’s window, and she reached for the handle to roll it down. Ruppert wanted to tell her to stop, but what could they do? Two rough-

looking male faces appeared outside his own window, their hostile glares a steep contrast to their puffy silk apparel.

“Toll gate,” the bearded man said through Lucia’s open window. “Ride the king’s road, pay the king’s taxes.”

“What’s the toll?” Lucia asked him.

“Depends what you carry,” the bearded man said. “Got drugs? Ammo?”

“Sorry,” Lucia said. “We have a little cash, that’s it.”

“Cash?” The bearded man looked to his comrades, who laughed. “Cash doesn’t buy around here. We *wipe* with cash. Get out of the truck. Your man, too.”

The armed men directed Ruppert and Lucia out into the dusty air and stood them against the grill of the truck. Two of the bandits patted them down and searched their pockets. More searched inside the truck. They unrolled two tarps stored in the back of Archer’s truck, one printed with forest camouflage and another with desert camouflage, but were disappointed that nothing was hidden inside them. The bandits dug out the paper bag holding their food and water, Lucia’s worn, patched duffle, Ruppert’s embossed leather suitcase.

“This one looks expensive,” one of them muttered, stroking his fingers across over the suitcase.

“You’re welcome to the suitcase,” Ruppert said. “But the clothes inside are all I have.” He didn’t realize how true those words were until he said them aloud. He was even traveling in a stolen truck.

“We got a million suitcases,” said the bearded man, who seemed to be the group’s leader. “People left quick, back during the riots.”

The men had no interest in Ruppert’s thrift-store clothes, but the contents of Lucia’s duffle drew their attention.

“What’s this here?” A bandit held up her modified remote control, the colored wires tumbling in every direction.

“It’s for housebreaking,” Lucia said, surprising Ruppert with her bluntness.

“Really only works on residential systems. Some liquor stores.”

The man snorted and laid it on the truck’s hood. He lifted out a blue data disc the size of a silver dollar, one of fifty in her bag.

“What are all these?” he asked.

“It’s fifty copies of the same video,” Lucia told him.

“Starring you?” he asked, drawing snickers and leers from the others.

“I doubt it would interest you,” she said. “Just a historical document, really.”

“If it’s so not-interesting,” the bearded man asked, “Why you smuggling fifty copies?”

“Why do you assume we’re smuggling?” Ruppert asked.

“You’re driving through Vegas, ain’t you?” the bearded man said. He looked back to Lucia. “What is it?”

“It’s restricted information,” Lucia said. Ruppert wished she would stop there, but she continued. “Letting people know about some covert operations, state secrets, that kind of thing.”

The bearded man stared at Lucia, then gave her a wry smile. He gestured toward one of his men: “Rico, let’s have a look at the lady’s data.”

The man named Rico was short and dark, his skin weathered by long exposure to the desert, though he looked no more than twenty. He wore data goggles over his eyes and assorted plastic and metal components strapped to his arms and belt. He took the disc in question, ejected it from its transparent case, and popped it into a console on his arm. Rico then pointed his arm at an empty, sandy patch of road beside the truck. Ruppert and Hollis Westerly appeared in a life-size hologram.

As the interview played, the bandits ceased talking among themselves. Ruppert and Westerly's voice echoed through the quiet streets, bouncing off the Empire State Building, the Statue of Liberty, the Sphinx. More bandits emerged one or two at a time for a better look at the video, leaving their hidden guard posts, including two who'd been hiding behind the Eiffel Tower.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Ruppert whispered to Lucia.

"Did you have a better one?" she whispered back.

When the entire video had played, the men stood in silence. Finally, Rico flipped off his projector and spoke up.

"Terror would pay a good bounty for these two, I bet," he said. "Whatever we wanted."

A couple of the men grumbled what might have been agreement, but they looked at their shoes as they spoke. To Ruppert's surprise, most of them remained quiet, their eyes distant. Gradually they turned their attention to the bearded man, who continued to stare at the patch of road where Westerly's image had been.

"What are you planning to do with this?" he finally asked.

"We're going to distribute as wide as we can," Lucia said. "There are others doing the same. Lots of others." Ruppert found this to be an exaggeration, but said nothing.

The bearded man released the disc from Rico's arm, returned it to its case. "You have fifty copies. I'm keeping one."

"Of course," Lucia said. "Make as many copies as you can, too."

The bearded man looked south along the strip, possibly checking whether any other cars were approaching. None were.

"Let them go," the bearded man said.

"But there could be a bounty—" Rico protested.

"Shut up." One of the older bandits cut him off.

"We at least oughta siphon some gas," another bandit said.

"Quiet," the bearded man said. "I served four years in the Marines, in the old world. We talked about something called honor. You brats don't even know what the word means."

"Sure," Rico spoke up. "My uncle told me, greed and honor. Greed is killing someone else for your own profit. Honor is when you kill for someone else's greed, and they keep the profit."

"Nobody wants to hear your bullshit, Rico." The bearded man turned back to Ruppert and Lucia. "This is treason, and people need to know it." He shook his head. A waxing moon was rising behind him. "We used to be a country."

He turned his back to them and walked towards Paris, his head low, saying nothing. The other men began to peel away. Ruppert and Lucia gathered their belongings and loaded them back into the truck, then climbed up into the cab. Ruppert started the engine, but the sentries at the gate ahead of them didn't move.

Ruppert leaned out the window. “He said we could go.”

“One minute,” a sentry said, and nodded towards the Eiffel Tower. Rico was returning, holding some kind of large, red container in one hand. He wore a broad, clearly false smile as he approached Lucia’s passenger window.

“I don’t like him,” Lucia whispered. “Tell them to open the gate.”

“Just wait.”

“He’s coming towards me.”

“Have your blade ready.”

“I do.”

Ruppert studied the length of black obsidian resting in her fingers. Not for the first time, he considered how helpful a gun could be to their situation. Legally, only police, government agents, and specially approved citizens could own firearms, but supposedly there were a million or more still circulating the countryside. He wouldn’t know who to ask, but Lucia likely would.

Rico approached with his unnaturally wide smile.

“A parting gift for you,” he said. “From the mayor.”

He held it up, and now Ruppert could make out the word stamped on the rectangular five-gallon jug: GASOLINE.

Lucia reached for the jug with one hand, while her other hand positioned the blade just below the edge of the window, ready to strike. She accepted the jug and quickly retreated into the truck, setting it on the floorboard.

Rico backed away, still grinning. “Drive safe,” he said.

“Thanks,” Ruppert said. Lucia did not look at him.

At last, the sentries used a chain-and-pulley system to open the gate. Ruppert drove through it and on along the potholed Vegas strip, passing groups of shriveled people in rags huddled around trash fires in the cluttered streets, while moonlight illuminated the dark, soaring Roman and Chinese palaces behind them. The deprived condition of the people reminded him of south Los Angeles. He was beginning to wonder if most people in the country were living this way, and if his walled and protected suburb was the exception and not, as he’d somehow been led to believe, the norm.

He stomped the accelerator—there would be other armed gangs lurking in the windblown city ahead, and he didn’t want to tempt any of them.

“We have to dump this.” Lucia lifted the five-gallon gas can.

“What? Why?”

“He could have put a tracker in it.” She thumped the large black cap with her fingernail. “Maybe even a listener.”

“They’re just desert people,” he said. “It was a gift. They support us.”

“Desert people with computers on their arms,” Lucia said. “The one wanted to contact Terror for a bounty. He must have done it before.”

Ruppert’s good mood, which had just begun to develop, now evaporated. “But the bearded guy said to let us go.”

“Bigger share for Rico and his friends.”

Ruppert frowned. Maybe she was paranoid, but he’d learned to be paranoid, too. “All right. We’ll pour the gas in the truck and dump the can.”

“Not happening.”

“We need it. We can’t afford to keep gassing up your pal’s monster truck.”

“If he’s calling Terror, he could also taint our fuel to make us an easier catch. Probably pay him a bonus. And a tracker could be floating in there, too.”

“You want to throw away six hundred dollars’ worth of gas?”

“It could cause thirty thousand dollars in damage to the truck. And I prefer to be alive and free, if it all possible. Why are you slowing down?”

“Look.” They’d reached another barricade, this one erected of I-beams, more wrecked cars, and glittering curtains hung on chainlink. Already, men with machine guns were appearing at their windows.

Lucia rolled down the window and addressed the largest man in rapid-fire Spanish. She held up the jug, spoke a bit more, and he nodded and accepted it. He waved them through, and the sentries pulled their tangled metal gate aside.

“Two problems solved.” She smiled at Ruppert, something he hadn’t seen before. He’d seen her as dangerous, tough, resourceful, but now it occurred to him that beneath the angry glare etched into her face, she might be beautiful, too.

“What are you looking at?” she said.

“Just you.”

She dipped her head away and looked out the window. “Drive. I don’t want to stop until we’re in Utah.”

TWENTY-SIX

It was six more hours of rough driving through canyons, washouts, and choppy dirt roads before Lucia, who'd drifted in and out of sleep since Las Vegas, announced they should stop to rest. Ruppert kept checking his rearview, expecting an armada of armored cars and black helicopters to erupt over the horizon at any moment, but there was nothing but desert and night sky. They'd been traveling for more than twenty-four hours, and though he hadn't seen a Terror agent in many days now, Ruppert felt pursued. Maybe they were toying with him, watching him through satellites. There could even be a drone cruising above the Bronto, keeping a special tab on them, and Ruppert would never know.

"This is far enough," Lucia said, blinking away sleep. "We need a place to hide."

"We still have another hour to Goblin Valley."

"And we don't want to get any closer. I'm the extractions expert, remember?"

She zoomed to a closer view of their location on the digital dashboard map. They were near a region marked Capitol Reef National Park. "Utah. We should find a slot canyon."

For the first time, Ruppert enjoyed the fact that the Party had gutted the parks and conservation budget long ago. There would be hardly any rangers to find them. Not much risk of tourists, either. The wilderness teemed with the insane, the murderous, and the criminal, or so Ruppert had frequently reported. The Dominionists preached against visiting the wild, insisted it was home to demons, emphasized that time in the wilderness had made even Jesus vulnerable to the devil's temptations. The only real sanctuary was the church and the company of fellow believers.

"Turn off here," Lucia said. They turned down a narrow rut of a path littered with boulders and rocks. Ruppert eased the truck around, and sometimes over, the rocks. The truck seemed like it could handle the terrain, but he worried about the tires.

She directed him through a series of sharp, steep turns. His headlights shone on irregular rock surfaces pitted with long, deep shadows, like Rorschach blots, and his tired brain could hardly interpret any meaning from what his eyes told him.

“Okay, slow down,” she said. She leaned until her nose almost touched the screen, scrutinizing the old satellite image of the park. “You want to slow down...and turn to the left...right...here.”

Ruppert gingerly turned the wheel to the left, unable to understand the strange rock patterns around him, and drove them over a cliff. His fingernails bit into the steering wheel as the front tires reached out into empty space, and then the whole front end of the truck dropped like the heavy end of seesaw. They slammed into a hard, steep slope, rattling everything inside the cab and shoving Ruppert and Lucia upward against their seatbelts, which dug deep into their thighs and abdomens. He thought he felt his brain splosh against the dome of his skull.

The truck charged forward at an extreme downhill angle, out of his control, fishtailing down a washed-out gully.

“Gas!” Lucia screamed. “Give it gas!”

“What?” he asked, but his foot, which had been searching for the brakes, took her advice instead and stomped the accelerator. They roared down the slope. In the headlights, a high, solid ridge appeared in the distance and rapidly swelled to consume his field of vision.

“Turn!” Lucia yelled, but his hands were already moving. Ruppert’s instinct was to wrench the wheel as hard as possible, but his numbed shock at the situation saved him, and he only turned it a little. The truck spun to the right, and they skittered down the remainder of the slope and then skipped across an uneven surface of eroded rock.

The canyon narrowed quickly around them—ahead, Ruppert could see where the smooth boulders of the opposing canyon walls nearly touched each other. A man on foot would have to climb his way through.

He eased down the brake, then stomped it. Again the seatbelt lashed diagonally across him, and now he heard the tires screaming as they grabbed onto the rocky ground. The truck squealed to a stop as the canyon walls closed in around it.

Ruppert turned off the truck and removed his shaking hands from the steering wheel. Lucia caught her breath, then reached out and scrolled the map a few degrees. “Oh, maybe we should have come down the other side,” she said. “It’s not as steep.”

Ruppert removed his seatbelt, which would soon be tattooed into his skin in the as a chain of purple bruises, and opened the truck door. He half-climbed, half-fell from the cab, stumbled across the smooth rock floor, and sat down.

“This is good, though.” Lucia sat beside him and looked up. The canyon walls reached more than a hundred feet above them, but were so close to each other they almost touched in places. “Hard for them to look down in here.”

They shrouded the truck under the desert-camouflage tarp, and then sat upon a heap of boulders to study the laminated maps printed from Liam O’Shea’s computer. They shared a paper sleeve of salt crackers and a large bottle of water.

“The database said Nando lives in Lodge 10, with twenty boys his age,” Lucia said. “The nearest gate is the staff entrance, here in the west wall. We should use that.”

“We can’t just ram it down with the truck,” Ruppert said. “They’ll have a security system. Armed guards, I bet.”

“Guards, and machine gun nests, and lots of boys with military training.”

“They’re just kids.”

“Best time to train them,” Lucia said. “Goblin Valley keeps boys up to the age of sixteen, then enlists them. So there will be older boys too—boys trained as soldiers and snipers, trained to torture and interrogate. I’m sure they run school-defense drills. That would be good training for protecting foreign bases. So we could be facing a few thousand defenders.”

“Then we have to keep quiet. I don’t suppose we can use your magic remote?”

She shook her head. “It’s just a toy against their systems. They have an evolving propriety code.”

“Then what do we do, extraction expert?”

“We’ll need human intelligence. A person on the inside.”

“Which we don’t have,” Ruppert pointed out.

“And we’ll have to get one. I’m not sure how. Let’s assume we’re inside and go from there.”

“Okay. So we’re inside the school, surrounded by a bunch of armed Children of the Corn—and your son,” Ruppert hurried to add, in response to Lucia’s scowl. “We have to get inside his dormitory without drawing the attention of guards or other kids. We have to wake him without disturbing any of the others. I assume they’re not in private apartments or anything?”

Lucia glanced at the map, shook her head. “Looks like they all sleep in one room.”

“Won’t he automatically try to alert the others?”

“He won’t, if he recognizes me.”

“Do you think he will?” Ruppert regretted the question even before he asked it, but it had to be said. He worried Lucia was being a little unrealistic in her expectations—the boy was ten years old and hadn’t seen his mother since the age of five. Ruppert himself couldn’t remember anything before the age of six or so, though that was thirty years ago now.

Lucia’s mouth trembled, and she looked away from him without answering.

“I’m just saying,” Ruppert continued, “That he could make a lot of noise and trouble before he realizes who you are.”

“Then what can we do?” she whispered.

“All I can think is to use a tranquilizer. Maybe they have ether.” He pointed to the square building near the center of the school compound. It was marked “Clinic/Dispensary.”

“Then we’d have to break into a second building, right in the middle of the place,” Lucia said. “Probably extra secure because of the drugs. Too complicated.”

“Fernando kicking and screaming would complicate things, too.”

“We would trigger security alerts at the clinic,” Lucia said. “We’d never get to Nando.”

“All right. So, by some miracle, we get into the school, we grab Fernando without getting ambushed by a mob of killer ten-year-olds. We still have to get out again. And we have to plan for them to be pursuing us at that point. Worst-case scenario.”

“At last, you are thinking clearly.” Lucia traced her fingertip along the route from the west gate to Fernando’s barracks. They would have to make several turns. She

tapped a series of low sheds, shielded from the road by a wall. They were marked ORDINANCE.

“We cover our escape with fireworks,” she said. “If we time it right, there will be burning debris falling into the road behind us. Maybe even rubble. Block off the way out as we leave.”

“There are other gates they can use.”

“It will buy us a little time. And a lot of confusion. Once you assume they are following us, time will be short no matter what we do.”

“Okay, you’re right, it’s the best we can do. And then we all go north, right?”

“Yes. There is a safehouse. We can get across the border from there.”

“I thought you didn’t know about those things,” Ruppert said.

“I only know about this one. I’m not supposed to know about it, either.”

“Then it’s a lifetime of ice fishing and beaver trapping.”

“God willing.”

“God willing,” he agreed.



Goblin Valley was a low, rocky place between the Fishlake Mountains to the west and a dry tundra of badlands stretching away to the east, where the wind had carved the stone into elaborate fortresses, as if a forgotten race of giants had once lived and fought there. The valley itself teemed with thousands of enormous stone mushrooms, or “goblins,” the size of suburban homes. The school compound was barricaded inside concrete walls at the western cliffs of the valley, where the oddly shaped rocks created a landscape resembling vast human faces and skulls. The valley was without water and clearly never meant for human habitation.

Ruppert and Lucia drove through the open desert, far east of the valley, and also explored the mesas and canyons in the San Rafael Swell to the west. In the evening, they passed through the nearest town, Hanksville, whose main attraction seemed to be the Hollow Mountain gas station, carved into the side of a rock.

Hanksville provided much support to the Goblin Valley facility, judging by the numerous vans and trucks with “Goblin Valley School for Males” stamped on their doors. Ruppert noted six such trucks parked outside “Berna’s Lounge,” a cinderblock building with a sheet-metal roof, the town’s only apparent drinking establishment, located just outside the official town limits. He noticed a few more of them at a five-story brick apartment building at the center of town, and others parked in the driveways of small houses.

Their plan took shape as they studied the situation. At night, they hid in the shadows among southern Utah’s endless slot canyons and narrow, rocky valleys. They slept in the back of the truck on the forest-camouflage tarp, all their clothes piled around them for warmth, each one sleeping half the night and keeping guard the other half, watching for bandits, police, or Terror.

On their fourth night in Utah, a Friday, Lucia parked the Brontosaur in the parking lot at Berna’s Lounge, positioning it so that the driver’s-side door faced the bar, while the

passenger side looked out to the empty desert. Ruppert was slouched down deep in his seat, out of sight. It was a few minutes before eleven.

“Wish me luck,” Lucia said. She’d dressed in a long cotton skirt and a skimpy top that left most of her belly and chest exposed. Dressing that way could get you arrested for public immorality in Ruppert’s old neighborhood, but such attire on a young woman was always welcome wherever men gathered to drink.

“Luck,” Ruppert said. He took her hand, which was decorated with chunky, glittery fake jewelry she’d purchased in a flea market three towns away. “This is your last chance to turn back. Are you sure?”

Lucia shook her head. “No second thoughts.”

“No second thoughts,” he agreed.

“Are you ready?”

“As much as possible.”

“Good. Keep your eyes open.” Lucia reached for the door handle, then surprised him by leaning over and kissing him on the mouth. His hands reached to embrace her, and he had a quick impression of ribs, taut muscle, and hot skin before she pulled away.

Ruppert gave her a smile. “Remember—”

“I know,” she interrupted. “Identify the highest-status male in the room.”

“I was going to say, be careful.”

“That, too.” Lucia half-smiled at him, then eased the truck door open. They’d long since dismantled the cab’s interior light. She dropped to the blacktop and closed the door behind her. Ruppert slid across the seat and peered over the edge of the window, keeping his head low. He watched her pass the row of Goblin Valley School pick-up trucks, her skirt fluttering around her in the cool desert wind. Then she opened the front door and disappeared.

Ruppert slid back to the passenger side and opened the door about half an inch. He reached under the seat, and his fingers closed on the cold, heavy mass of the tire iron. Then he returned to the driver’s side, and he looked out the window, and he waited.

When he’d suggested to Lucia that they should arm themselves with guns, she’d refused the idea immediately.

“To carry a gun is to become a beast,” she’d said. “Like them. Guns are for those who live in fear.”

“But you carry that knife,” Ruppert had pointed out.

“A knife has many uses,” Lucia said. “A girl has to be sensible.”

Ruppert clutched the tire iron in both hands and tried to think of it that way. It was the sensible thing to do. In this situation, it was entirely reasonable. He thought of the picture of Lucia’s boy, Fernando Luis Santos, barely ten years old, his entire education focused on mountain warfare and counterinsurgency, and probably a fair amount of Dominionist dogma. He hoped the kid was worth it.

His thoughts drifted to Madeline, as they sometimes did. She was probably happier, he’d decided, as long as Terror left her alone. Certainly a Terror alert for her own husband would be more than an embarrassment at church—she might even have been banished from the congregation. He hoped Pastor John hadn’t done that. Madeline lived to belong and be accepted.

The door to Bertha's opened, and Ruppert's hands tightened on the tire iron. A bearded man in long shorts emerged, meandered across the parking lot to a beaten old Mustang, and drove away, drifting slightly into the wrong side of the road.

It was another hour before Lucia finally emerged, stumbling as if she'd had a little too much to drink, and Ruppert wondered if she really had. She beamed at the man who escorted her out. He looked to be in his late fifties, his hair cut into a flattop the color of steel. He possessed the wide neck and arms of a former athlete, with a paunchy gut to match. He wore a khaki uniform jacket with golden epaulets, unbuttoned now, displaying a loosened tie and a partially untucked shirt. Lucia swayed and leaned on his arm as he guided her toward the row of Goblin Valley trucks.

Ruppert slid back to the passenger side door, which he'd left ajar, and nudged it open. He eased down to the pavement with the tire iron in his hand. He looked up and down the empty road, grateful they were in the middle of nowhere.

He crept around the front of the truck, keeping himself lower than the hood. Ahead, the uniformed man opened the passenger door on a Goblin Valley truck and gestured for Lucia to get inside. Ruppert would have to pass two more trucks and then cross two open parking spots to reach him. The distance might have been thirty or forty feet, but it looked as wide as the Great Plains to Ruppert.

Lucia rested a hand on the side of the man's truck, bent down, and began working at one of her shoes, apparently intending to remove it but having difficulty. Buying time.

Ruppert changed course and passed behind the tailgate of the first Goblin Valley truck. He dropped even lower, into a kind of walking crouch, as he passed behind the second truck. He stopped at the rear bumper and peered around. There was nothing but open blacktop left between himself and the school officer.

Lucia had removed one shoe and was working at the other. Her stooped-over position held the man's attention. He stroked his hand down her smooth, brown back, then cupped her buttocks through the thin material of her skirt. Lucia looked back over her shoulder, gave the man a wink. The man tugged the waist of her skirt down and poked his fingers at the black fringe of her panties.

Ruppert held his breath as he crossed the empty parking spots, raising the tire iron like a baseball bat. The man must have sensed his approach, because just before Ruppert reached him, he turned and looked Ruppert in the eyes. The man's own eyes were droopy with alcohol, but they flared at the sight of Ruppert, and his mouth opened wide and he took in a deep breath, ready to call for help.

Ruppert swung hard. The hexagonal end of the tire iron bashed into the side of the man's skull. The impact sent shudders up Ruppert's arm.

Lucia pulled away from the man as he lurched a step toward Ruppert, one hand grasping at the air before him, his mouth working soundlessly. Ruppert struck at him again, but this time his aim was off and he only clipped the man's lower jaw. He stepped forward and hit him again, and the man flopped back against his truck and slumped to the ground.

Ruppert continued to strike at the man's head, over and over. The world was narrow and dark around him, containing only the school officer's face and Ruppert's own sudden rage, which boiled up from inside him. Later he would try to tell himself that he was just trying to be safe, he couldn't allow this trainer of soldiers one moment to collect himself, because Ruppert would surely lose a fair fight with the man. But in his mind he

was seeing the man's hand fondle Lucia, and he was seeing the Captain watching with disinterested blue eyes as two guards held Ruppert against the floor and beat him, and he was seeing George Baldwin, the Terror agent at the studio, and he was seeing Pastor John's beatific, collagen-molded face.

"Enough!" Lucia spoke in a loud whisper. "Daniel, enough! What's wrong with you?"

Ruppert stopped swinging the iron, blinked a few times, and looked down at the school officer. The man bled from his mouth, his nose, and both ears. He was not moving. Ruppert felt his stomach lurch.

"You don't think I killed him, do you?" Ruppert whispered.

"Yeah," Lucia said. "Maybe three or four times."

Ruppert knelt down, checked the man's wrist for a pulse. He could detect nothing.

"We have to get moving," Lucia squatted down and took the man's arms. "Help me."

They loaded him into the storage area behind the driver's seat in the Goblin Valley truck, and Ruppert laid the bloodied tire iron beside him. Lucia filched the man's wallet pack and handed it to Ruppert, who dug through it, searching for the truck key.

"Hurry." Lucia glanced toward the bar. "I think someone's coming out."

"I'll be fine," Ruppert said. "Go ahead."

Lucia nodded and dashed to the Brontosaur, circled around it to slam the passenger door closed, then jumped into the cab. Ruppert found the key and hurried to crank up the Goblin Valley truck. He followed Lucia out of the parking lot just as the door to Bertha's opened and two younger men in khaki uniforms stumbled out, laughing, their arms flung around each other.

Once they were on the road, Ruppert passed Lucia in order to drive in front of her. They'd decided that a truck from Goblin Valley would likely be ignored by local police, so the safest thing to do was let that truck lead the way, with the Bronto close behind, hopefully conveying the impression that the Bronto driver was some out-of-town guest of a school official.

They drove to a narrow canyon they'd selected along the western side of the San Rafael Swell plateau. Ruppert parked, then immediately removed his clothes and stripped the bloody school official down to his underwear. He moved the man delicately, not wanting to cause him any pain if he were alive. He still could not detect a pulse.

The driver's side door opened and Lucia leaned in. "Are we ready?"

"Working on it." Ruppert hauled on the man's pants, his shirt, fumbled with the tie.

"Don't worry about that," Lucia said.

"Make all the difference if some kid sees me." He managed to complete the knot and tighten it. He dressed in the school officer's jacket, though one sleeve was spattered with blood, then his shoes and hat. The Goblin Valley security system relied heavily on automated radio tags, which might be located anywhere in the man's wallet or uniform.

"How long until his buddies notice he's missing?" Ruppert said. He found the man's handkerchief and used it to soak up blood from the jacket sleeve.

"They think he hired me for the night," Lucia said. "They don't expect to see him back."

“Hired you?”

“Yeah. These guys are starved. You know they don’t allow any females inside the walls of the school? None. Ever. Nando’s probably never seen a girl since he got here.”

They transferred the school officer from the Goblin Valley truck to the Bronto, Ruppert taking extra care about the man’s wounded head. Lucia just shook her head at his concerns. They laid the man out in the truck bed and covered him with the forest-camouflage tarp, then closed the tailgate and covered the Bronto itself with the desert-camo tarp.

Ruppert checked his reflection in the Bronto’s window. The school official was three or four sizes too big for him, and the uniform drooped, and of course had those dark red blotches soaking the right arm. He adjusted his hat.

“Do I look believable?” he asked Lucia.

“We’ll say you do. Come on.”

They drove back to the school together in the Goblin Valley truck. Ruppert couldn’t stop thinking of the man he might have killed. Did he have family? Children? He imagined how it might be to die violently, at the hands of a stranger, for reasons that had absolutely nothing to do with you.

Then again, it was possible the man was abusive to the boys in his charge, and the world wouldn’t particularly suffer his loss. If he was married, he hadn’t demonstrated much loyalty to his wife.

“Good luck,” Lucia said, and she crawled behind the seat, into the narrow area where the man had lain. She covered herself with a fire blanket they’d found in the truck’s emergency kit. From a distance, those in the compound might think Ruppert was a guard or an instructor, but they would certainly notice Lucia, a female, did not belong.

Ruppert slowed to a crawl as he approached the western gate in the high walls of the Goblin Valley School. The gate showed no signs of moving aside for him, so he had to stop altogether. There was a guard booth beside him, but thankfully it appeared dark and empty.

“What’s happening?” Lucia whispered behind him.

“Nothing.” Ruppert reached for the touchscreen mounted in the dashboard.

“Maybe there’s some kind of—”

Before he finished his thought, the dashboard screen emitted a rapid series of high-pitched beeps. Ahead, the gate clattered as it rolled aside. Ruppert drove into the compound.

The buildings inside were dull cubes of cinderblock, a style of architecture that screamed government bureaucracy. He might have been visiting a public school, or a prison, or the local office of the Department of Faith and Values.

The row of buildings on his left gave way to a paneled aluminum wall. He checked the map of the compound.

“We’re passing the ordinance sheds,” he said.

“Here.” Lucia passed him a bundle of six plastic tubes, each of them about ten inches long and painted black to make them less visible to security cameras. Each had a number between 1 and 6 scratched into it. As he drove, he pitched four of them over the wall on his left, hopefully scattering them among the storage sheds on the other side.

Lucia had built the explosives from household chemicals and fixed each with a detonator. The number buttons on Lucia's specialized remote control each corresponded to one of the bombs. She'd gutted most of the remote's parts, along with most of its functionality, to help prepare for the mission.

Ruppert arrived without incident at the row of long, narrow lodges housing boys in Nando's age group. He parked right in front of Lodge 10. They would need quick access to the vehicle if things turned sour.

"We're here," Ruppert whispered. He climbed out of the truck, then helped Lucia crawl out to join him.

The lodge was made of the same dusty concrete as the other buildings. Five concrete steps led up to a shallow concrete porch, where a single closed door gave access to the windowless lodge. Lucia looked at the door and trembled. He took her hand, but she gave no sign of noticing it.

Ruppert gazed along the unlined black road. From the security map, he knew the school bristled with cameras, not all of them visible. They would have a video record of him, which would undoubtedly find its way to Terror, though he hoped bureaucratic inefficiency and territorialism might delay that a day or two. It was a slender hope.

The main concern, of course, was whether anyone was monitoring the cameras right now and might notice that Ruppert wasn't actually a school employee, or that Lucia wasn't in any sense a male. They'd had plenty of luck so far. Lucia's carnovirus must have done its job on Liam O'Shea's home office, as well as the Child and Family server.

He'd half-expected a pack of Terror agents lying in wait when they arrived. Or maybe they were here, still waiting for the order to ambush. Ruppert glanced at the dark alleys between the cinderblock buildings, but they were pitch black. If men in dark coats or uniforms hid there, he would not be able to see them.

"Are you ready?" he whispered to Lucia, who continued staring at the door.

After a moment, she nodded.

They proceeded up the steps, Lucia's hand still shivering in Ruppert's. Ruppert waved the school officer's identity card at the keypad beside the door, and its single light turned from red to green. They entered the lodge.

Inside, they stood in a sour-smelling, wood-floored anteroom. To their right, a rectangular window looked into a room that served as a station for a guard or supervisor. It contained a flat table with a data console, its cluster of pinpoint lights burning blue in the darkened room. There was an office chair behind the table and three smaller, plain chairs facing it.

Ruppert stepped to the office door and waved the identicard to unlock it. He held it open for Lucia, who tossed aside the fire blanket and walked to the tall microphone next to the data console. She unscrewed the mesh bulb at the top of the microphone, and then she withdrew from her pocket a circuit board, once a part of her remote control, and wired it into the microphone. She depressed the last of a row of buttons at the microphone's base, labeled with a strip of masking tape: GENERAL/OUTDOOR. Then she pushed the power button to activate the microphone.

They took care to make no sound as they left the room, and closed the door very cautiously. She gave him a thumbs-up sign and an attempt at a smile.

They continued from the anteroom into the hallway running down the center of the lodge. They passed a dreary rec room hung with dusty, unpainted drywall and

furnished with a few badly wounded sofas facing a chunky, outdated video screen. A dusty ping-pong table occupied a back corner of the room.

There seemed to be no interior doors in the dorm area, not even for the bathroom, where a row of toilets faced a row of showerheads. The boys were clearly meant to live with zero privacy of any kind. Ruppert wondered if they were instructed to watch each other for misbehavior, like the pastors encouraged at Golden Tabernacle.

They crept into the long dorm room, where twenty boys between the ages of ten and twelve slept on twenty bunk beds. Everything was gray—the walls, the sheets, the t-shirts and pajamas of the boys. The only splashes of color were large posters warning against the evils of foreigners and masturbation.

Lucia stalked from one to the next, looking for her son. Ruppert struggled to remember the picture of the boy he'd seen in Liam's office. He could feel the seconds ticking past, each one bringing him closer to the moment when a boy would waken and notice them, or a guard would come to investigate why a school official had returned to work late on a Friday night.

Lucia grabbed his sleeve, motioned excitedly towards one of the lower bunks. They edged toward the bed, and Lucia reached out her hand. The boy slept like a tin soldier in a box—flat on his back, arms and legs perfectly straight. The sole sign of childishness was a spit bubble swelling on his lips.

Lucia nodded, and they closed in on him. She covered her son's mouth with her right hand, and then pinned down both his arms with her left arm. At the same time, Ruppert seized Nando's feet to prevent him from kicking out against the bunk bed frame to make noise and alert the others.

Nando's eyes snapped open and he immediately tried to swing his arms, then his feet. Ruppert struggled to keep his feet pinned. The boy was incredibly strong for his small size.

Nando grunted and tried to speak, but Lucia kept him muffled. His eyes rolled to her and grew wide, and he bucked his entire body several times, trying to break loose. He reminded Ruppert of a spooked horse.

"Sh," Lucia whispered. "It's okay, Nando."

Nando continued struggling until he looked at Ruppert. His gaze dashed over Ruppert's hat and jacket, and then the boy fell limp and quiet. It took Ruppert a moment to realize the boy was automatically obedient to any adult wearing the school uniform.

"Stay quiet," Ruppert whispered. "Come with us right now."

Nando nodded, and they released him. He stood, saluted Ruppert, then strode towards the foot locker at the end of his bunk bed. Lucia took him by the arm, shook her head. Nando looked to Ruppert, who shook his head and pointed towards the hall.

Nando walked towards the empty doorframe on the balls of his bare feet, making no sound on the warped floorboards. Ruppert did not have as much luck—one of the boards groaned under his shoe.

A boy in a top bunk sat up suddenly, like Frankenstein's monster jolting to life. His eyes locked onto Lucia and scanned down her body: long hair, breasts, curving hips. From the horrified expression on his face, she might have been a slimy, tentacled alien. He reacted in probably the only way he knew how. He opened his mouth and screamed:

"Foreigner!"

The other boys snapped up to a sitting position as if each one were a spring-loaded bar on a mousetrap. The call repeated itself from bunk to bunk. Boys jumped to their feet and hurried towards them, falling into a tight semicircle formation around Ruppert, Lucia, and Nando.

“Stop!” Ruppert yelled, and they froze, straightened up their backs, and saluted him. He noticed puzzled looks on some of their faces—he’d probably used the wrong terminology. He sifted his memory for war movie dialogue.

“Attention!” he said. Twenty boys, including Nando, lay the flats of their hands parallel to their sides and lifted their chins, their faces stoic. Ruppert struggled to think of something to say next. As he looked among them, it occurred to him that it might be best to say nothing at all.

He tapped Nando’s shoulder. “Come along...” Happily, the school’s name for the boy popped into his mind. “Liberty.”

“Yes, sir.”

The three of them moved on into the hall and towards the front door. Ruppert’s nerves were on a hair trigger, urging him to run, but he fought them down.

He opened the front door, looked out into the road. It seemed clear. They left the lodge, down the steps, and towards the Goblin Valley truck, and then a pair of high beams swung out from a corner down the road and rushed towards them.

“Get going!” Ruppert shouted, and they hurried to the truck, Lucia half-dragging Nando, then boosting him up through the passenger door. She climbed in after him.

Ruppert was running around to the driver’s side, unfortunately located in the direction of the approaching headlights, when the lights swerved and a Goblin Valley truck parked slantwise in front of him. A second truck pulled in behind it.

A uniformed, pimply young man with very bloodshot eyes leaned out the driver’s side of the nearest truck.

“Hey Gus, what the hell are you doing back here?” the young man asked, blinking rapidly.

“That ain’t Gus,” said the other uniformed man riding shotgun with him.

Ruppert jumped up into the cab and slammed the door. He cranked it and slammed the gas. The two trucks peeled out as they turned to pursue him. Piercing blue lights strobed from their headlamps and grilles—apparently Goblin Valley trucks had been authorized as police vehicles, too. Sirens howled from both trucks.

“Permission to speak, staff sergeant?” Nando asked. Ruppert swerved around a tight corner, intent on reaching the gate before the guards put the school in lockdown. It took him several seconds to process what Nando had said, then grasp that the boy was addressing him.

“Yeah, go ahead.” Ruppert glanced in the rearview and could have wept. There were now four trucks chasing him, blue lights flashing. He made another sharp turn, tires skittering and squealing across the pavement, then righted the truck and accelerated.

Lucia found the controls for the blue lights in their own truck and switched them on.

“Is this a special night exercise, sir?” Nando asked.

“Sure, call it that,” Ruppert said.

The boy frowned and sat back, folding his arms in.

Lucia lifted her modified remote, which no longer had any wires dangling from it. She pressed the PLAY button. Every loudspeaker in the compound sprang to life, repeating a single phrase again and again:

“Allahu akbar! Allahu akbar!”

It was the suicide bomber slogan “God is great!” They hoped it would confuse the people in the compound about what was happening—maybe they would think the next event was a suicide bombing.

Lucia pressed the 4 button on her remote, and thunder and smoke exploded behind the wall, which was now on the right side of the truck. Seconds later, char and ash rained down on the trucks behind him.

She worked back from 3 to 1, summoning columns of flame behind the aluminum wall. The last bomb actually blasted loose a panel of the aluminum fence, which slammed into the truck immediately behind him. That truck swerved and crashed sidelong into a cinderblock wall, but more trucks were close behind.

Lucia lifted one of the two remaining bombs.

“I’m taking 5,” she said. She slid open the rear window of the truck and crawled through it, then dropped facedown into the truck bed behind Ruppert. Ahead, the western gate blocked his path, and hadn’t even begun moving for him. He remembered how long he’d waited last time, and swore under his breath. He lightened up on the accelerator.

He glanced in the rearview. Lucia squirmed on her stomach along the bed of the truck, bomb in one hand, remote in the other. He hoped she kept her fingers away from the number buttons. Blue lights flashed from the rear of his own truck. Maybe some of the pursuers in the back would lose track of which truck was the quarry, since they all looked identical. In the confusion, some of them not even grasp that they were chasing one of their own trucks.

His speed dropped to fifty, then forty-five. The gate wasn’t budging.

Lucia leaned up over the tailgate and flung the bomb. It cracked into the lead pursuer’s windshield, then she pressed the remote and dropped to the truck bed, covering her head with her arms.

Red light filled the rearview mirror. Ruppert had no choice but to slow even more as he approached the gate. Fire engulfed the truck behind them. Fortunately, the driver had managed to hit the brakes and slow the truck, or it would have slammed directly into Ruppert’s tailgate, and into Lucia.

Then the truck immediately behind that one crashed into it, which boosted the flaming truck forward. Ruppert waited, idling, at the western gate, and could only watch it approach, like a burning barge on a swift current.

Lucia scrambled toward the open window. Already, another Goblin Valley truck was nosing its way around the side of the bombed truck, its driver struggling to avoid the burning pyre on one side of him and the solid concrete wall on the other. The truck crept forward.

A guard leaned out the passenger side door and raised something long and black in his hands.

“Get the fuck down!” Lucia screamed as she slithered in through the window. She smacked Ruppert’s face sideways into the seat, then rolled on top of him. Ruppert reached for Nando, but the boy was gone—he’d already tucked himself down on the

floorboard, knees drawn to his chin. His face was eerily placid. A sane boy would have been screaming right now. Ruppert felt like screaming himself.

The machine gun sounded like a thousand corks popping from a thousand bottles of champagne. The guard strafed the truck, obliterating the front and rear windshields, the headrests, chunks of the steering wheel and upper dashboard, the side view mirrors. Lucia tumbled down to the floorboard to protect Nando with her body.

The stutter of bullets ceased, and Ruppert dared to poke his head up and look over the dashboard, through the remnants of the windshield. Miraculously, the western gate was rolling aside. Already it stood half-open, nearly wide enough for the truck.

He turned his head and looked out the rear at the next Goblin Valley truck, the one that had shot at them. It had forced its way past the burning truck and now accelerated towards him.

“We’re going.” Ruppert still spoke in a whisper, despite the sirens screaming behind them and the loudspeakers chanted Arabic battle prayer. “Get ready with number six.”

Lucia pulled herself up to a kneeling position on the floorboard and grabbed the final bomb.

Ruppert swung his feet down to the pedals, so that he was halfway between sitting up and lying on his side. He stomped the accelerator and swerved the truck to drive it through the opened portion of the gate. Twin metallic squeals sounded along the sides of the truck as the side mirrors sheared away. The truck scraped between the receding gate on one side and the concrete wall on the other.

Then they pulled loose and they were free, charging towards the menagerie of stone goblins filling the valley. Ruppert squinted against the wind pressing in on him through the open windshield area.

“Now!” Ruppert yelled, but Lucia was already pitching number 6 out through the demolished rear window. It struck the ground just outside the open gate, a few yards ahead of the caravan of trucks.

Lucia clicked the remote, and a fireball engulfed the gate area, which was still close enough behind that a wave of heat ruffled through Ruppert’s hair. She hurled the remote itself, entirely stripped and useless now, out the window, and it shattered against a passing boulder.

Without all his mirrors shot away, and a field of giant boulders ahead, Ruppert couldn’t waste time looking back to see whether the bomb had destroyed the next truck, or in some other way blocked the gate. They would know soon enough.

He pushed himself upright and rammed the gas pedal to the floor, and soon he was dodging the maze of elevated boulders on their narrow sandstone stalks. The fire and smoke at Goblin Valley School retreated behind them. Ruppert let himself breathe again, and glanced down at Nando, who’d remained silent through the entire ordeal.

The boy glared up at him, his mouth fixed in a thin, straight line, his dark eyes blazing. Was the kid going to cause trouble now?

“Incoming!” Lucia cried. She grabbed the steering wheel and jerked it to the right. A screaming, whistling sound punctured the air next to Ruppert’s ear. He saw the artillery rocket slam into a cluster of the big goblin boulders ahead, enveloping them in flame, kicking up wide jets of sand. The dirt track they were traveling led directly into the flames and the swelling black cloud of smoke.

Two large boulders, the first one the size of a beach ball, the next one much larger, hurtled out of the smoke, rolling towards them.

Ruppert slewed off the road into sand, and found himself dodging rock formations that seemed leap towards him wherever he turned. Some of them towered above the truck.

More artillery pounded the unbalanced spires of rock around them, and a rain of shattered stone hammered the roof of the cab, denting it in more than a dozen places. Ruppert threaded among the goblins as best he could, losing most of his speed to the difficult maneuvering and the jagged, rocky ground. A few times he even caught a tire against a boulder and had to reverse and change course.

The rockets screamed down at them, toppling more of the rocks, which not only pummeled the truck but also blocked off many of their potential escape routes. Ruppert noticed they all seemed to land very close to the truck. The guards, or perhaps students, weren't shelling the valley at random, but knew exactly where to find Ruppert and Lucia.

"GPS!" Ruppert shouted at Lucia. She was reaching down and trying to take Nando's hands, but the boy wanted nothing to do with her. Nando ignored his mother, but he was glowering at Ruppert.

Lucia kicked at the underside of the console, then grabbed underneath it, gritted her teeth and pulled. She ripped free a plastic module the size of a poker chip and flung it out the passenger window.

Ruppert continued to push ahead, and within a minute they were out of range of the falling shells. He looked behind him, but saw only solid black. Smoke and sand occluded the valley

He found his way back to the dirt road, and at last he could really make some time.

"Sir?" Nando asked. He was still lying curled on the floor, staring up at Ruppert.

"What is it?" Ruppert asked. "Are you hurt?"

"You're not really a staff sergeant, are you, sir?" the boy asked.

"Nando," Lucia said, and the boy cast her a sharp look. "Don't you know who I am?"

Nando stared at her for a long moment. "Are you in the movies?"

"Nando, I'm your mother."

The boy's brow furrowed. "Is this...an interrogation exercise?"

"Please, Nando." Lucia's eyes glistened. "Try to remember."

They climbed up out of the smoke-filled valley, heading northwest. Then, at last, the fires among the ordinance sheds must have touched something serious, because a narrow geyser of flame ejected straight up and out of the smoldering school compound, reminding Ruppert of the pillar of flame in the movie *Exodus*. He thought of the boys he'd left standing at attention, and hoped they'd had the sense to scatter and lay low when the fighting started.

Nando climbed up to look out the passenger window, and Lucia moved aside to let him sit.

"My parents died in the wars," Nando said. He stared at the pillar of fire. "Like all the kids at school. My dad in Nigeria, my mom in the Philippines. Commandant Redding told me. He showed me pictures."

"It isn't true, Nando." Lucia reached for his hand, but again he jerked away.

“Why do you keep calling me that?”

“It is your name. Fernando Luis Santos. And mine is Lucia Santos. Your mother.” She took his hands in hers. “Look at me, Fernando.”

Lucia leaned close to his ear and whispered, most of it too low for Ruppert to hear. It was Spanish, too low and fast for Ruppert to understand.

“Stop it,” Nando said. His voice was low and quivering. “I have to think.”

“Nando,” Lucia whispered. “Do you remember—”

“I have to think!” the boy snapped. He looked directly ahead, squinting into the wind that rolled over the bullet-scarred dashboard.

Lucia looked at Ruppert with a pained expression, her lips drawn and thin. He tried to smile, and he drove on.



Ruppert felt himself relax a little as they pulled into the tight canyon where they'd stashed the Bronto. Lucia and Nando left the Goblin Valley truck, while Ruppert lingered inside to change out of the bloodstained school uniform, in the process lifting the cash from the staff sergeant's wallet, and then back into his own clothes. Through the shattered windshield, he overheard them:

“Where are we going?” Nando asked.

“We're leaving for somewhere safe, up north.”

“When do I go back to school?”

“You don't ever have to go back there. You're free now, Nando.”

“I'm always free,” Nando said. “I'm an American.”

“Yes, you are, Nando.”

“If you're my mother, is that man my father?” Nando whispered.

“No.”

“Is he your commanding officer?”

“No, I am the commanding officer.”

“Excuse me?” Ruppert asked. He'd finished changing, and now closed the door of the Goblin Valley truck behind him.

“I am,” Lucia insisted. “You don't know what you're doing.”

“I know we have one more thing to do before we can go.” Ruppert glanced at the rear of the Brontosaur, sheathed in its desert tarp. Lucia nodded.

“Nando,” she said, “Why don't you go stand at the front end of this truck, and wait there for a minute, all right?”

“Yes, sir.” Nando turned on his heel and marched to the front of the camouflaged truck, where he stood at attention.

Ruppert and Lucia lifted the tarp from the back of the truck and pushed it forward, unveiling the rear half of the Bronto. They lowered the tailgate and raised the door panel in the back of the truck's camper top. Ruppert stared at the heap of forest-colored tarp for a moment.

After seeing what the school did to boys in their charge, he felt a bit less sorry for the men they'd hurt or even killed in the course of extracting Nando. He hoped some of

the other boys had used the opportunity to escape, though he didn't know where they might have gone. Perhaps they were too brainwashed to try such a thing, in any case.

He lifted up the tarp. There was nothing underneath but a long smear of partly dried blood.

"Shit," Ruppert said, just before the impact on the back of his head spun him forward and slammed his head into the side of the camper top. He felt like he was caught in a small tornado as something swept him up, pulled him back, slammed him a few times against the side of the truck, then pitched him forward, Ruppert's face dragging the desert-colored tarp off the remainder of the truck.

A large pair of rough, calloused hands grabbed Ruppert up and shoved him back against the door of the Bronto. The school official, the staff sergeant Ruppert thought he had murdered, loomed before him, the size of a grizzly bear, his upper torso and his entire head encrusted with sand glued on by dried blood, one eye swollen shut, looking very much like one of the wilderness demons Pastor John preached about. He snarled at Ruppert through broken teeth.

The staff sergeant hissed, his body curling to one side. Lucia had slashed him across the ribs with her obsidian blade, and then scurried back from him. He dropped Ruppert and charged after her.

Ruppert struggled to his feet, pushing himself up along the truck door. He thought he heard could hear a bass drum thumping somewhere deep inside his brain. The moonlit world around him blinkered in and out.

The staff sergeant snatched Lucia's knife hand in one of his own, then pinned her thumb back while twisting her wrist. The blade spilled from her fingers and stabbed deep into the sand at her feet.

Ruppert forced his right foot to slide forward, then his left. He focused on the staff sergeant's twisted, glowering face, pushing himself toward the bigger man. His ribs ached from repeated slamming against the truck, possibly cracked. He didn't know what he would do when he reached the man—Ruppert doubted he could do much more than lean on him.

Then the staff sergeant rolled backward out of his field of vision. Ruppert's aching neck turning slowly, and he saw the large man sprawl out on his back onto sand and sharp rocks, a look of shock on his face.

Nando scurried on his hands and knees away from the man's legs and up to his head. He held Lucia's blade in one hand, and it was dripping. In one nimble, fluid movement, he knelt beside the fallen man, raised the blade high with the tip of its blade pointed straight at the man's Adam apple, and then he stabbed it downward in a perfectly straight line.

The man's hands wrapped around Nando's upper arms, and his legs kicked from the knees, his feet flopping uselessly. Ruppert saw that the Nando had slashed across the man's heels, severing both his Achilles tendons.

Nando dragged the blade around the man's neck, with the calm expertise of a butcher, halfway decapitating him. Then Nando let the staff sergeant's head flop back, bleeding out into the sand. Every muscle in the man twitched, as he were having a small seizure, and then he died.

Lucia stepped gently toward her son.

"Nando? Nando, are you all right?"

Nando swiped both sides of the knife across the man's chest, painting a bloody X. "That's Staff Sergeant Meyers," Nando said. "Now I can never go back." He stood, and he offered the blade to Lucia, handle first. "The Commandant is going to kill me."

"He won't find you," Lucia said. "Come on, we're behind schedule now." She began gathering the desert-colored tarp. Nando and Ruppert stared at the dead man.

"Are you all right?" Ruppert asked him. The boy nodded. "Thank you. You saved our lives. I'm sorry you had to do it."

Nando stayed quiet for several seconds, and then he shrugged. "It's okay. Everyone wants to kill Staff Sergeant Meyers." And the boy turned and marched toward the Bronto's cab.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Lucia drove them north, into the Rocky Mountains and Wyoming, following a course of high, twisting roads through one of the least populated regions in America. They'd siphoned the gas from the Goblin Valley truck before leaving, and now the Bronto could travel for several hours before stopping again. Ruppert sat on the passenger side, still aching from his fight in the desert.

Nando sat in the back seat of the Bronto, alternating between long periods of silence and long barrages of questions.

"If you're really my mom, how come it took you so long to come get me?" he asked at one point.

"I tried, Nando. The officials keep your location secret. They don't want your parents to find you."

"I don't believe that. Who was my father, then?"

"I have not seen him in a long time, Nando. He was taken to prison."

"For why?"

"For helping the wrong war victims. Practicing medicine."

Nando frowned. "The Commandant told me my father was in Special Forces, and he commanded a regiment of the Nigerian army against the Islamofascists. He died defending America."

"He commanded a...small regiment of volunteers. Like me. He was a very, very good man. You would have loved him, and he would have loved you."

Nando took that in for a moment, then pointed at Ruppert. "If he's not my father, and he's not your commander, who is he?"

"My name is Daniel," Ruppert said. "I'm just helping your mother."

"Why?"

"Because she's helped me, and now it's my turn."

"Oh." Nando sat back and stared out the window again. Then he asked, "Where is your base?"

"We don't have a base, Nando," Lucia said. "We aren't part of an army."

“So you’re irregulars.”

“We aren’t soldiers,” Lucia said.

“Intelligence?”

“No.”

“You aren’t civilians, I saw everything you did back there. You’re terrorists, aren’t you?”

“We’re just people, Nando,” she told him. “Just trying to survive.”

“You bombed our base,” Nando said. “You took me prisoner. Who was that on the P.A.?”

“That was me,” Ruppert said.

“You don’t speak Arabic too good.”

“I don’t speak it at all,” Ruppert said. “Just what you hear on the news.”

Nando recited a long, fluid Arabic verse, then smiled and translated, “‘In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful. Praise be to Allah, the Cherisher and Sustainer of the worlds.’ That’s the opener for the Koran.”

“They teach you about Islam?” Lucia asked.

“It’s just for controlling foreigners,” Nando said. “In church we study the New Dominion Bible.”

“That’s what we used at my church, too,” Ruppert said.

After a long pause, Nando asked, “Am I going to Hell for going AWOL?”

“No, Fernando,” Lucia said. “You’re going to be fine.”

Lucia shifted gears to climb a steep, narrow dirt road. They were far from any highway, once again relying on the maps stored in Archer’s dashboard computer. Ruppert hoped there weren’t any surprise washouts ahead, or fallen rocks blocking their path.

The driving was rough, steep, and much slower than they would have liked, but the Rockies provided far more cover than the flat, open lands to the east or west. Lucia said that mountains were the best setting for guerrilla war, the kind of terrain that yielded least to control by central governments, which were more interested in ruling cities and masses of people than rocks and goats.

Nando launched into an enthusiastic monologue on the subject, describing in detail tactics employed by mujahideen against Soviet and American soldiers in the Hindu Kush mountains of Afghanistan. He seemed to be adjusting to the sudden events fairly well, enjoying the sight of moonlit mountain pinnacles outlined against the stars.

They drove through the night, northward along the roughest mountain roads, Ruppert fading in and out of consciousness. They shared a jug of juice, a bag of nuts and dried berries, a few squares of chocolate. Eventually Nando fell asleep as well.

Ruppert woke to Lucia shaking his arm. He blinked as his eyes adjusted to the soft early morning light.

She’d parked by the side of an overgrown dirt track winding through a valley encircled by sheer, dark bluffs. Within the bluffs, blooming meadows and veins of rock sloped down to a clear alpine lake, reflecting the gold and red of the sunrise over the snowy peaks to the east. A white mist emanated from the lake itself, obscuring the far side of the valley.

“What is it?” Ruppert asked.

“Look at this place,” Lucia said. “Have you ever been anywhere like this?”

Ruppert thought of his closest experience, looking at an uninhabited island over a railing as he and Madeline rode the Pirate's Booty tour boat through the Virgin Islands. The ride had been narrated by Captain Steve, who wore a plastic hook hand, an eyepatch, and an automatron parrot who squawked one-liners. He shook his head.

"Nando," Lucia said. "Nando, wake up. We're stopping for a while."

The boy stirred, rubbed at his eyes, then gasped at he took in the landscape.

"Can I go outside?" he asked.

They poured out of the truck into the meadow, fragrant and richly colored with late summer blooms. Ruppert stood and stretched, breathing in the pristine air.

"Where are we?" he asked Lucia.

"Wyoming," she said. "There is nothing out here, no towns. We are as safe as we could be."

Nando saluted his mother. "Permission to scout the area, sir?"

"Stay where I can see you," Lucia said. "And you say ma'am when you talk to a woman, not sir."

"Yes, sir. Ma'am." Nando clomped through the high grasses and flowers, still dressed in gray pajamas, wearing Ruppert's extra pair of shoes.

"Do you think that's safe?" Ruppert passed a hand through the tall grass beside him, nearly as high as his waist.

"He seems disciplined enough."

Ruppert couldn't argue with that. They ambled downward along the meadow, toward the glowing lake painted the colors of sunrise. Nando ran far ahead of them, zigging and zagging through the meadow, head low as if avoiding imaginary gunfire.

"Do you think he'll ever be normal?" she asked.

"I think he's very prepared for the world he'll have to live in," Ruppert said.

They reached the pebbled shore of the lake. The water lay clear and still before them, and Ruppert could see all the way to the stony, sandy bottom. He looked off to their right, where Nando had taken an interest in one of the crooked veins of stone that ran down from the cliffs and divided the meadow into sections. The boy inspected the rocks closely, probably looking for a place to climb.

"How cold do you bet the water is?" Lucia asked.

"Freezing," Ruppert told her. "Don't even think about it."

She kicked off her shoe, dipped a toe in the edge of the lake. "It's not so bad. I haven't had a real bath since California. Neither have you." She pinched her nose, keeping her face solemn.

"This isn't a real bath, either. Besides, Nando—"

"We can watch him from here." The boy was walking up along a flat vein of rock toward the dark bluffs, arms wide as if he were navigating a tightrope, though the ridge was wide and low. The gorgeous colors of the morning sky glowed around him.

Lucia peeled off her skirt and tossed it into the grass, then weighed it down with rocks against the cool morning breeze. She waded out into the lake wearing the black panties and the short top she'd purchased to seduce the staff sergeant. She turned back to face Ruppert, smiling and waving, and then dived into the deeper water toward the center of the lake.

Ruppert glanced back towards Nando, who now lay on his back on the stone ridge, looking up at a stream of low, fluffy red and yellow clouds streaming across the sky just above them, nearly close enough to touch.

Ruppert took off his own shoes and jeans, then followed her into the water. It was so cold that it seemed to grab both his legs.

“Better if you just dive in,” Lucia told him. She treaded water several yards from the shore.

“I know that.” Ruppert plunged into the clear depths, dunking his head under the frigid surface to soak his hair. The water was painfully cold, until his skin grew numb.

“That feels so good, doesn’t it?” Lucia said.

“Sure. Ready to get out?”

Lucia swam up to him, her head submerged up to the eyes like an alligator. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and pushed her body up against him.

“Thank you for all of this,” she said. “I could not have rescued him without you.”

She gave him a long kiss. For some reason, he could only think of how easily she’d tricked the man from Goblin Valley.

“You don’t have to do this,” he whispered.

She pushed back from him and lay floating on her back, sunlight glittering on her damp skin, eyes closed. “This is the perfect moment,” she said. “Don’t ruin it.”

Ruppert swam for a couple of minutes, occasionally glancing up the slope to see that Nando was still close. He thought about all the copies of his interview with Hollis Westerly now beginning to circulate out in the world. Lucia and Nando were minor figures to Terror, nonexistent in terms of public perception. Daniel Ruppert, though, had been a recognizable media presence, at least in southern California, before turning guerilla journalist (or “terror propagandist,” as the charge would surely read at his closed-door tribunal). Terror would want his blood, and would never cease hunting him.

If he settled in the same place as Lucia and Nando after they crossed into Canada, he would only become an unnecessary threat to their safety. As if the mountain water had cleared his mind, he now saw that he would have to help the two of them across the border, but then part ways with them forever. Over time, they could build new identities, and the world itself might change for the better, but Ruppert would have powerful enemies hunting him as long as he lived.

He returned to the shore, shivering hard, and replaced his jeans and shoes. He glanced up to check on Nando, and saw the boy hurtling down the meadow towards him, arms wide. Nando opened his mouth and began screaming, his voice redounding off the mountains around them, but Ruppert couldn’t make out his words.

“What is it, Nando?” Ruppert asked. The boy rushed towards him with great, leaping steps down the slope. He jumped up and down, jabbering words too fast for Ruppert to follow, and pointed across the lake.

Ruppert and Lucia, who had just reached the shore, turned back to look across the lake. On the meadow sloping up and away from the far side of the lake, where most of the fog had now burned away, a herd of elk nibbled among the thick grasses. A few of the cows sipped cold water from the shallows on the far side, while their calves nuzzled them for milk.

The massive, dark animals paid no attention to the jumping, yelling boy across the lake.

“What are they?” Nando asked.

“Those are elk,” Ruppert told him. “Mountain animals.”

“They’re so big,” Nando breathed, gazing at them. “I didn’t know animals got that big. What do they eat?”

“Whatever they can find, I guess,” Ruppert said.

“Do they eat people?” Nando’s eyes were very large, looking up at him.

“Nope, just plants. You want to stay back and give them plenty of room, though.”

“Do they care if I watch them?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Can you ride one?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Can you teach them tricks?”

“Couldn’t tell you.”

“I wonder if they have names. Anything that big should have a name.”

“They probably won’t mind if you name them.”

“Really?” Nando seemed captivated by the idea. “I’ll name that one Washington...Lincoln...Roosevelt...Eisenhower...” He walked along the shore, pointing at each of the grazing elk.

Ruppert and Lucia changed into dry clothes, and Lucia spread out the forest-colored tarp near the lake. The three of them ate lunch on the meadow, and Lucia pointed out images in the clouds to Nando. Nando entertained them with a detailed plan of how he could invade, occupy and defend the valley with a force of fifty soldiers.



They remained in the valley for the rest of the day, Lucia and Ruppert taking turns between sleeping and keeping watch on Nando. As the sun began to set, they climbed back into the Bronto, and Ruppert drove them northward.

They passed into open, flat country in Montana, under a sprawling blue sky that made Ruppert feel dangerously exposed, as he had in the desert. Terror controlled the skies, and there was a lot of open sky out here. The safehouse that Lucia knew about was out in prairie country, an hour or more east of the comforting shadows of the Rocky Mountains.

They traveled in a relaxed quiet and let the stereo play songs at random from its memory. Archer had stored an unfortunately wide array of old Broadway musical numbers on his truck’s hard drive, which Lucia flipped past impatiently.

It was another night of driving, and they arrived before dawn at a cluster of wooden buildings that appeared to be an actual working ranch, with a herd of a thousand or more cattle, lowing to each other in the early light. These animals impressed Nando as much as the elk.

A few men approached on horseback as Ruppert parked alongside a row of trucks. They wore cowboy hats and appeared to be in their late thirties or early forties, with deep lines worn into their faces by years of wind and sun. One of them rode up alongside Ruppert’s window.

“Help you?” he asked. Ruppert turned to Lucia.

“We’re looking for Violet Jakobsen,” Lucia told him.

“She expecting you?”

“No,” Lucia said, “But you can tell her we’re arriving under a flag of distress.”

The man’s eyes narrowed. He instructed the other two to keep watch on the unexpected visitors, then dismounted and walked up into the rambling, uneven main house, which looked as if it had grown one misfit room at a time over the years—some stone, some brick, some wooden. A collection of miniature windmills spun in the front yard.

“Is that an elk?” Nando pointed to a white and brown spotted horse. The man atop it shook his head.

“Appaloosa. Horse.”

“A horse.” Nando spoke the word in awe.

“Must come from someplace awful strange,” the other man said. “Not to know what a horse is.”

“I know what they are!” Nando sounded defensive, which amused Ruppert a little. “Alexander the Great’s horse was Bucephalus, and he conquered Afghanistan, like George Bush the Second. Soldiers used to ride them a long time ago.”

“Not all that long ago,” the man on the Appaloosa said, and his companion smiled.

The rider who had first greeted them returned, accompanied by a tall woman in a straw-colored cowboy hat—Ruppert guess this was the woman called Violet, the owner of the ranch. Her gray hair was gathered into loose, thick braids punctuated with bits of turquoise. She looked over the three strangers in the Bronto, then leaned in at Lucia’s window.

“Kipp tells me you’re travelers in trouble.” She studied Lucia’s face for a second, then looked towards Nando in the back seat. “What’s your name?”

“Private Cadet George Liberty, sir,” the boy replied. “I mean, ma’am.”

“That is surely an interesting name.” She lifted an eyebrow at Lucia. “He is your son.”

“His name is Fernando,” Lucia said.

“Child and Family Services?” Violet asked.

“We only just recovered him.”

“That must be an interesting tale. I’d love to hear how you managed it.”

“I doubt anyone could repeat it. We nearly died.”

“It’s always good to learn.”

Lucia leaned out and whispered into the woman’s ear. Violet nodded, looking to Ruppert and Nando. Ruppert didn’t know if she was explaining their story, or passing information, or using some sort of code to indicate she was a trustworthy resister. Whatever she said, it worked, because the woman hugged her and invited the three of them inside for a “late breakfast.” It was a few minutes past six in the morning.

The kitchen was clearly the biggest room in the house, arranged around an unevenly built stone fireplace at the center of the room. Violet directed them to a big picnic table that could seat twenty people at once, though none of them would be sitting in matching chairs—there were chairs of wood, wicker, bamboo, and a couple of folding

aluminum seats. Two adolescent girls, one white and one Guatemalan, hurried to dish them out breakfast from an array of skillets on the brick counters flanking the stove.

Before eating, Nando said a prayer aloud: “Our Almighty King, Commander of the Legions of Heaven, Let us eat grain from the fields of our enemies, that we may grow strong on their hunger, and let our swords find their bellies empty. Amen.” Then he tore into his food, loudly proclaiming it the best he’d ever eaten.

Lucia cast a gloomy look at Ruppert.

They learned what it meant to eat like a ranch hand—the girls brought fried steak, fried eggs, fresh tomatoes, and biscuits yellow with butter. They drank hot coffee and cold milk thick with cream. After days of crackers and nuts and watery juice mix, it was a feast.

Afterward, Violet and the teenage Guatemalan girl, whose name was Ana, led Ruppert, Lucia and Nando behind the house to the long, ramshackle horse stable. They carried their luggage—Ruppert’s suitcase, Lucia’s duffle bag, and Nando empty-handed—up a narrow staircase of wooden slats into the dark loft, which was illuminated by a wide, narrow slit of a window. Violet crossed the length of the building to the rear wall, reached through the clutter of saddles, harnesses and horse blankets that hung upon it, and opened a concealed door that folded back into a dark, hidden room.

The interior of the room stank of old sweat and musty, hot air, though a little light and fresh air trickled in through a constellation of nail-holes in one wall. Fresh straw lined the floor, and on top of that people huddled together on blankets and sleeping bags in the shadows. They stirred as the door opened, but said nothing.

As Ruppert’s eyes adjusted to the gloom, he could see the room’s occupants consisted of two families with small children, plus a few lone individuals scattered along the rear wall.

“We have a few extra guests,” Violet announced to the people in the room, who didn’t exactly applaud the news. She turned to Lucia. “We were just about to wake the children anyhow. We let them work around the farm during the day—it ends up better for everyone.”

“Can I feed the elks and the horses?” Nando asked.

“We don’t have any elk, but we have cows,” Violet said.

Ana collected the three other children in the room, who were already awake and ready to get busy.

“Are you sure that’s safe?” Lucia asked.

“Of course,” Violet said. “Ana will keep an eye on them. We have workers’ kids running all over the farm, and everyone will assume they belong to someone else.”

“That’s not what concerns me.”

“If the police come, they usually want to question me, or my sister, or one of the workers. They don’t care about the kids. And anyway the kids aren’t always good at keeping quiet when you need them to, so everyone’s safer this way. Speaking of that...” Violet pointed to a small light bulb wired to a roof beam. “If that lights up, everyone must lay low and be quiet. It’s for emergencies. Follow me?”

“When do we cross the border?” Ruppert whispered his question, which drew scowls from both Lucia and Violet.

“You’ll cross when it’s time, with everyone else,” Violet said. “And I will thank you not to ask more of those kinds of questions. There’s a washroom downstairs if you

need it, but otherwise please stay up here unless somebody comes for you. Are you going to be all right? I have a lot of work this morning.”

“We’re fine,” Lucia said. “Thank you so much.”

“My pleasure.” Violet closed the concealed door after her.

Ruppert looked among the others in the crowded room, smiling awkwardly, thinking of how nobody liked to talk in an elevator. He saw a lot of dull eyes and blank faces, the signs of people who’d experienced unspeakable things. A man in the back corner looked familiar to him, but it took Ruppert a minute to place him. Then he ran over to the man.

“Sully?” he asked.

Sullivan Stone barely resembled the man he’d been a few months earlier. His head was shaved, and scars twisted across his exposed scalp. Splotches of bruised purple and sickly yellow marred his face and arms. A hashwork of scars tattooed the left side of his face, and the eyelid there drooped over a staring, bloodshot eye.

Ruppert recalled what Archer had told him, that it was likely Sully had been sent to a behavior modification clinic.

“Sully, are you okay?”

Sully blinked at him, showing no sign of recognition.

“You know him?” Lucia asked Ruppert.

“Sully. He was the one who was going to...do what I did. It should have been him that you extracted, his house’s memory you deleted instead of mine.”

“That’s Sullivan Stone?” Lucia knelt on the other side of Sully. “Oh. Wow. I see it. How are you?” She took his hand, but Sully pulled it back and folded his arms around himself.

“Sully, look at me close,” Ruppert said.

Sully did look at him, mouth open, appearing to comprehend nothing. Then he said, “Daniel?”

“That’s right. It’s Daniel Ruppert.”

“Oh.” Sully’s gaze drifted away for a few seconds, then fixed back on him. “Is it time to...do a show?”

“No, Sully, no more shows. We’re down to reality now.”

“Yeah.” Sully stared at his own dirty shoes, where the tips of the laces looked chewed. He’d lost a significant amount of muscle mass, leaving him shriveled inside clothes that were too large for him. The clothes themselves were odd choices for Sully: corduroy pants that didn’t reach his ankles, a big t-shirt featuring characters from the kids’ cartoon Dog Soldiers.

“Jesus, Sully,” Ruppert whispered. “What happened to you?”

“Re...programmed.” Sully took a breath and made an effort to speak up. “You were my friend.”

“I am your friend, Sully. It’s good to see you again. I’m sorry you’re hurt like this.”

“Reprogrammed,” Sully said again, “I’m deviant. They made us...they injected us, and they made us do...bad things...”

“I’m sorry,” Ruppert said.

“They asked about you,” Sully said. “They asked if you were, you know, disloyal to the state, and I said no, but then they burned me more, and I said yes. They made me say that about a lot of people. They had cameras recording it. I didn’t mean to.”

“Don’t worry, they’re after me for worse than that. Your friend Archer came and found me. You remember him, don’t you?”

“Did they get him, too?”

“No, he’s fine. I just saw him a few days ago.”

“I did love him,” Sully said. “The doctors said I shouldn’t anymore.”

“It’s all right, Sully.”

“Do you think he’s okay?”

“Yes. I just saw him.”

“Hope he’s okay.”

“The project you planned with him,” Ruppert said. “We did it. It worked. The word’s getting out there.”

“We were supposed to go north together.” Sully looked at his watch. “Now I only have one thing left to do.”

“What’s that?” Ruppert asked.

“Huh?”

“You said you had something to do. What is it?”

“Oh, yeah. Canada. I have to get to Canada. Can you help me to Canada, Daniel?”

“You’re already on the way. How did you get here?”

“They dumped a bunch of us on the street. St. Louis. Or Chicago. Or Minneapolis, I think. They didn’t want to feed us anymore, or something. They said—I don’t remember.”

“What happened then?” Ruppert asked. “Can you remember after that?”

“I went to—I don’t know, Daniel. I can’t keep track. I was in a hotel room with a dog on the wall. A painting of a dog. Some people helped me out with money, and they sent me here. Or some other people sent me here later, from the bar.”

“What kind of people?”

“Just people. This is really hard, Daniel.” The strain of trying to concentrate turned his face red and drew deep furrows in his brow. His right fist opened and closed, opened and closed, as if a muscle inside it were having spasms.

“It’s all right, Sully. We can talk later. Do you need anything? Water?”

Sully shook his head.

“Sully, you were right,” Ruppert said. “About what I always wanted. You gave it to me. The big story. The truth that changes the world. My old teacher Dr. Gorski would be proud of us. We’re journalists now, not reporters.”

Sully blinked a few times, and his lips moved soundlessly. Then he closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the wall.

Ruppert and Lucia sat on the hay-covered floor next to Sully. They remained quiet for a long time. Ruppert didn’t feel like talking. Seeing his friend all but incoherent, his mind broken up into unrecognizable pieces, chilled any comfort Ruppert might have taken in reaching this next step toward freedom.

Later, Violet returned and motioned for Ruppert and Lucia to follow her. She led them back to the main house, into an upstairs sewing room with a small video screen.

“I thought you should see this. It’s been playing on all the newsnets. Don’t worry, my nephew fixed it, or broke it, so nobody can look out through it.” She turned on the screen, accessed a news site (GlobeNet - Salt Lake City), and clicked the blinking TERROR ALERT icon.

Ruppert appeared onscreen in a way he’d never appeared in a newscast—disheveled, tie undone, a growth of stubble on his chin. He looked dirty. A Chinese dragon with a red star on its forehead filled the background behind him. The video effects group had done excellent work.

“It is time we admit the truth,” the digital Ruppert said. “America is weak and broken. America will fall. We must throw ourselves on the mercy of the great nation of China, a society thousands of years older and wiser than ours. They are closer to God than we are. We should adopt the Chinese way of life as our own, and beg China’s forgiveness for the crimes and provocations waged of our own evil, terrorist government.”

“This isn’t really you,” Lucia said.

“No,” Ruppert said. “But it’s on the news, so it must be true, right? I guess we can assume they’ve seen the Westerly interview. So they set up the narrative that I’m an anti-American, terroristic, apparently pro-Chinese, traitor spreading propaganda. They won’t broadcast the real video, of course, but it prepares people to dismiss the Westerly interview in case they do see it.”

Lucia shook her head. “That is diabolical.”

“In the news business, we call it muddying the stream—flooding them with so much conflicting information they don’t know what to believe. George Baldwin, the Terror agent at my studio, called it releasing the antibodies. You swarm the unwanted bit of information and surround it, steer it your own way, kill whatever leaked. That’s how you keep the official narrative intact.”

“What interview are you talking about?” Violet asked. “Who is Westerly?”

“I’ll show her.” Lucia ran outside, then quickly returned and gave Violet one of the discs. “We have more copies. I can leave some with you. It’s best to distribute these hand to hand instead of online, if you want to avoid Terror.”

Violet led them down the hall to a bedroom with another, older video screen, assuring them it was not connected to anything but its own hard drive. She closed the door and inserted the disc.

As Violet watched the video, her knees shook and she sank down to sit at the foot of her bed. She was in tears as the interview ended, but she didn’t look away. She stared at the blank screen for a few minutes.

“None of it was real,” she finally whispered. She looked to Ruppert. “None of it was ever real.”

“There’s an organization called PSYCOM,” Ruppert said. “Defense, or intelligence. They wage psychological warfare on the world, and that includes us. They have everything, the media, the schools, the big Dominionist churches you have to attend. The Department of Terror is a front for them. They went rogue, or maybe they were following orders, I don’t know, but Columbus was their project.”

“But why?” Violet asked. “To our own people?”

“To make us afraid,” Lucia said. “So they could remake everything.”

“This makes me more afraid,” Violet said, gesturing at the screen. “I’ve never been this frightened.”

Ruppert looked at the black screen. “Even this works for them, doesn’t it? It shows us how ruthless they are. What if it only intimidates people, and they keep quiet?”

“They will have the truth,” Lucia said. “It never goes away. It stays inside you.”

“I think it’s going to stay inside me a long time,” Violet said. “I’m not sure I’m glad I know this. I thought things were bad enough before.” She stood up. “We need to move fast. You need to get out of this country right away. I’ll see if I can move things up a day or two. Until then, you better get back up to the hideaway. Try not to let anybody see your face, Daniel. Even folks around here can’t always tell the difference between truth and not.”

TWENTY-EIGHT

They spent two nights in the hidden room above the stables, and Ruppert quickly grew accustomed to the sounds of the horses stomping and neighing below, and even the animal smells that reached up into the loft. They made him feel alive and, for the first time since his childhood, like he inhabited a world with some measure of sanity.

Violet, as it turned out, lived in the main house with her sister and her sister's four children, as well as an assortment of dogs. Violet or one of her nieces delivered meals and jugs of water to them four or five times a day.

Ruppert and Lucia passed the time with the old paperbacks on the room's only table, most of them missing both front and back covers. In the evenings, they listened to Nando and the other children describe in hushed, awed tones the goats, horses, cows and chickens they'd helped tend around the farm. Nando seemed to be adapting well, except for a tendency to bark orders at younger children.

The travelers also played cards with each other, using decks supplied by Violet. Nobody talked about their past, or how they'd arrived there, and Ruppert began to feel ashamed of how he'd questioned Sully in front of the others.

In fact, they only wanted to discuss one subject: Canada.

"I'm going to learn how to build those igloos," one of the lone men said. "You can build an igloo, you can live anywhere. Get a couple of dogs, you're set."

"You go and sleep with dogs if you want," said another lone traveler, Tarvis, a hefty black man with a Southern accent. "I'm finding me a French-speaking women, and live up in the mountains."

"No woman who speaks French would go and live in the mountains with you," the first man said.

"Fine with me," Tarvis said. "I'll move into her place."

Violet stopped by to tell them she'd advanced the schedule: they'd be leaving a few days earlier than expected. Since she'd kept the original schedule secret anyway, Ruppert didn't see the point, but he thanked her for it.

“Are you kidding?” Violet said. “You’re the most wanted man in the country. It’s a danger to my family, keeping you here.”

Sully continued to have trouble with his speaking and his memory. Occasionally he would blank out in the middle of a meal, his mouth sagging open, partially chewed meat or bread dribbling from the corner of his lips. Ruppert would hurry to clean him up. Sully twitched his fingers and hands constantly, unable to calm down, checking his watch nine or ten times per minute. It made the others nervous, and they tried to avoid him.

When Ruppert asked Violet how Sully had arrived, she said he’d come through some contacts of hers in the east, but refused to disclose any information more detailed than that. “You know how things are,” she’d said. “It’s best to stay discreet about your friends. It’s part of being a friend, don’t you think? I’ll do the same for you,” she added.

After talking with Ruppert about the Bronto, Violet had one of her workers deliver the truck to a junkyard owner she knew in Billings. He returned with cash, seven thousand dollars of which she gave to Ruppert and Lucia. Ruppert had insisted Violet keep a portion of the money for herself, and she assured him she’d already taken the liberty.

On their third night, Violet and her two oldest nieces arrived just after sunset and ushered everyone out of the stables. They led them into the long, caged trailer of a cattle truck. Violet’s nieces walked to the front of the trailer and pried loose a section of one of the interior cage walls. They lifted it out of the long indentation in the aluminum floor in which the wall was set. Then they reached into the indentation, and Ruppert heard a series of clanging, snapping sounds.

Ruppert and the other adults helped them lift up two panels of the floor, revealing a shallow, hidden cargo bay. The travelers—illegal immigrants, now—would have to lie underneath the floor, side by side, for the entire journey.

“Are you driving us there?” Ruppert asked Violet.

She shook her head. “Best if you don’t see the driver, and he don’t see you.”

The travelers lay down, Ruppert next to Lucia, Nando on the far side of her. Everyone’s luggage and sleeping bags was arrayed at their feet. Violet and her nieces replaced the floor panels, and Ruppert heard the clicking as they replaced the wall. They waited for several long minutes in silence and darkness, and then a low thunder rolled across the floor above them, as if someone were tumbling boulders through the truck. They would be riding underneath a shipment of live cows.

“Are we in Canada yet?” one of the children whispered in the dark.

It was another twenty minutes before the truck finally revved up and began to move. Soon the hidden compartment was hot and sticky with body heat, and it stank of oil and gasoline, and eventually, fresh manure. The road jostled them constantly, jarring Ruppert’s spine.

The long, uncomfortable ride took more than an hour. Ruppert whispered to Sully, making sure he was handling the uncomfortable, frightening situation. Once, the truck idled in place for a painfully long time, and Ruppert wondered if they’d been stopped by the police, but nothing came of it.

Eventually the road got rougher and steeper, and they were sliding into each other, as well as banging elbows and knees against the walls of the compartment. Ruppert took a sharp jab in the ribs from Lucia’s elbow.

Then the truck stopped, reversed direction, pulled forward, reversed direction again, jostling everyone back and forth. Sully groaned. Ruppert was feeling a little ill, too.

Finally, there was heavy thumping above, and then a clanging sound, and then one of the floor panels above them lifted free. An unfamiliar young man in overalls, probably in his late teens, stood above them.

“Come on,” he said in a low voice. “Everybody grab your stuff and get moving.”

They climbed up from the compartment, Ruppert helping Sully to his feet, Nando impatient to get out into the fresh air. Cows occupied half the cages in the truck. A young woman about the same age as the boy in coveralls stood in an opened cage, luring in a cow with a bucket of grain. This must have been the cow that had been positioned on top of them the entire drive.

They exited through the open doors at the back of the trailer, into a cool, rocky corridor that slanted downward into darkness. Its shape was too regular to be a cave, and it was framed with wooden support beams—maybe an old mine shaft, or just a hastily built smuggling tunnel.

Much of the truck was not visible. The last several feet of the trailer extended through a wide square opening not much bigger than the trailer itself. Ruppert got the impression that the area behind the opening was not the outdoors, but some kind of darkened building, maybe a warehouse. He didn't ask any questions.

“This is everybody?” The girl who'd been leading the cow away jumped down from the trailer. She wore a pair of tall hiking boots. “We go the rest of the way on foot. I'm going to lead, and Wayne here is going to be the last in line. Stay between us and you'll be safe.”

The young bearded man—Wayne, Ruppert supposed—opened a backpack leaning against a wall of the rocky corridor. He lifted out a thin plastic ring wide enough to be a necklace, twisted and shook it, and the ring flared a glowing green. He dropped it over the head of the nearest child, who still looked pale and sick from the ride.

“Everyone takes one of these,” he said. “It's going to be your only light for parts of the trip.” They passed the glowing green rings out to everyone, and then two young guides put on spelunking helmets and flipped on the lights set into them.

“We're going to be walking for about an hour,” the young woman said. “When we come back up, we'll be in Canada. There is transportation waiting on the other side, but we can't be late, so let's get going.” She turned and walked several yards down the tunnel.

They gathered their things and followed, Sully moving a little slow and having trouble with his balance. Ruppert took his luggage, which consisted of a dirty nylon bag that cinched with a drawstring, and carried it for him.

“Are you ready to walk, Nando?” Lucia asked.

“Yes, ma'am. I've done a lot of cave maneuvers before.”

“That makes one of us,” Ruppert said. “Keep an eye on your mom and make sure she stays safe.”

“I will, sir.”

Sully was already falling a few steps behind. Ruppert could see the young man at the end of the line staring at Sully and shaking his head, recognizing he could be a problem.

As promised, the tunnel was lightless, and increasingly cold, the only light provided by the guides' helmets and the glow rings around each person's neck.

He and Lucia kept Nando between them. They'd attempted to hold his hands throughout the walk, but the boy refused, so they settled for keeping a close eye on him. Like everyone else, he appeared as a disembodied, glowing green head floating through the dark.

Ruppert looked around at the floating green heads. "Where's Sully?"

"I don't see him," Lucia said.

"What's the problem now?" Wayne asked.

"Sully," Ruppert said. "The guy who was with us."

"Oh, the retard?" Wayne looked around. "Shit."

"Sully?" Ruppert called. The word echoed away in both directions along the tunnel.

"Don't do that," Wayne said. He slowly pivoted around, panning the light in a circle. Sully was no longer with the group.

The group had stopped moving and gathered around the young woman guiding them. She walked back to ask what was happening.

"We lost the retarded guy," Wayne said.

"He's not retarded," Ruppert said. "He's been through a behavior clinic."

"Even worse," Wayne said. "We don't have time to turn back."

"You two go and look for him," the young woman said. "We'll wait here."

Wayne grumbled, but he and Ruppert turned back and walked along the way they'd come. Wayne swung his head back and forth as they walked, in case Sully had managed to lose his glowing necklace.

After they'd backtracked for ten or fifteen minutes, Wayne said, "Look, he's lost. We can't risk everybody for him."

"We can't leave him," Ruppert said. "He'd never find his way out. He's—wait!" Ruppert grabbed Wayne's arm. "Look back...more to the right..."

The beam found Sully, who had indeed managed to misplace his own light source. He stood back in a slight concave nook, where the tunnel had turned to avoid a bank of solid rock.

Sully was staring at his watch.

"Let's grab him," Wayne said.

"Wait," Ruppert said. "Let me do it. You might panic him."

Wayne snorted, but he stayed in place as Ruppert approached Sully, trying not to make any sudden moves.

"Sully?" he whispered. "Sully, it's Daniel."

Sully continued to stare at his watch. A red light pulsed on its face, about once every second. Sully appeared transfixed by it.

"Sully, look at me," Ruppert said. "We have to keep going. Everyone's waiting."

Sully didn't move. Ruppert reached out and covered the blinking light with his hand. Sully gasped, looked up at him.

"Daniel...Ruppert?" Sully asked.

"That's right. Sully, we have to stay with the group—"

Something thin and sharp stabbed into Ruppert's left side, into the soft tissue just underneath his lowest rib. At first he thought it was a wild animal, maybe a mountain

lion, though it felt more like a shark. Then Sully raised a polished stone knife and stabbed him again and again, the blade hacking into the ribs along Ruppert's left side, as if Sully were trying to break through into his heart, but kept missing and gouging Ruppert's abdomen instead. He thought he could feel hot blood in his own stomach.

Ruppert stumbled back, trying to get away, but Sully's left hand gripped Ruppert's right arm and refused to let go. Sully stabbed him again and again, his face blank, drooling a little from the corner of his mouth.

Behavior modification, Ruppert thought, instantly remembering how Terror had programmed him to murder Hollis Westerly. Which, on reflection, he might have accomplished before leaving Cassandra Kendrick's defunct vineyard.

Ruppert tried desperately to remember how Dr. Smith had deprogrammed him. There had been a keyword, a master word that George Baldwin had used to gain instant control over Ruppert's mind.

"Racca!" he shouted into Sully's face. "Jesus, Sully, Racca, does that work on you?"

The stabbings slowed, then stopped. Sully released him, and Ruppert slipped to the dirt floor, which felt muddy and warm. His own blood.

"Sully, wake up," Ruppert said.

Sully blinked and looked down at him, then looked to the pointed stone blade in his right hand, drenched in Ruppert's blood.

"Oh," Sully said. "Oh, fuck, Daniel."

Ruppert could see him clearly in the light from Wayne's helmet. He turned his head and saw Wayne standing where Ruppert had left him, watching, hands at his side, eyes wide in astonishment.

"I'm so sorry, Daniel, oh God," Sully muttered, and Ruppert turned back to him. "They made me. I forgot. I forgot or I would have said. They made me do it."

Ruppert coughed, and it hurt. He shuddered.

Sully raised the blade again, staring at it.

"They made me do it, Daniel."

"I know."

Sully tilted the blade to look at the bloodied tip. Then, his face blank again, he plunged the knife into his own throat.

"Sully!" Ruppert reached for him as he sank to his knees. Ruppert looked back to Wayne. "Are you going to help at all?"

Ruppert heard a thunderous, rumbling sound, and then Lucia and Nando bolted into view, followed by the other travelers and the young woman who'd been leading the group. All of them ran while looking back over their shoulders, panic on their faces. Ruppert tried to push himself to his feet, but he had no strength in his legs. He'd lost a lot of blood.

Light flooded the tunnel, as if the sun had risen in the underground world, shining down from little buzzing drones overhead. Rows of armed men in faded green uniforms marched after them, wielding machine guns.

"This is the United States Army," an amplified voice announced. "Border Patrol. Get down flat on your faces. You move, we shoot."

The travelers dropped to their knees, then lay prostrate on the floor. Lucia gripped Nando's hand. A team of soldiers approached the alcove where Ruppert and Sully lay, each soaked in their own blood. They lowered their weapons.

"What the hell happened to you?" one of the soldiers asked Ruppert.

"I think I'm dying," Ruppert said, and then the world turned black.

TWENTY-NINE

When Ruppert finally awoke, he lay on a mattress no thicker than a towel against a hard, flat surface. He had almost no strength, but leather cuffs bound his arms to cool metal rails. Everything in his abdomen ached.

He opened his eyes to see gray cinderblock walls. Clean white bandages bound up his torso. Plastic green curtains hung on either side of his narrow hospital bed. Machines monitored him, included a convex black lens for video surveillance. Fluids fed into his arm from a clear bag suspended overhead.

He lay for a long time, trying to piece together what had happened, wondering if Nando and Lucia were safe. He doubted it, but someone had gone to the trouble of giving Ruppert medical care, and that gave him a little hope. Beyond the curtains, he heard groans and a few snores. There were many others in the room with him.

“Where am I?” Ruppert asked aloud.

“The land of no return,” someone answered off to his left. Someone else forced a laugh.

“Are we in Canada?” Ruppert asked.

There was another, snorting laugh. Ruppert didn’t attempt further conversation, and neither did anybody else.

After more than an hour, a pair of crewcut young men, eighteen or nineteen years old, appeared in threadbare green uniforms. They looked back and forth between Ruppert and a digital clipboard.

“That’s him,” one of the soldiers declared. An obese male orderly appeared with a wheelchair, and the soldiers helped him move Ruppert into it. They strapped Ruppert’s arms to the arms of the chair.

“What’s happening?” Ruppert asked.

“Time for your interrogation,” a soldier said. “Do yourself a favor. Cooperate. Don’t give them a bunch of trouble. Tell them whatever they want to hear.”

“Okay,” Ruppert said. “I’m familiar with the program.”

They rolled him down a long, crowded hallway lined with bed-ridden patients lay on beds along the walls. The patients wore flimsy paper gowns, and most looked heavily sedated. The facility smelled of rot and disease. Streamers of dark mold grew in the upper corners of the hall.

They rode up in a freight elevator, and then the soldiers wheeled Ruppert down a long, white corridor to a black door. It slid aside, and they pushed Ruppert into a white cube of a room, where two black office chairs faced each other across a lozenge-shaped black desk. They moved aside one of the chairs and wheeled Ruppert into place. And they waited.

After about twenty minutes, a section of white wall at the far side of the room slid back, and a man in the black tie, shirt and suit of a Terror agent entered. He was probably in his sixties, but he was very lean and fit, his eyes like blue ice under close-cropped silver hair. He seemed familiar to Ruppert.

“That’s all right, boys,” he said to the soldiers. “You can go on. He’s no danger.”

The soldiers saluted him, then pivoted and marched out of the room, the orderly lumbering after them.

The Terror agent sat down across the desk from Ruppert. He touched the slick black surface, and a row of glowing white digital documents appeared beneath his fingertips, many with images of Ruppert alongside their text. He perused them at a leisurely pace, ignoring Ruppert. It was several minutes before he spoke.

“Accessing illegal foreign data,” the man said. “Reneging on an agreement with the Department of Terror. Assault on a high official of the Department of Child and Family Services, for the purpose of accessing classified data. Assault and murder of a military school instructor. Forced entry into said military school, where you kidnapped a ward of the state, detonated explosives, killed two guards and injured several more instructors—all of this while publicly chanting terrorist slogans over an intercom.

“Manufacturing and disseminating terrorist propaganda. Finally, attempting to exit the country illegally.” The man’s eyes burned into Ruppert, who thought the room had grown colder. Maybe it actually had, to intimidate him. “Even if we provided you a trial, you’d have no chance of surviving. You face a long, painful public execution. You are a terrorist, Daniel Ruppert.”

Ruppert said nothing. Now he recognized the man: he was the one who’d been in George Baldwin’s office at the GlobeNet studio, while Ruppert was hypnotized. The one Baldwin had made him forget, until Dr. Smith deprogrammed him.

“Dr. Reginald Crane,” Ruppert said. “That’s right, isn’t it? The 'doctor' for economics, not medicine.”

Crane sat back in his chair. “Correct.”

“They called you Duckers in school.”

Crane’s lips curled into a slight snarl.

“Short for 'Duck-fucker'?” Ruppert added.

The man leaned back in his chair, folded his hands, sighed. “You’ve picked up a thing or two since we last met.” He looked Ruppert over carefully. “There is no need for secrets in this place. On my part or yours.”

“Okay,” Ruppert said.

The man sat very still, and then he asked, “What else do you know about me?”

"You're Brother Zeb," Ruppert asked. He made the connection even as he said it aloud. This was why the man had been so interested in him, why he'd come to Baldwin's office at GlobeNet, why he was here now. "Of the white supremacist national church, or whatever you called it."

The man's smile was tight and cold. He unknotted his tie, then unfastened the top three buttons of his black silk shirt. He exposed his chest to Ruppert, revealing a faded tattoo of six swords arranged in a swastika. "I had most of them removed with lasers, naturally, but this one I kept as a souvenir. Those were heady days."

"You programmed Sully to kill me," Ruppert said. "And himself."

"Oh, no, that was a slight bureaucratic error," Crane told him. "Once your little video emerged, standard protocols went into action."

"That was standard protocol?"

"For a target as stubbornly on the run as yourself, one takes several precautions. But it wasn't my group. We are highly compartmentalized, you understand."

"Terror?"

"Above that."

"PSYCOM?"

"I'll admit now, we did lose you entirely on a few occasions. The woman you traveled with, Lucia, she is quite capable. I'm considering recruiting her for our side. What do you think?"

"She would never."

"All people are vulnerable to persuasion."

"Like Hollis Westerly?"

Crane offered a small smile. "You feel pity for him, don't you? A beast like that."

"No. I feel pity for everyone who died in Columbus. The people you murdered."

"Naturally you do. It would be inhuman to feel otherwise."

"Why did you kill them? So many?"

"It isn't as though we took pleasure in it," the old man said. "It was collateral damage. A necessary act of war."

"That's what Westerly said."

"It's what I told him. War surrounds us all. Some of us learn to inhabit it, to move with it, but no man controls it. Do you fault a sailor for the violence of the ocean, or for learning to navigate the storm?"

"You don't feel anything?" Ruppert asked. "Remorse?"

"Everyone feels remorse at one time or another," Crane said. "But we have medication for that. You're focusing on one event and missing the broader picture. Columbus was necessary to protect and preserve the nation."

"You protect people by murdering them?"

"You aren't listening, Daniel. I said we were protecting the *nation*."

"I don't think I understand."

Crane summoned a holographic keyboard, then typed at it. A three-dimensional representation of ancient Rome appeared on the desktop, with stone aqueducts from the mountains feeding into fountains among colorful marble buildings.

"This is from a PSYCOM training manual," Crane said. "Do you know what finally destroyed the city of Rome, Daniel? What caused it to become uninhabitable?"

“Uninhabitable?” Ruppert asked. “I read the population was about 10 million people.”

“You misunderstand. I meant the ancient city.” Crane passed a finger through a miniature aqueduct, and it broke, heaving water out into the mountains far outside the city walls. “Invading barbarians—Goths, if you care to be specific—besieged the city and broke all the aqueducts. They broke the aqueducts, you see, that fed the city, that made the Roman way of life possible. Without water, there could be no city. Never mind who won that particular battle. Without water, the population fell from a million to ten thousand. The greatest city in history became a ruin, home to only sheep and bandits living among abandoned palaces. You saw Las Vegas, didn’t you?”

“Okay,” Ruppert said. “But what does Columbus have to do with aqueducts?”

“Everything. In our case, it is not loss of water we fear. You know what we need, though, do you not?”

“Oil?”

“Loss of petroleum would lay waste our cities. Should we fail to secure the necessary hydrocarbons, and fail to protect the intervening supply lines between there and here, every city in America would resemble like Las Vegas in a matter of weeks. No commerce as we know it. And imagine our military—the tanks, the planes, the navy, all useless lumps of metal.

“To protect the nation, we must be willing to fight off all competitors, great and small. We are the mightiest beast in the jungle, Daniel, but the mightiest beast must fight hardest to survive. It is the largest, therefore its needs are the largest, therefore it is, paradoxically, the most vulnerable. You see?”

“You think nations need to make war to survive?”

“Nations do not make war,” Crane said.

“They don't? I'm maybe too medicated right now.”

“It is war that raises up nations, war that makes them powerful, war that destroys them. War is the survival competition among human beings, the driver of *our* evolution. It does not begin or end, though we artificially mark beginnings and endings to particular wars. The nation itself, Ruppert, is simply a long, sustained act of war, in which one group plunders both its own population and foreign lands. It is simply life, the competition for resources, and we cannot help if that is life's inherent condition.”

“Now you're claiming to be moral?” Ruppert asked.

“I am not,” Crane said. “Morality is for structuring and ordering society. Human beings, like animals, are not good or evil, but amoral. We are capable of good or evil acts at any time. It simply depends on circumstances. Look at your background. Not only did you carry out the various criminal acts I described earlier, but for several years, you made a good living spreading propaganda for us. You have murdered a few men, but you have lied to millions.”

“I've tried to atone for it,” Ruppert said.

“And you've failed. This little interview with Hollis will have no effect, I assure you. No one will believe it, unless they are already predisposed to believing such a thing. For most people, we will continue to tell them what to believe. We will tell them they are morally superior, that they love peace, but unfortunately this is a time of war, and one must support one's leaders. And they will continue to believe it. Because they need to

believe it, Daniel, and at a biological level, they know it is necessary for the survival of the group.”

“If people want war anyway, why do you have to lie to them at all?” Ruppert asked. “Why invent threats? Why not just say, ‘These people have oil, and we need it, and we’re stronger, and we’re taking it.’ Why wouldn’t people support that war, if what you say is right?”

“Because we also must live together for the sake of commerce,” Crane said. “Morals are necessary for, as I said, internal organization to support the war machine. The rule of every state rests on two things, Daniel: force and myth. Without force, myth is just words and images. Force without a supportive myth, however, will not last long, because it has no legitimacy among the people. No state can rule by myth alone, or by force alone.

“The role of PSYCOM is to generate the necessary myth—an ongoing myth, extending into the fourth dimension—that is, a mythical narrative. Every war is a war to protect God, country, and family. We exist in an ongoing clash between good and evil, in which good means ‘us’ and evil means ‘them,’ the others who control the resources and supply lines we need.

“What is it that forms our sense of identity, as Americans or as Englishmen or anything else? To which elements of history do we refer? Would you agree that America’s identity was forged in the Revolution, the Civil War, the Second World War, and in the struggle of freedom against terror?”

“That sounds right,” Ruppert said.

“And what do these events have in common?”

“They were all about the struggle for freedom,” Ruppert said.

Crane snorted. “The bigger picture, Daniel, is that they were all wars, weren’t they? Cataclysmic struggles over the question of who would rule whom. Our sense of being a people, that holy sense of patriotism, is generated by war and war alone. What is there that defines a nation beyond its wars?”

Ruppert thought it over. “There’s a lot. Culture, learning, science—”

“Irrelevant,” Crane interrupted. “Now, consider the conditions of our existence as living organisms. Organisms can multiply rapidly, at a geometric rate, so their numbers are limited only by the need for each individual to consume resources and sustain itself. There are limited resources available at any given place and time. So they must compete. The slightest advantage—faster, stronger, smarter—determines who lives and who dies. Over time, advantages accumulate.

“The role you served, Daniel, in your former occupation, was the role of coordinating information—the bee dancing before the hive, the ant laying down a scent trail to a food source. It was more complicated, of course. The point is that myth is used to program the group behavior of human beings, to direct their fear, their violence and their productivity as needed. We all have a natural fear for the security of ourselves and our families—so much of the world, and the future, is simply unknown. Myth allows us to nurture that fear, and to pool it into a collective monster. This is the process that permits us to compete for resources as one human group against other human groups, and of course against lone, dissenting individuals like yourself.

“Evolution, as I was saying, results from competition over scarce resources. Colonies of bacteria, colonies of ants wage wars on one another. Trees poison the soil

against one another. We have ongoing wars in our bodies, antibodies fighting off invasive disease.

“From the smallest bacterium to the greatest civilizations, the same rules apply. Those who are able to band together and fight, dominate or destroy, are the victors in the evolutionary contest. But victory is always temporary, and there is always another fight tomorrow.

“So, war is holy because it the means by which the group binds together to protect and provide for its members. The world religion itself means ‘to bind back together.’ Are you following me, Daniel?”

“So you exploit people’s beliefs for fun and profit.”

“No!” Crane’s fist slammed into the black desktop, causing the holographic city of Rome to scramble and shudder. “War is the thing that makes us, war raised us from the primordial sea into creatures that build cities and nations, war evolved all forms of life on the planet, war makes us strong and makes us strive, war brings us together, tells us who we are, makes us more, the essence of the nation and of the human being and of all life.” Crane leaned in close, his mouth a flat line, his cold blue eyes unnaturally bright.

“War is God,” he whispered. “And God is war.”

Ruppert sat in his wheelchair, looking back into Crane’s eyes. It was a long, tense moment, and then something beeped in Crane’s pocket. He removed a flat screen the size of business card.

“I have an appointment,” Crane said. “You see? Even I am just a servant in the vineyards of the Lord. I’ve enjoyed our talk, Daniel, but tomorrow we’re down to business.” He opened a drawer in his side of the desk, then handed Ruppert a pen and a pad of paper. “I’m going to need you to write down everything, naturally.”

“I’m sorry?” Ruppert asked. He felt dazed by their conversation, detached from reality.

“A history of what you’ve done,” Crane said. “An account of your crimes against the state and so on. And do grant me the courtesy of naming names. Note anyone who assisted you in your crimes. As I said, we have no need of secrets in this place.” He touched the desktop, and the two Army guards returned with the obese orderly.

Crane stood and straightened his jacket, leaving his tie undone. “Remember what we talked about, Daniel. Consider your place in what remains of this world.” The wall panel slid away for him, and he turned and exited the room.

“I’m sure I will,” Ruppert said. The orderly turned him around, then wheeled him out of the room, a soldier close on either side.

THIRTY

They did not return Ruppert to the room where he'd awoken, but to a narrow, private room that looked as if it might have been converted from a janitor's storeroom. It was no cleaner than the rest of the hospital, and smelled just as sour, and Ruppert decided it was less a gesture of generosity than an attempt to prevent him from talking to other patients and spreading any of the classified information he knew. He'd been placed in information quarantine.

Dr. Crane did not send for Ruppert the next day, or the next. He had no reading material and no screen to watch, so he resorted to the pad of paper Crane had given him. Instead of a confession, he tried to draw a cartoon picture of Vice President Hartwell, and eventually he wrote letters to both Lucia and to Madeline, wishing them both the best. He knew they would never be delivered, but it felt good. After four days, he also wrote a note to Dr. Crane:

Dr. Crane:

You make a strong argument, but I don't believe you.

Ruppert paused, not sure what else to add. Then he wrote:

You may be right. Historically, you are right. But there must be another way to live. And shouldn't we be trying to figure out what that might be?

He stared at what he'd written, and he sighed and put away the notepad. Reading and writing made him dizzy. He wondered what drugs he was on.

On the seventh night in the private room, he dreamed of earthquakes and woke to silence. He lay in complete darkness—even the annoying little lights on the monitoring machines had vanished.

Voices shouted from the floors below him. Then there was a long quiet, maybe a few hours, he thought he drifted in and out of sleep during this, but he couldn't be sure. He was startled by a sudden eruption of gunfire below, which quieted, then resumed, then trickled down to a random shot fired here and there around the detention facility.

It was just before dawn when the door to his room opened, but it wasn't the large orderly or any of the nurses who occasionally dropped by to silently refill his meds. It was the two young soldiers who'd escorted him to meet Dr. Crane, one them with blond stubble on his scalp, one with red. The hallway behind them lay dark, but both of them held flashlights.

"Told you they put him in here," the red-haired soldier said to the other.

"What's happening?" Ruppert asked.

"Fucking game over, man," the blond soldier said. "Can you walk?"

Ruppert heaved himself up to a sitting position. He tried to put weight on his feet, then shook his head.

The soldiers left, then returned with a folded wheelchair. They muttered and grumbled to each other as they figured out how to open it and lock it into position. Then they hefted Ruppert into the chair. He was able to turn the wheels with his own hands.

"We have to take the stairs," the red-haired soldier told him. "No power, no elevators. Nothing works."

Ruppert followed them into the stairwell. The soldiers turned him around and rolled him backwards down the stairs, one step at a time, down five landings.

They followed a wide corridor into the detention center's staff cafeteria, where hundreds of people had gathered, prisoners and Army guards alike. The young and the wounded were wrapped in blankets gathered from the hospital rooms and guard barracks. The crowd was silent, listening intently to a scratchy radio set into a wooden case the size of a coffee table.

"Everything fritzed out," the blond soldier whispered. "We found the old radio in the basement. Couple generators."

"We killed those psychos that were running this place," the red-haired soldier told him. "That's what you want to know, isn't it?"

"I don't understand," Ruppert said.

"When the cities started going up, they told us to kill all the elderly prisoners," the blond soldier said.

"And adult males," his friend added. "To, you know, conserve resources, and all that."

"But we talked it about it," the first soldiers. "We decided not to do it. But you can't just disobey a psycho. But D.C.'s gone, no chain of command, so what the hell, right? We figure we had to kill the psychos instead. We put 'em out there." He nodded toward a window wall that looked out into a concrete courtyard outside the staff cafeteria.

There were five bodies in black cloth. Ruppert saw one man in an official, military-style Terror uniform, black with silver ornamentation, and four others in black-on-black suits. Crane was among them, his blank eyes open toward the stars, snowflakes accumulating on his frozen eyeballs. and collecting snowflakes. The ice and snow around his head had become a wide circle of red slush.

"That's an extreme decision," Ruppert said.

"Extreme days," the red-haired soldier said. "And we saw your video. That was you, right? With the Nazi guy?"

"What?" Ruppert asked. "When?"

"It's going around." The soldier shrugged. "Helped us make up our minds about the psychos. Figured they brought things down in the first place, right?"

Then the two soldiers left to collect another patient. Ruppert wheeled into the crowd, looking carefully among the shadowy faces. His heart stuttered when a dark-haired woman seated on the floor turned towards him, and he recognized Lucia. She looked smaller, as if she hadn't eaten well, but now she was spooning peanut butter out of a gallon-sized aluminum can. She shared it with Nando, who sat beside her on a folded bed sheet.

Ruppert rolled towards her, but Nando saw him first and sprang towards him. Lucia gasped.

"We didn't know if you were alive," she whispered. "Are you hungry?"

"No, thanks. What's happened?"

Several people shushed them, and they lowered their voices even more. On the radio, a man's voice crackled: "Has anybody heard any announcements? Is there anyone left out there?"

"It was war," Lucia whispered. "Real, nuclear war."

"With who?"

"China. Our cities, their cities. Nobody's sure who started it."

"What about the anti-missile satellites?" Ruppert asked. "The Skyfire system? The President said it would protect us."

"Who knows?" Lucia whispered. "Maybe the Chinese took it out. Maybe nobody turned it on. Maybe it never worked."

"Maybe it never existed," muttered a man in a meshback cap.

Ruppert shook his head. "Nando, are you all right?"

Nando nodded without looking up. He'd returned his attention to a heaping spoonful of peanut butter.

"Again, this is Jerry Rothman, licensed chiropractor, broadcasting by ham radio from Garrison, North Dakota," the radio voice said. The sound was full of hiss and static. "I've heard from survivors as far away as Eau Claire. They say they've heard people from upstate New York. Reception is not good. There has been no word from the government. We have known survivors in the following areas..."

Ruppert looked out through the tall windows into the predawn dark. Looking south, he thought he could see bright embers of the holocaustic light, unnaturally white, glowing over the southern horizon, consuming the cities of North America. He thought of his parents in Bakersfield, his wife in Los Angeles.

Lucia took his hand.

"What do we do now?" she whispered.

Ruppert watched the sun begin to rise over the smoldering ruins of the civilization. He didn't know the answer.

THE END