

SECRET REVELATION

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Steve Bell

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A memory is what is left when something happens and does not completely un-happen.

—Edward De Bono

The mind is like a door, but don't lose the key, that's amnesia.

—Tony Follari

C H A P T E R 1

BANG!

The worn Goodyear tires on the gold '78 Pontiac rasped, seeking scant grip as the car slammed to a dead stop. Dust from the bone dry road lifted into the black night sky, a red cloud in the glow of the brake lights. With the sudden force of the deceleration the engine had cut out, leaving a vast expanse of desert now in silence.

“Oh shit! I hit him,” Shelly Truman said as her vodka soaked eyes suddenly cleared with the rush of adrenaline the loud impact had summoned. Her tanned fingers, tipped with cheap, pink nail varnish, gripped the wheel tightly, knuckles pale with exertion, and her body started to tremble with shock. Slowly she turned her head to look out the rear window. Through the swirling red haze beyond she could make out the long lonely road stretching behind them. There, on the edge of it, a few yards back, could be discerned the shape of a human body. It lay motionless, crumpled, where it had fallen. “Oh my God. I think he’s dead.”

After a moment she looked to Jayne Weston, sitting stunned beside her. She reached across, pried the half empty bottle of Jim Beam from Jayne’s hand and took a long slug before wiping her shaking hand across her mouth. “Oh Jesus. They’re gonna lock me away forever this time.”

Jayne paused, looking at her empty hand and shaking her head. “Not if we just drive away. Leave him there.” She pulled back the bottle, hitting it hard. “No one’s ever gonna know.”

This advice from a friend, a good friend ever since the two flunked high school together. They’d moved into similar trailer homes, married similar losers and were beaten senseless by said losers more than once, often simultaneously. No

coincidence, given that the men did their drinking together. Matching bruises can create a powerful bond. Shelly knew if they drove away now, they could trust each other to hold the secret forever.

“But what if someone finds the body and calls the cops?” Shelly asked, unsuccessfully wiping a black tear streak from her cheek with the back of her trembling hand.

Shaking her head, Jayne glanced out into the darkness of the desert. “No. The animals will have him before sunrise. There won’t be enough left of him to know a car hit him. I’m tellin’ you, honey, we should just run.”

“But what if they find the half chewed pieces scattered near the road? They’re bound to ask what happened.”

“*If* there’s anything left and someone manages to find it,” Jayne said, “then they’ll just reckon it’s more strange shit from one of the bases. You know they find all kinds of weird things out here and it just gets hushed up.”

Shelly looked back toward the dark shape curled on the road. “But what if he’s not dead?”

“Shelly, we hit him at goddamn near sixty. He’s dead. Christ, look at the hood of the car.”

Shelly looked around. First at the hood and then up along the road, then from side to side out into the deep blackness of the desert. “I gotta check. If he ain’t dead then we have to help him. I can’t leave him suffering until some animal takes him.”

“Oh my lord! Are you crazy?” Jayne said, grabbing Shelly’s arm. “Just drive, honey, before anyone comes. Now is not the point in your life to develop a conscience. Just accept that he’s...”

Shelly released Jayne’s grip and pulled on the door handle, swinging open the door. She pushed her long, slim legs from the car, placed pink stilettos on brown dirt. Rising to her full height, she tugged down the cheap Lycra floral-patterned dress to cover her behind.

Once she had been an attractive woman—and she still turned heads in town when the light was right. Her peroxide ravaged hair fell in short tight curls around her face. This set off her once sparkling gray eyes, now dulled by years of cheap booze. Although only thirty-five, she looked a decade older. The skin on her face, aged by years of sun and cigarettes, sagged saddened and drawn by a tough life. But even after three kids she’d managed to keep her great natural shape. She had large breasts that curved into a slim waist before flaring into what the guys in the bar called a peach of an ass.

“Shelly! You get back in this damned car now!” Jayne hollered through the open door.

“I gotta know if he’s dead or not,” Shelly said, teetering toward the back of the car. “I just gotta check.”

“Oh Christ!” Jayne moaned, shaking her head and gulping another blast of JB. Then she too was out of the car.

Jayne Weston had been Miss Kingman back in ’87, her moment of glory. An all-American beauty once, tall, thin and voluptuous, she had used the cascades of natural brown curls that fell to her back as one of her key weapons when enticing boys. She was famed for a sultry pout as she flicked her hair across one shoulder. Many guys had grown weak at the knees when she winked a large hazel eye at them. These days her tight red dress showed more bulges than curves, fed on high-octane lunches at the local bar. Her dreams of reigning as a national beauty queen lay at the bottom of a bottle. Many bottles.

She looked nervously out into the desert and then, shaking her head, cautiously walked after Shelly. “This is a really dumb idea.”

Shelly stepped through the eerie cloud of still swirling dust. She could now clearly see the motionless shape. It was a man, on his side, curled up and facing away from her. Creeping closer, she could see a dark pool glistening on the road near the back of his head. Blood had seeped out of a gash, forming a thin film mixed with dust. Then, in the dim red light, she noticed something strange.

“Oh my God! He’s completely naked,” Shelly said, frowning. “What the hell was he doing out here with no clothes on?”

Jayne sidled up to Shelly, grabbing her left arm tightly. She stared down at the body. “I told you...I told you to just drive. I’ve heard too many stories about weird shit that happens out here. And a naked guy out in the desert is what I class as weird shit. I say we hightail it back to town before anyone comes.” She glanced out into the darkness. “He’s probably from one of the bases out here. If so, then I suggest we let *them* come and pick him up. Come on, Shelly, just leave him.”

Shelly looked at the man on the ground. She didn’t know what it was, but something was out of place. “Look at his skin; it’s kinda burned. Maybe he’s been wandering out here all day. What the hell was he doing out here?”

Jayne shrugged. “Maybe he’s just some crazy son of a bitch that’s escaped from the funny farm. Maybe he’s from one of those fucked up experiments they have going on out here that Bobby Jones talks about. I really don’t know and I really don’t care. Let’s...just...go!”

Shelly stepped around the body to see whether she might recognize him from the town. His eyes were tightly closed, with a look of pain across his face.

Crouching down, she tipped her head to one side. “Oh, he was cute. I ain’t ever seen him before. Have you?”

“Nope. He ain’t from town. I’d remember that face.” Suddenly, something silver nestled in his right hand drew Jayne’s attention. “What the hell’s he holding? I ain’t ever seen anything like that before.”

Shelly looked down and examined it closer, her eyes narrowed. “I have *no* idea.”

“This is getting worse,” Jayne said. “If there’s one thing I’ve learned in my life, it’s that anything found in the desert should be left in the desert.” She pointed a shaking finger. “Now if it’s a goddamned body holding something weird like that, it’s better we run away and forget we ever saw it. I’m tellin’ ya, he’s from one of the bases and they’ll be looking for him and whatever he’s got there.”

The strange metal object glowed slightly. The odd light it emitted held Shelly’s gaze transfixed—almost drawing her toward it. Indeed moving closer, she slowly reached out her trembling hand to touch it. Her fingers stretched near, when suddenly the man moaned. Shelly jumped back with shock, releasing a scream before landing on her backside.

“He’s still alive!” Jayne gasped, then covering her mouth with her hands.

Shelly picked herself up, shaking wildly. “What in God’s name do we do now?”

“Let’s just leave him and go!” Jayne said, dragging on Shelly’s arm.

Shelly pulled back toward the body. “I can’t leave him here to die. I hit the man.”

“No! There is something very bad about him! Think, for God’s sake! He’s out in the desert, naked, with who the hell knows what in his hand.” She grabbed Shelly’s shoulders. “Remember, we are right in the middle of a bunch of military bases. Bases where they kill people all the time for just trespassing. My God, if this man is anything to do with them...If what he’s holding belongs to them, then they will not think twice about killing two lowlifes like us. Do you get it or not? Let’s go. Now!”

Suddenly to her right, out in the darkness of the desert, Shelly could see two faint points of light. Watching, she realized the lights were heading straight toward them. She looked at the body and then at her friend. “Oh my God. I’m sorry, Jayne.”

C H A P T E R 2

The Kingman Regional Medical Center sits back from Stockton Hill Road in Kingman, Arizona. The hospital is divided into two main buildings, one of four stories and one of two stories. The outside is painted a patient-friendly cream color and is surrounded by ample car parking. The hospital serves a large catchment area, taking its patients from the city and surrounding rural areas. Local residents believe it to be an independent, not for profit organization. But it is a closely guarded secret that in truth it is not.

In 1982, all the lands, property and equipment were moved from county to local control. A five-member board was put in place to oversee the independent running of the estate. Few people know that three of the members on this 'independent' board are in fact secretly members of the armed forces. The KMRC has also a twenty-five-member board that elects a key seven-member executive committee to control the actual running of the hospital. With a number of top secret military bases within a one-hour radius, it was thought (by the military) it priority that control of such a key structure should remain firmly within its hands. The seven members of the executive committee are the key to that control. They decide upon personnel handpicked to work in the emergency room. It is no coincidence the ER helipad receives frequent air ambulances from the military. Crucially, the executive board exerts complete control over all information leaving the hospital. In the corner office belonging to the executive committee sits a red telephone connected to the office of the commander of Luke Air Force Base in Phoenix.

The KRMC holds dear one accolade: it is the only rural hospital in Arizona that has a residency program in its emergency department. The resident on duty tonight is Dr Scott Thomas.

* * * *

Dr Thomas was trying to catch ten minutes sleep in the duty room when his pager started to vibrate.

He was immediately roused from light sleep, the usual adrenaline rush jolting his body wide awake. In reflex he reached for the pager and looked at the time, 4:40 am. His immediate thought was that it must be an RTA from out on one of the desert roads. *Maybe the air team is bringing someone in.*

Dr Thomas's blue ER scrubs barely reached the extremities of his tall and gangly frame. Both his calves and his midriff were often on show, keeping the rest of the medical team amused. Pushing his hands through his blonde hair, he tried hard to straighten the waves matted to the side of his head. His face was young but his blue eyes were tired from his punishing residency. Not long now and he would be off to his own consultancy post in Phoenix. He was glad to be leaving the rural atmosphere of Kingman and the bullying of the ER chief, Dr Jason Connolly, asshole extraordinaire.

Turning toward the door, he picked up his Littmann stethoscope and draped it around his neck. Then he strode from the office like some oversized ill-feathered bird. Turning left, he took a well-lit corridor approaching the clerking desk. He was expecting Doris, tonight's clerk, to hand him a clipboard with details of the incoming RTA.

Doris stared back from behind the desk. She was a huge black woman who had worked in her present position since 1982. In those twenty-two years not once had she smiled and not once had she said anything in other than a bitter tone. Her large eyes rolled upward and her mouth pulled sideways as she spoke. "Dr Brains, nice of you to join the party. Sleeping were we?"

"Well, I was trying. It's just whenever I try to sleep in this hotel, someone yanks the fire alarm."

"Don't look at me, honey. I just fill in the paperwork and take the checks. You need to ask Carol: she's the girl with the itchy beeper finger. But I guess you already know that."

Dr Thomas didn't need any more early morning banter. He wanted to take the clip, fix up the patient or sign the death certificate and then roll back into his bed. "Be a good dragon and just give me the details, will you?"

“As I said, boy, you are *too* late. Bay four; the party has already started.”

Dr Thomas shook his head and jogged away from the desk toward the resus room. It was an eight-bayed, state of the art space, with prime location between the helipad and the operating suite. A lead lined screen separated each bay from the next, and clipped to the back wall was an array of equipment necessary for resuscitation. Monitoring equipment and a portable ventilator sat on the side; bags of fluid with primed giving sets hung from the ceiling.

He slammed dramatically through the swinging doors and the commotion hit him. “So what do we have?” he asked, donning a pair of size nine nonallergenic gloves and reaching for a visor.

“Caucasian, a regular John Doe, ’bout thirty. He’s maintaining his airway, sats are ninety-six percent but his GCS is eight and I think he needs a tube.” Carol, a young nurse-practitioner was standing over the patient, fumbling into place a blood pressure cuff around his right arm. Her attractive hazel gaze met Scott’s as she glanced up from the job. “RTA. He was dropped off a few minutes ago.”

“Dropped off? Sounds like a parcel. Who dropped him, UPS?”

Carol smiled as the automatic sphygmomanometer inflated and she watched the screen for the systolic pressure. “Don’t know, maybe the tooth fairy. The night porter said two women, a couple of cheap hookers he said, dragged him just inside the doors and then hightailed it away.”

“Nice. This town is just adorable. So, what do we have?”

A huge orderly with thick red hair tied back in a pony and a coarse red biker beard rushed from one side of the room. He rolled a mayo trolley loaded with instruments. “Scuse me, Doc.”

Carol reset the machine and the cuff re-inflated. “His pressure’s low, eighty systolic, pulse one-twenty, better get a second line in.” She turned to Dr Thomas who was already on his knees, tapping out a decent vein in the left cubital fossa.

“He’s got a deep wound to his occiput,” Thomas said. “I can’t see properly because of the spine board but looks like a significant bruise. I wouldn’t be surprised if he has a skull fracture and we don’t know where that blood’s gone yet.” Thomas moved to the side of the patient. “He has some bruising down his left flank with a large impact mark on his right thigh, probably where a car clipped him.” Attaching the giving set, the doctor moved quickly around the trolley—John Doe was clearly in trouble.

In seconds, a short fat anesthetist appeared in the room. Without hesitating, he was automatically checking the airway while reaching for the suction. “Morning. How’s he doing?” He turned to the patient.

“Hello, sir, can you hear me, open your eyes for us?” Thomas asked, pulling out a pen torch and lifting the patient’s eyelids—*pupils reactive*. He rubbed hard on the sternum and the patient’s left hand came up to meet him. “That did the trick. Okay. Sir, can you squeeze my fingers?”

Dr Thomas moved to grab the right hand. “What’s that?”

“What?” Carol asked, looking across as she set up a catheter trolley. She could see the patient was gripping tightly a small silver object. It was no larger than a small computer mouse, with barely visible indents for fingertips and a thumb tip. “No idea. I never noticed it when they wheeled him in. It’s certainly not mine.”

“If it’s valuable, then it’s mine,” the orderly laughed.

Dr Thomas shrugged and then tried to pull it free, but the hand was locked like steel. “Well, he won’t give it up.” He started to prize at the fingers, when suddenly the patient’s back arched, straining at the straps that held him securely on the spine board. His head jerked upward in the confines of the hard collar around his neck. His mouth opened and he released a guttural scream.

Dr Thomas shot backward, stumbling over the catheter trolley, sending it crashing to the floor. A urinary catheter and KY jelly spilled onto the polished granite.

Carol and the orderly reeled in shock, and then a second later lunged forward to secure their patient. They pushed him down easily, as he collapsed before they could get their hands on him.

“Holy shit!” Dr Thomas said, freeing himself from the trolley mess and shaking his head. “I nearly filled my scrubs.”

“He’s fitting!” the anesthetist shouted as the patient began to shudder violently against the spine board. The anesthetist turned, holding out his hand to the orderly. “Diazemol, please, and give me some cricoid pressure. We’ll do a rapid sequence on him before he fills his lungs.”

The antiepileptic drugs took immediate effect and then the muscle-paralyzing agent set to work. As the orderly pressed firmly on the front of the patient’s neck, the anesthetist reached for a laryngoscope and slickly slid an ET tube down through the vocal cords. Once the patient was on the ventilator, Thomas breathed his own sigh of relief.

“Do we have any ID on this guy?” he asked, recomposing himself and returning to his primary survey.

“No idea, Doc,” the orderly said, opening another Foley catheter for Carol. “Dude came in just as you see him: naked as a jaybird. There was nothing on him.”

“Nothing at all?”

“Not unless it was crammed up his ass,” the orderly said with a chuckle. “Why don’t you check, Doc?”

“Connolly’s gonna love this one,” Thomas said, shaking his head.

“Is this a fucking circus?” a deep English-accented voice boomed from by the doors. It belonged to Dr Jason Connolly, the chief of the ER, an imposing man, rigid and square. His face was regal, like a reproduction from an old royal-commissioned painting. He would indeed have looked more at home astride a giant white horse and clad in medieval battle armor than standing in a white doctor’s coat. His steel gray eyes burned down his aristocratic nose, which ended just above his mouth—turned down with distaste. His brown locks of swept-back hair bounced as he strode into the room. “Oh my. The chief clown is running the show. I should have guessed by the level of confusion in here.”

Dr Thomas turned his head, feeling his hatred for Connolly rise to a new level. Having endured his pompous sarcasm for nearly two years, the rope was now wearing thin. He detested the way the man thought he was king of the ER and that all others were commoners, serfs. Yes, he hated the man, and he would be glad to get to Phoenix.

“Unusual to see you working at this time of day, Doctor,” Thomas remarked.

“Unusual to see you work,” Connolly retorted. “If that’s what you call it. I’ve seen trained monkeys do a more refined job in an ER than certain members of this team. They also dress better.”

“I thought you were on duty at nine,” Carol said, coming to the side of Dr Thomas. She had endured Connolly’s ostentatious arrogance for longer than Thomas had, and, further, had to put up with his unrelenting chauvinistic attitude. Like everyone, she hated him.

Connolly paused and looked between Carol, Thomas and the orderly, shaking his head with distaste. Then he placed his hands on his hips and spoke in the most condescending tone he could muster, and he was a master at mustering such a tone. “For your information, my little people, I happened to be coming in early to cover some important notes I am assembling for a lecture I am to give next month. It’s for a rather prestigious congress.” Slight smile. “But, I expect none of you would know about such matters. So I was here by chance and it seems that it is fortunate.”

Dr Thomas glanced sideways at Carol. He wasn’t buying it. *Connolly would never come in early. Never.* Thomas’s immediate paranoid suspicion was that he was there to throw a wrench, or in Connolly’s British-accented case, a spanner, in the works for the move to Phoenix. He knew Connolly would struggle to run the place without him. In two months they had found only one candidate to even

look at the post, and that was an army doctor. Thomas hoped the whole ship would go under with Captain Ahab at the helm.

Connolly stepped past the riffraff to the patient. "Well I heard enough from the door. Abdomen?"

"Soft, some bruising to the left flank. But he's not distended," Thomas said.

"Pelvis? Long bones?"

"Feels stable. There's a lot of bruising to the left thigh but the femur seems intact."

"Okay so why's his BP in his boots?" Connolly turned to the radiographer, who'd just arrived and was donning a lead gown. "C-spine, chest and pelvis, shall we? Thomas, get him a CAT scan as soon as he's stable. Let's check his head out and you'd better scan his chest and abdomen while you're at it. The moment you've finished, I want you to deliver *all* reports personally to my office. Is that clear?"

"I think I can handle the situation," Dr Thomas complained, a little surprised at Connolly's request. "I know it's hard to believe there are others in the world, but I am actually a qualified doctor as well."

Connolly paused for a second. "This man has no identification. Women of dubious character dropped him off at our door in what appear to be unusual circumstances. These things can soon spiral out of control. The last thing we want is the local police saying we missed something should events take a turn for the worse. I think *I* will handle this man personally, if it's not too much trouble to you." He paused and raised his eyebrows, daring anyone to object. "Oh, and I want you to inform me if any relatives call. In fact, if anyone at all calls."

"Sure," Carol said, looking sideways at Connolly. "Should I ask them to call you direct in your office or should I have them make an appointment through St Peter?"

Connolly's face suddenly changed from mere anger to utter rage. His gaze zoomed in on Carol. "I said if *anyone* calls about this man, then *you* call me! Don't say anything to anyone, even if they claim to be God!"

"There's something else," Thomas said. "He's holding a small metal object as if his life depends on it. He has an unusually strong grip on it. He should have let it go by now."

Connolly's focus shifted to the patient's hand. "Leave it! Don't touch anything! Treat it as...evidence. Just let the man keep hold of it."

"It'll be a problem in the CAT and PET scanners."

"I said fucking well leave it alone! Let him keep it! Is that clear?" He paused and waited for a challenge. He turned on the spot and marched from the ER adding, "Good. Now for pity's sake put a warming blanket on him."

Thomas watched as the doors swung closed. The anesthetist simply shrugged and waddled off in the opposite direction, shaking his head.

"What the hell was that all about?" the orderly asked, eyes wide.

"Connolly is one strange man," Dr Thomas said, shrugging. "But tonight I'm calling Guinness. The man has broken his weirdness record."

Carol turned back to the patient. "Who is this guy? And why has he got Connolly so wound up?"

"As he said," the orderly answered, "he has no ID and I guess it's making the big man nervous."

"No. Connolly's reaction was more than that," Carol said. "I mean wanting to see the reports personally and not wanting anyone to talk to the relatives. John Doe or not, it's a strange reaction." Carol looked at the mild burns across the patient's skin. Then the silver object clutched in his hand slowly drew her attention. "There's something more about this guy and Connolly knows it. I mean, why the hell was he so strong about us leaving that in his hands. Just weird."

Dr Thomas turned and filled in details on a small clipboard, looking up frequently at the patient. He was still seething from being bumped again by Connolly. "If he's stable, we should get his head checked out. As soon as he wakes up, *he* can tell us who he is, and maybe shed some light on what's up with Connolly."

"I've got a creepy feeling about this dude," the orderly said, as he connected the catheter bag and urine started to flow. "Don't be surprised if we suddenly get a visit from some of our uniformed friends. This all feels like there's a little military thing goin' down here. Remember back in ninety-eight?"

Dr Thomas shook his head. "I wasn't here then. What happened?"

"Oh, you mean when that chopper full of special ops guys went down just south of here?" Carol said, nodding slowly. "Yes, I do remember. Before we could patch them up, they had a team in here taking them and their equipment away. They came in like they owned the place, asking all kinds of weird questions." She paused, tilting her head slightly to one side and narrowing her eyes. "Yeah, you're right. That was the other time King Shit went all strange on us, and everything went cloak-and-dagger. It wouldn't surprise me if our boy here were also military."

Dr Thomas looked at the patient and then shook his head. "Nah. If he was military he'd have dog tags."

“Not all soldiers wear tags,” the orderly said in a quiet voice. “Some special ops...If they get caught, it’s over. No tags. No link to the US.” The orderly paused and raised his eyebrows. “Well, my advice, ladies and gentleman,” he said sniffing, “is to patch him up and do as the boss man says. I’ve lived out here near these bases too long and know it’s better not to ask—just in case you find out. If you get my drift.”

“What about that in his hand?” Thomas asked.

“You want my advice, Doc?” the orderly said. “Let the man keep it, and don’t ever mention to anyone that you seen it.”

Scott exchanged glances with Carol as he started to wheel the gurney out of the exit door. He silently shook his head. *I’ll be glad to get to Phoenix*, he thought.

That he might never get there, ever, didn’t cross the good doctor’s mind.

C H A P T E R 3

“Will he survive?” Mr Jones asked in his cold, calculating voice as he lit a cigarette.

Even the ever-superior Connolly was unnerved by the man who stood before him in the executive room of the KRMC. His eyes, soulless black slits in his weasel face, spoke of nothing but death. His thin mouth, above his pointed chin, seemed somehow to be motionless when he spoke—*if* he spoke. He sported a thin gray mustache and long narrow sideburns. To Connolly, he looked lost from the set of an old black and white western. The silent gunslinger who leaned on the bar and only ever spoke just before he drew his gun.

His call had awakened Connolly an hour earlier. He’d been told one of *their* men had potentially been in an accident. As they had all been briefed, the patient was to get Connolly’s personal attention. Connolly had been through this before, but this time there was a menacing air to the request and a heightened sense of urgency. It was the first time one of their agents had arrived so soon—and alone.

“He is stable,” Connolly answered. “My staff have him in the CAT scanner now. He has a head injury and we’re not sure whether he has any internal bleeding. It’s essential we control this and then I’ll have a better idea. But yes, he should survive.”

Jones’s breath rasped as he inhaled cigarette smoke and then slowly expelled it. “You were asked to oversee him yourself.”

“There is nothing to be done while he’s in the scanner,” Connolly said, straightening his collar. “I’ll follow him once I have the initial results. You can assure your superiors he is in capable hands.”

“Head injury?” Jones asked. “Does that mean he might have brain damage? Memory loss?”

“His injuries do carry a high risk of that. It may help if I knew more.” Connolly paused, unsure he should ask the next question. “Do you know what kind of accident he was involved in?”

Jones raised an eyebrow and then shook his head slowly. “Classified.”

“It’s just that it might help us in our treatment if we know he’s been exposed to any...”

Jones simply shook his head again. “I need to inform my superiors of the situation.”

Connolly turned and gestured to the red dial-less phone that sat on the high table in the corner. “Be my guest. It’s your quarter, after all. I’m happy to talk to whomever and answer whatever I can.”

Jones slowly turned his death-like eyes toward the door.

Connolly immediately understood. He turned and walked toward it. “If you need me...”

“I know,” Jones said coldly, and watched Connolly leave the room.

* * * *

Jones ambled over to the phone and picked up the receiver. He heard a slow three-pulse ring. After a moment a delicate female voice answered.

“Yes?”

“Miss Davies?”

“Mr Jones, how delightful to hear your voice so early.”

Jones simply grunted.

“Do you have an update for General McFee? He needs to give The Council good news. He’s becoming impatient and angry, and you know what that does to me.”

Jones looked around and drew on his cigarette. “Try to control your fantasies a little longer. I think I’ve found him.” He paused and breathed out slowly. “An hour ago a man was dumped here, and from the accounts of the head doctor he is holding something. Something he described as a silver object.”

“Sounds like the device we’re looking for. Is the secret safe?”

Jones paused. “We’ll know more by late this morning. Unfortunately, the patient is being treated for what was reported as head trauma, and you know what that could mean. Seems he’s had a busy night.”

“Head trauma?”

“If Dr Connolly is right, then I guess this is our man, and I guess he should still have the secret. Ask McFee if I’m to eliminate the patient and recover the device.”

“Wait by the phone. I’ll update him straight away and I’ll ask what you’re to do.”

The connection clicked off and Jones placed the receiver down. He dropped the butt of his cigarette and slowly crushed it with his pointed cowboy boot toe. Slowly he pulled his long black coat to one side and removed one of his many sidearms. From an inside pocket he pulled out a silencer and slowly, purposefully screwed it to the muzzle.

CHAPTER 4



Luke Air Force Base sits in Litchfield Park, Arizona, off the I-10 near Phoenix and is home to the 56th and 944th fighter wings. It is a world-renowned center for training F-16 pilots and considered one of the US's most important fighter bases. Two stories below the ground, in a hardened concrete bunker, lies the hermetically sealed office of the general in charge of the base. Access to the office is by biometrically controlled entry codes, a series of guarded elevators and a four hundred-foot steel reinforced access corridor. It is considered one of the most secure offices within the US air force.

Placed at the far corner of the sparsely decorated office is a square gray desk, and behind it sits a concerned man—General Orson McFee

* * * *

McFee was a colossus of a black man; even now at fifty-four his daily regime in the gym kept him in top condition. His uniform stretched tight across his massive chest and pulled back across powerful shoulders. Mind and body both were in shape: during even the intense crisis today happening around him, his face bore no signs of stress, no signs of deep concern. As always, he remained the consummate professional. His bald head shone brightly in the single spotlight that cast a great cone of illumination in the centre of this room. Only a slight frown marred his high forehead. The lines running from his nose to his mouth held deep shadows, shading his face with a tinge of sadness. The thick black mustache simply added to his already formidable air of authority.

McFee looked up toward the stunning woman who stood half shrouded in the shadows before him. “Miss Davies, it had better be good news. The Council is extremely concerned we may have lost him.”

“It appears we have a concrete lead from tonight’s activities,” she said in a deceptively sweet voice. “A man, a possible witness, is thought to have been fleeing from the area during the operation. Our planes lost track of him for a while, but we think now he’s resurfaced.”

McFee watched as Lavinia Davies’s gaze crawled across his body. He knew she’d been attracted to him from the first day she had seen him step from the male showers. He’d been surprised to find her standing there, pointing a Browning pistol at his head. She’d been making a point on the laxity of his security and the sloppiness of their operating protocols. He’d been told he was the first man she’d met whom she didn’t want to kill. Since then, he had placed her as his close personal assistant, in charge of security and *special* operations.

McFee watched as she stepped forward into the light. She was close to perfect—tall and slim, but still shapely where it counted. Her face was long and pale with slight flushes of rose below her pronounced cheekbones. Her large, full, pouting lips that glistened with moisture in the half-light seduced most men on their own.

She ran a delicate hand up through her waves of silky brown hair, pushing it away from her most bewitching feature, her sky-blue eyes. In the dimness of the room, they radiated light.

McFee mused at her angelic looks—deceptive, like her voice, to say the least. He acknowledged silently why Davies was one of the deadliest assassins in Special Forces, nicknamed “Beauty and the Beast.” She had trained at one of the top academies of special operations for close quarters diplomatic assassination. Her technique was to act as a high-class escort and seduce her prey. Once she had him alone, she would push a nine-inch narrow blade up under his sternum. She would then drive it into the left ventricle of the heart, guaranteeing instant death. Often the pleasure of seeing her athletic, naked body was the last experience of which her victims were aware.

“Where is he now?” McFee asked.

“Mr Jones has tracked him to the KRMC emergency room,” she replied. “It seems that’s where he was taken after an accident.”

“Is he injured?”

“It appears so. Fortunately for us, or we’d never have found him.”

McFee sat back in his chair. “And how is Mr Jones so convinced that this is the man?”

Davies took out a cigarette and lit it. She breathed out a cloud of smoke as she spoke. “The first reports coming out of the hospital say that when ‘he was dumped’ there, he was holding what appears to be the device.”

McFee raised his eyebrows. “Who dumped him?” Davies shrugged. That information obviously hadn’t been deemed important by Jones. “But does this man hold the secret?”

“This we don’t know for sure. All we know is he has the device and that means he must be a part of The Enigma. It’s more than probable he’s the one.”

“We’ll need to ensure he’s kept safe,” McFee said. “There’s no way to know whether or not they’ve activated the Darwin weapon, and that means we may need him alive. Did you get an update on the whereabouts of the weapon?”

Davies shook her head. “No. Darwin is still missing. Shortly after the operation we lost the tracking signal. It must be out in the desert somewhere.”

McFee stood up, finally showing agitation. “Shit! We all know just how devastating it would be...The Enigma was crazy enough to bring it here, so we must assume they’re reckless enough to set the fucking thing off.”

Davies nodded as McFee continued. “We have to assume the worst-case scenario: that the weapon is in timer mode and could go hot any minute. We have to set our team on the highest state of alert—but without creating panic.”

“If it is on a timer, could we deactivate it?” Davies asked.

Crossing his arms, McFee walked around the desk. “Yes. It can be deactivated, but only if the secret remains intact.”

“If not?”

“If not, then there may be no way to stop it. I’m hoping this man in the hospital will survive. If we lose him, and he does indeed hold the secret, then we lose the ability to control the weapon.” McFee shook his head. “Just how critical is he?”

“It’s not clear yet; information is still sketchy. I’m hoping Mr Jones will get this information for us within the next few hours. This morning, he said. He’s waiting for the first full assessment by Dr Connolly.”

McFee paused for a moment. “I need to inform The Council immediately. As I’d feared, events have moved faster than even they had imagined. It appears The Enigma is carrying out their plan. Every second is now crucial.”

“The Enigma’s become much more dangerous. Gil has become more daring,” Davies said. “The intelligence we’ve gathered in the past months is fragmented, but it did suggest they were about to step up their activities. It’s unbelievable they’ve managed to get hold of a military class weapon.”

“But somehow they did.”

“It looks like they want to take their plans to a whole new level. Our intelligence speaks of a crucial date that’s only a few weeks away.”

“I guess they’ve chosen that date to detonate it,” McFee said. “I’d warned The Council this group are no ordinary terrorists. They’re religious fanatics, driven on by their lunatic leader.”

“The information does suggest Gil is personally coordinating this entire plan.”

A look of rage filled McFee’s eyes. His body visibly tensed. “Gil is just as important to The Council as Darwin,” McFee said. “They’ve been after him for a long time. Maybe, by a strange twist of fate this man could bring us closer to Gil.”

“Why do you say that?”

“I’m sure The Enigma would have given the secret only to someone they can trust, someone on the real inside. If so, then the man in the hospital may hold the secret, and he just might hold the key to getting to Gil. That makes him a valuable commodity.”

Davies drew hard on her cigarette. “You know how loyal these people can be. What if he refuses to tell us the secret, even under duress? Do we kill him?”

McFee shook his head. “That’s not an option. The countdown may have started and that secret is the only key. What’s in his head may be the only way to stop Darwin and the only link to Gil.” McFee shook his head. “If he’s dead, then he may be of no more use to The Enigma, but he is also of no use to us. No, this man must be kept alive at all costs.”

“Then what can we do?” Davies said, resting the cigarette in an ashtray. “I’m sure if The Enigma feel he could jeopardize the weapon, or even worse, betray Gil, then they’ll kill him without thinking.”

McFee breathed in deeply. “That means we need to protect our asset until we can get him to talk. You and Mr Jones have the task of watching over him and ensuring no one can kill him. I want Jones at the hospital twenty-four-seven.” McFee paused to think. “We should also start an aerial grid search of the area for a signature of Darwin. Maybe we’ll get lucky.”

“Anything else?” Davies asked.

McFee sat on the corner of his desk and stared deeply into her eyes. He knew a great danger faced the world. They both knew it. “Anything else? Well, you might want to pray a little.”

C H A P T E R 5

It was late morning when Dr Thomas knocked on the door of Dr Connolly's extravagant office. He waited for a second and then walked in.

Thomas never ceased to be repulsed by the size and garish nature of his mentor's luxurious office. A wealth of bizarre objects adorned the walls and shelves. There were tribal masks from Africa, paper dragons from China, a bearskin hat from Russia among other exotic trophies. All were talking points for the young nurses he would bring there late at night and ply with expensive Veuve Clicquot. He served it chilled from the small fridge built into his vast power desk. The desk would then serve as his mating post as he claimed his favorite of all trophies.

Thomas was both surprised and delighted to see Dr Connolly sitting hunched behind his desk. Connolly's normal arrogance had been lessened in the last few hours. It was obvious the patient, now lying in a pharmaceutically induced coma, was giving him great concern. *I'll shake our patient by the hand for upsetting Dr Asshole*, Thomas thought.

The fact that Connolly had requested an isolated Intensive Therapy Unit added to the suspicions Scott and Carol had been discussing at length. There was plenty of space on the regular unit, but Connolly had insisted—*We don't want any chance of any evidence being 'tampered with'*. Now seeing the grave look of concern on Connolly's face, he was sure this was something serious.

"So what's the latest on our patient?" Connolly demanded; his hand outstretched for the reports.

"Well, he's in surprisingly good shape," Thomas said, passing a wad of notes across the desk. "The CAT scan showed that although he has a cerebral contusion, there's no intracranial bleeding. He has a minor subcapsular hematoma to

the left kidney we'll need to watch, but otherwise the scan was negative. X-rays confirm no broken bones, internal bleeds or organ damage."

Connolly shuffled through the papers.

"Considering he appears to have been in a major RTA," Thomas continued. "I'd say he's a fortunate individual. I've never seen anyone who appears to have been hit so hard with so few major injuries."

"Did you get him into the isolated ITU as I asked?"

"Of course. Whatever is your bidding we are happy to do, my master." He bowed slightly. "We've decided to keep him on the ventilator for now. The anesthesiologist thought that after his convulsion it'd be prudent to keep him under until the swelling goes down on his brain. The last thing we need is for him to jump of the bed and do himself some real damage. Imagine what people would think."

Connolly quickly flicked through the last of the reports. "Okay, it looks good. When will they try waking him up?"

"Oh, about twenty-four hours, I think," Thomas said, taking the papers back. Connolly was curiously reluctant to let go of them, but with no real reason to keep them, Thomas won the small tug-of-war. "By then it should be safe to bring him around. Once he's awake, he might be able to tell us what happened."

Connolly shifted in his seat. "Of course, there is the possibility he could have some degree of amnesia about the incident."

Thomas shrugged, a little bemused by the question. "We'll just have to wait and see. He may wake up with a headache or he may wake up thinking he's David Bowie. After such a blunt head trauma, he could have any level of damage."

"And you think?"

"First signs are the damage is not too severe, but I guess tomorrow we'll know for sure."

"It is essential that the moment he wakes I am told," Connolly said, and now his gaze burned into Thomas. "It is imperative that no one, and I mean no one, speaks to this man until I am present. Is that clear?"

Thomas nodded and clicked his heels.

"Good. Well it looks like all is in order for once."

Thomas did a double-take. *Was that almost a compliment from the great Dr Asshole?* This removed any final doubts in Thomas's mind. Now he was convinced this patient had Connolly on edge. Now was the perfect time to prod a little.

"Oh. There is one other thing."

"Yes?"

“The patient is still holding that thing. Now he’s sedated we could take it from him.”

Connolly leapt from his seat, the veins in his forehead pulsing. “Touch nothing!” he barked. “Nothing! I said—it’s better we treat anything to do with this man as—evidence. At least until we’ve found out who he is and what happened.”

Thomas stared back.

“If anyone touches anything, communicates with him or...or, well, anything. Then I’ll have your arses kicked out of this institute. Now, have I made myself clear enough, even for your limited intellect, about how I want this patient dealt with?”

“Don’t worry. The message is clear,” Thomas said, backing away. “If he farts, then I’ll have it collected in a bag and delivered to you personally.”

“Cut the fucking humor,” Connolly said, standing and ushering Thomas toward the door. “I’m serious. Don’t ask him anything until I get there. Now, did anyone call about him? Relatives, people claiming to be friends, anyone?”

Thomas shook his head. “No, not yet. It’s early. But Carol is contacting the local police to see if they have any missing persons and to report the RTA.”

“What?” Connolly screamed, almost lunging at Thomas. “Who the hell told her to do that? I never told any of you to call the fucking police!”

Thomas stepped back. “It’s a hit-and-run. We’re duty bound to call the police.”

Connolly’s eyes rolled in his head and his lips turned white with rage. “Look, you idiot! I have everything under control with the appropriate authorities. Stop her now! Do you understand? I don’t want any local police here!”

Dr Thomas backed slowly from the room, his gaze fixed on Connolly. He was now positive this was military business—*No local police. Then who are the appropriate authorities?* Suddenly something caught his eye down the corridor. A tall black silhouette of a man stood against a long window. Smoke was slowly rising from its mouth. The gravity of the situation was becoming clearer. Connolly was not running the show; it was others, others who had Connolly terrified. That meant they were serious people. Thomas looked back to Connolly before turning toward the elevators—*This is wrong.*

C H A P T E R 6

Chewing on the corner of a pen, Carol stood by the reception desk. She had the phone wedged in the crook of her neck and a small notebook in her hand.

Dr Thomas walked from the elevators with his mind abuzz from the meeting. The image of the strange man standing near the executive room concerned him. Striding across to the reception desk, Carol's smile greeted him.

"You okay?" Carol asked, looking at his face. "You look a bit pale. Connolly being his usual self?"

"Did you get through yet?" he asked, glancing around.

Carol shook her head and pulled her mouth. "Their phone lines have been buzzing all night. Apparently, they've been getting lots of crank calls. I'm waiting for the precinct sergeant."

Thomas looked at the phone. For a second he had the urge to take the receiver and place it back on its cradle.

"Hey. Are sure you're okay?" Carol asked. "You look concerned. What's wrong?"

Moving close to her, Thomas started to whisper. "You know yesterday we talked about how there's something not right about this patient and the whole situation."

"Yeah?"

"Well just a few seconds ago upstairs," he glanced around as a patient walked past. "Connolly was like I've never seen him."

"Yeah?"

"He was genuinely scared about something. When I stepped out of the office, there was a guy over near the executive office. Really gave me the creeps."

“Military?”

“Well I’m sure he wasn’t one of our board members, let’s put it like that.” He paused. “Do you think we should call the police?”

Carol looked back in surprise. “What? Of course, we have to call the police. Why the hell wouldn’t we?”

“It’s just that Connolly told us not to.”

“Fuck Connolly. This is procedure.” Carol shook her head vigorously. “Hey, if the shit hits the fan about this guy and we didn’t tell the police, then I’m sure King Shit up there would forget all about what he said. No way. I’m tellin’ the cops to cover my ass.”

Thomas nodded slowly. Maybe it was better they passed this off to the police, then the ‘appropriate authorities’ could discuss it with them. Carol was right. At least by telling the cops, they were in the clear. “Right, well make sure you tell them everything, even about that thing he’s got. Connolly is determined that no one goes near it. I’ll go check on the patient, make sure he’s still there.”

Carol nodded and then her expression changed. “Oh, hello. This is the emergency room of the KRMC. I’d like to report an incident...”

C H A P T E R 7

Caine clicked off the secure line and collected the Browning BDM semi-auto pistol from his desk. The call he had been hoping for had come—they'd found him. He lifted his black jacket and holstered the weapon before moving to walk from his office. Then he caught a half glimpse of his reflection in the mirror. Stepping back, he turned, smiling at himself.

He licked the middle finger of his right hand and passed it back through his tightly cropped black Afro. He smoothed down his pencil thin mustache before straightening the half Windsor on his black Boss tie.

"You know, you are the best looking man in this outfit," he said to his reflection. "Others may try to copy, but there is only one Caine. One highly tuned, finely dressed, smooth as silk, mo fo killing machine." He smiled and winked. "Damn, you look good."

Suddenly he reached under his jacket and pulled out the Browning, leveling it at his reflection. "Boom! You are dead, my friend. You gotta be faster than that to escape from me." Laughing, he reholstered the gun before turning and striding from his office.

Caine strutted down the gray featureless corridor, his black shoes squeaking as he walked. He passed two areas marked Top Secret and then turned left to head toward General Dickson's office. The corridor stretched before him, long and narrow, dimly lit by fluorescent strip lights—the gray, reinforced walls absorbing most of the light. At the far end stood a huge metal door with two large metal levers—it seemed to have been lifted from a submarine. The door was made of a thick, blast proof alloy and held together by heavy countersunk bolts. A corporal

stood before the entrance, wearing a full flak jacket and pointing an M16A3 flat top down the corridor toward Caine.

As Caine approached, the guard spoke. "Halt and identify yourself!"

"Do we have to do this shit every day?" Caine asked, exasperated. "I mean, damn, you've seen me for over six months coming and going from this office."

The young face of the corporal was unmoved. Raising the rifle to his shoulder, he aimed the anti-flash muzzle toward Caine's head. "Identify yourself. Now!"

Caine shook his head in frustration—he knew the drill. "Special Agent Caine," he answered slowly and deliberately, while carefully pulling his wallet from his inside pocket. He opened the wallet and flashed the badge.

The corporal looked at it for a few seconds and then nodded slowly before lowering his weapon. Flicking the strap over his shoulder, he turned and released the latches on the door. It glided open effortlessly and silently. "Okay, you have clearance."

"Damned clearance," Caine moaned quietly, stepping past the corporal and through the door. "I'll put a clearance cap in your ass one day."

Beyond that door stood a second one made of deep stained oak. A single brass plaque, reading "General Dickson", hung on it. Caine knocked lightly and an electric buzzer sounded, followed by a click, as the latch unlocked. Caine pushed the door and stepped into the dimly lit office of the general.

Thick cigar smoke filled the room with a haze that reeked like a bar. Oak lined walls bordered a small library of books down the right hand side of the office. There were no windows and no other doors. In the middle of the room stood a sturdy oak writing desk topped with a green leather inset. A black phone, a red phone and a white phone sat on the desk among an assortment of papers. Next to them, in a large brass ashtray, lay a thick smoldering cigar.

Caine looked at his partner, Abel, perched on the corner of the desk. He was sat with his hands on his lap. He wore standard issue agent clothes: crisp white cotton shirt with button down collar, black silk tie with silver tie clip, single-breasted wool mix black suit and regulation black shoes with low noise rubber soles. On his face were the square framed mirrored sunglasses that seemed to have been surgically implanted. No one at the agency could ever remember seeing him without the shades. Many proposed it was because his eyes were too frightening to be revealed. Dead, cold, killer eyes, like that of some great shark. The only clue to what he was thinking was his ever-stern mouth constantly down turned in a sneer.

His stretched skin clung taut, like thin white polythene, enhancing already pronounced cheekbones. Topping his skull like face was a thick covering of

black-waxed hair, a long wide parting running from the crown to his high forehead.

If Caine were to draw a human killing machine, he would draw Abel.

“Looking good, Abe. Why don’t you just bend over the desk like a real secretary,” Caine said.

“Perhaps, as the expert, you would demonstrate,” Abel replied.

General Walter Dickson had handpicked both of these men. Agents had alerted Dickson to Caine’s special talents for dealing out merciless pain. It was during Caine’s time in a correctional institute—on the wrong side of the law. He had known that with the right training, Caine would make an excellent agent for The Enigma, and a perfect bodyguard.

Abel was an altogether different machine. He was military through and through, disciplined and a fast learner. His skills in weaponry and explosives had brought him to the attention of the higher ranks. Dickson had followed his many successful insurgent operations and had decided to convert him to The Enigma. He’d never regretted it. Their chosen names were Caine and Abel. No brotherly betrayal was expected.

“When you two ladies have finished,” Dickson said from behind his desk. He was in no mood for jokes.

General Dickson was one of the most feared men in the army base, and for good reason. From his head to his feet, he oozed meanness. His hair was no more than a gray shadow on his head. His eyes glared out from deep-set sockets, simple holes with brown centers. He wore a permanent frown that drove his thin eyebrows into a deep V, earning him the nickname at the base “The Menace.” Sitting slightly off to one side of the center of his face was his broad, bent nose—smashed many times in the abundant action he’d seen. Finally, above his chin sat a mean stripe of a mouth.

He picked up the cigar, lifting it to his thin lips. Drawing long and deep, he brought the end to a rich red glow and then he inhaled deeply. Breathing out the cloud of heavy smoke, he spoke in a deep gravelly voice. “It better be good news, Caine.”

Caine shrugged. “Well it’s a mixture—Darwin made it safely back into our hands, but the damn thing’s useless without the secret.”

Dickson leaned forward and scowled. “Did you find him yet?”

Caine stepped back slightly. “We intercepted a call a few minutes ago coming from KRMC. They have someone who fits his description.”

“Is it him?”

“We don’t know yet. But, the call mentioned what sounds like the device.”

Dickson sat back, shaking his head slowly. He put down the cigar and began to slowly turn the gold circle on his right ring finger. For a moment, a small hieroglyph was visible on the side of the ring—Ankh—and then it disappeared back under his hand. “Get me some eyes in the KRMC. I want an update in one hour. We can’t afford to lose the fucking secret, no matter what. Also, I want some information on his condition. I want to know how he is. Hack their systems if you have to.”

Abel stood from the desk and straightened his tie. “He’s passed into civilian hands at the hospital. Things aren’t easy to control now. The Council may well get to him first.” He paused. “What if it looks like they’ll get the secret before us?”

Dickson paused for a moment. “This is a hard but necessary decision. Our plans have been laid for too long for us to fall at the last minute. For us to have been intercepted tonight, it can only mean The Council had some knowledge of our plans. They’ll move on us soon.” He paused again. “They can’t be allowed to gain control of the secret; they mustn’t stop us firing Darwin. We—The Enigma—are more important than this one man. This has always been Gil’s teaching.”

Both Caine and Abel nodded.

“If you think The Council will take the secret before we can regain control—then kill him.”

Abel simply smiled.

CHAPTER 8

Entering the dimly lit room, Dr Thomas half expected to find it full of military personnel. To his relief, it was not. A single, draped window at the far end allowed in some light. In the half shadows, he could see the patient lying in his drug-induced coma, his arms resting above the covers, a tube fixed to his mouth. Thomas watched as his chest rose and fell in time to the steady sound of the respirator. The slow beep of the ECG machine kept pace like a hypnotizing metronome.

Walking to the foot of the bed, Dr Thomas lifted the clipboard, reading the latest data points. The patient was remarkably stable despite his injuries. Thomas thought, *unusually stable*. His vital signs had all returned to normal and the swelling in his brain had subsided at an incredible rate. As Thomas looked at the sun-scorched face of the patient, he felt the man looked more like a film star than a soldier. He didn't understand why. Strangely, he felt compelled to look down toward the patient's right hand. The small silver object drew his rapt attention. The patient still clung to it as if his life depended on it. Perhaps it did.

Almost hypnotized, he looked closely at the smooth silver object, perfectly polished. There were no visible scratches or dents and no obvious markings. Above all, there was something unusual about the metal—it seemed to radiate a low blue luminescence. *Who are you and what the hell is this?* the doctor thought, gazing at the device. Uncontrollably, he felt himself reaching slowly toward it; his outstretched fingers hovered just in front of the device.

"I hope you're not thinking of stealing it," Carol said, making him jump.

He looked at her, wide-eyed, as he stepped back from the patient. "Jesus, you scared the life out of me."

Stepping forward, she pushed herself against him, ensuring he felt her firm breasts against his chest. Then she gently kissed him on the mouth. "I think you're sexy when you're nervous," she teased. "Kind of like a little boy."

"Carol, not so close. Anyone could step in, and if Connolly ever finds out that we..."

"Yeah?"

"You know, that we're an item. He'll explode."

"Why? 'Cause he hates you or 'cause he wants into my pants?"

Dr Thomas smiled. "Anyway, just another few weeks and we'll be out of this shit hole. When we get to Phoenix, we can become official."

"Maybe I like being a dirty secret," Carol said, pouting. "Maybe I get a kick out of sneaking into your room during night duties and setting off your beeper."

Dr Thomas's eyes widened—he loved it when Carol talked dirty. He hadn't noticed her for six months. Then during one resus session, he'd seen her bend over the bed and her assets suddenly caught his attention.

"Just be patient," Thomas said, pushing her hair back from her face. "Did you tell the cops?"

She stepped back and nodded. "Yeah. I eventually got the sergeant, told him we had a hit-and-run dumped last night. I said he was stable and would live but that he had no ID."

"What'd he say?"

"He said he'd send someone in to take an official statement. He'll log the call and tell anyone if they report a missing person fitting the description of a highly attractive male with a great body and cute butt."

Dr Thomas raised his eyebrows and smiled. "You forgot the part about the strange metal object he was carrying."

"No I didn't. I just focused on his butt."

Thomas turned and looked at the object again. "What do you think this is? Why the hell won't Connolly let us take it?"

Carol shook her head. "Hey, I don't think we should get any more involved than we have to. We've patched him up, got him stable and now we've told the police, against Connolly's wishes. I think it's enough."

"What about him? Do you think he's from one of those bases? Do you think this thing belongs to the military?"

Carol reached across and grabbed Scott's hand. "My daddy worked as a contractor out at one of those bases for near on forty years. Every day he left for work with his lunchbox full and came back home with his lunchbox empty. I asked him a few times what he did, and he always gave me the same answer." She

paused. “‘Things’ he always told me, ‘Just things.’ When he had cancer and was in the hospice we talked a long time in the weeks before he died. But he never mentioned one thing of what he’d done in his whole life out on that base. Not one thing.” She placed a hand to Thomas’s face. “It tells me that whatever they do out there, whatever secrets they have—not even my daddy wanted me to know.” She smiled. “Hey, just a few more weeks and we go to Phoenix. We did enough here.”

Thomas kissed her on the forehead. “You’re right, there’s nothing more we can do.” He turned and looked at the patient, feeling a deep unrest. He was sure this man’s life was in grave danger, and the strange metal object to which he was clinging was the reason.

C H A P T E R 9

Like a ghost, Abel appeared in the hospital. No one saw him slip in through the shadows of the unguarded side entrance—he ensured that no alarm sounded. Stealthily, he slipped along the maze of little used corridors, following the route he had memorized. As ordered, he passed down a narrow stairwell, heading to the basement level. He carefully opened an access door and crept through, finding himself in one of the many gloomy, pipe lined service corridors. Glancing left, he checked the route was clear and then he turned right. Hugging the walls, he searched for the third door on the left. Approaching it, he pulled out a small black leather pouch that contained an assortment of lock picks.

Within seconds the lock clicked open and Abel slithered through the door and into a room full of computer servers. The layout was just as depicted in the schematics. Along the far wall stood a bank of tall cages containing towers of servers that linked the network of terminals throughout the hospital complex. The stack of black boxes lined up before him clicked, and the lines of bright LEDs flashed in synchrony as the computers processed data. They held the master files of all the patients at KRMC. Near the middle of the servers sat a small desk holding two computers. Abel silently closed the door and approached it.

Like all modern hospitals, the patients' records, complete with up-to-the-minute results of tests, were stored in digital files, allowing rapid transit of potentially lifesaving data between departments. Although designed to be a confidential system, the data was often used for illegal insurance purposes and other covert data collection on patients' health. However, unlike most hospitals, at the KRMC there was a line, routing through a series of networks, all the way to the Pentagon. Every detail about the mysterious patient was being analyzed and

sent to Luke Air Force Base at McFee's request. He wanted to know whether the reports coming back from Mr Jones matched the medical data entered into the system. He knew this patient represented too great a risk, and at any moment The Enigma could intervene. The Council had ordered him to protect this man at all costs. They felt he was their chance to smash The Enigma and get to Gil.

The Enigma knew all about these connections, and General Dickson was convinced McFee and The Council would be using them. He'd ordered Abel to access the system and directly infect the servers with a piece of computer code. It was a small routine that would flow with the data to the Pentagon and the point of analysis. It would then encrypt a copy of the analysis file and retrace the file back to the server. Other lines of code would then deliver the encrypted file to a secure server. This would act as a remailer, sending the data directly back to General Dickson. He had no plan to alert anyone that he was accessing the data. The covertness of his monitoring would be key; he had to remain beyond suspicion. They would never discover his role in The Enigma and that The Enigma had now infiltrated the military.

The intercepted call by Caine had convinced Dickson this patient was indeed the man for whom they were looking. The mention of a small metal object had done it. Now he knew where the subject was, he needed to know what was happening to him and how serious his injuries were. He was not willing to lose him at this crucial stage—the device and the secret were too valuable to their plans. The cleansing process and the exodus needed to start on the holy date.

Abel turned on the monitor of the terminal that sat on the desk. Slowly the screen warmed up and asked for a password. Pulling from his pocket a small USB memory stick, he uncapped it and placed it in the side port of the machine. Instantly Windows detected the stick and from that point on the advanced code took over—bypassing all security protocols. In seconds the program had infiltrated the system and begun its journey to the Pentagon.

"We are The Enigma," Abel whispered to himself. He recovered the stick and returned it to his pocket. As he did, he heard footfalls approaching from down the corridor. Quickly, he shut off the monitor and considered making for the exit. It was too late; it was no longer an option. Turning, he scanned for a hiding place and then slipped into the furthest, darkest corner of the room. He hid himself deep behind the bank of servers. His eyes narrowed as he heard a key slip into the lock of the door.

Watching through a gap in the servers, he saw a tall thin guy in baggy blue jeans and a Converse top step through the door. His greasy hair hung limply

across his spotty face. Large headphones blared out a tinny noise as he mouthed the words of a song.

Just a nerd, Abel decided.

Dickson had ordered that no one was to know of his presence. If he were to be compromised, he was to eliminate any witnesses. He had memorized the route from the office to the furnace, should the need arise.

Abel's hand naturally slipped into the back waistband of his trousers. Slowly he withdrew a long, black bladed commando knife. The razor sharp edge was ground to pass easily through the skin, muscles, windpipe and major blood vessels like a hot wire through butter.

Abel watched as the nerd held out a long gray LAN cable and approached the rear bank of servers. He stopped momentarily and nodded his head vigorously in time with the music. Abel tensed, ready to strike, his eyes locked onto the threat, his grip tight on the handle of the knife. He selected the entry point for the blade, just below the nerd's jaw. Then his body coiled like a cobra preparing to pounce.

Suddenly the nerd stopped and turned, clicking the cable into two ports as the music obviously reached a crescendo. He punched a hand into the air, singing, "You can kick my ass!" Immediately he turned and walked back toward the door, drumming on the servers and the desk. Opening the door, he disappeared.

Abel's emotions were mixed—relief that there would be no trouble, and disappointment that he couldn't just now have the intense pleasure of killing. The words of the song had been prophetic.

Stepping out from behind the servers, he resheathed his weapon. Cautiously he opened the door a fraction and peered through the crack; as before, his route seemed clear. Like a ghost he vanished—his mission complete. Now Dickson could better understand whether the secret would live or die with the patient.

C H A P T E R 10

Early the next morning, Carol stepped into the patient's room and immediately noticed something was different. The silence she had noted for the past twenty-four hours was broken. On the wall a small TV churned out noise as it rapidly flicked from channel to channel. Sitting up in the bed was the patient, a blank expression on his face as his unblinking eyes stared, zombie like, at the small screen. His right hand no longer held the object, but instead a small black remote control, his thumb quickly pressing the buttons.

Carol looked with surprise. The anesthetist had taken him off the respirator only an hour ago and had left him in a state of heavy sedation. "Good morning," she said, amazed he was awake. "Are you feeling okay?"

No response.

"Can you hear me?" she asked, stepping in front of him.

No response.

Carol waved her hand and the patient's eyes continued to stare, unblinking, at the screen. Now he was awake, she noticed his attractive face—it was boyish but rugged. His eyebrows slanted down to his nose setting off the shape of his eyes, making them seem almost—mischievous. She guessed he was somewhere between thirty-five and forty but his lush brown hair showed no signs of gray. She immediately felt a charismatic attraction to him, as if she were with someone famous. She didn't understand the feeling. "I'll go and fetch Dr Thomas."

* * * *

A few moments later, the patient watched through his peripheral vision as Dr Thomas and Carol rushed into his room. He sat flicking through the channels of the TV, unblinking, unmoving.

“Hello there. I’m Dr Thomas. How are you feeling?”

The patient continued ignoring the presence of the others in his small room, his mind fixed on the TV. There was a slight halo around his vision. He had no plan to speak. Some deep-rooted reflex had emerged to take control of his body. A voice told him—*Don’t say anything; keep quiet and survive. Just stabilize the situation until you regain your thoughts and understand what’s happening. They could be the enemy.*

Scott glanced sideways at Carol and then approached the bed. Looking into the patient’s eyes, he waved a hand in front of his face. “Hello. Can you hear me?”

“Is he catatonic?” Carol asked, stepping closer.

Reaching down, Dr Thomas grabbed the patient’s left wrist and lifted the hand. Then he let it fall back to the cotton sheets. As it fell, it turned, revealing it clutched the small silver object. “How are you feeling?”

The greatest sensation the patient felt was confusion. He had awakened and immediately understood he was in a hospital, but he had no recollection of getting there. He could remember most things; however, he held no recollection of two of the most important: who he was and what had happened.

At first, he’d been alarmed and confused, but again his instincts had cut in as if he someone had trained him for such an incident. It removed the panic and set him about trying to assess the situation. It seemed logical to him to turn on the TV, to try to understand what day it was and possibly where he was.

He had a deep-rooted need, based on no logic he knew, to give away no information until he had assessed the situation. He knew conversation led to more conversation and that might compromise him. No. He would sit and listen, assimilating information until he had a clearer understanding of who these people were and what they wanted from him. It may *look* like a hospital and they may *claim* to be medical staff, but he couldn’t be sure. Yet.

Carol stepped around the bed to take a closer look at the dressing on the back of his head. “Well, the bandage is dry; there seems to be no fresh bleeding. That’s good.”

The patient didn’t respond. He simply continued to watch the TV.

Dr Thomas motioned his colleague toward him and started to whisper. But the words were still audible to the patient, whose acute hearing had been unaffected by the accident. "Strange. He seems to be fully lucid but uncooperative. Maybe it's the swelling. It's probably inducing confusion."

"Yeah. I get the feeling he knows we're here."

Thomas paused for a second. "I'm just going to take a little look at your reflexes," he said at normal volume, reaching into his white coat pocket and pulling out a small plastic pen. He lifted the cotton covers to expose the patient's feet. Then he placed the pen cap onto the nail of the patient's big toe and pressed hard.

Nothing.

The patient grimaced inside as the pen bit hard into the tender nail bed. The pain coursed up his body like a burning electrical current. Another deep reflex took over and quashed the feeling. His mind focused to help him ignore the pain as the subconscious voice spoke to him, willing him never to reveal secrets under duress.

"No pain reflex," Thomas said, uncapping the pen and turning to Carol. "Looks like he's muting the response," he said quietly, writing some notes on the clipboard. "That means he's fully aware. Otherwise even a person with severe brain damage would have retracted the leg. Why the hell is he being like this?"

"I don't know. Can you do anything?"

"I think I can get a response. Let's see if he's willing to give up that thing." Immediately he reached down to the patient's left hand and grabbed for the small silver object.

All the patient's thoughts were suddenly focused on the device. It had not even registered with him before, but now it was the priority; all other plans to stay silent became secondary. The device, for some unexplainable reason, meant everything. Turning from the TV, his penetrating gaze locked onto Dr Thomas. "Leave it," he said with an accent that was hard to place.

Dr Thomas stepped back, raising his hands. He'd been granted the response for which he was looking. "No problem. I'm not gonna touch it."

"So you are awake. Why won't you talk to us?" Carol asked. "Don't worry; we're here to help you."

The patient's gaze returned to the ever-changing channels of the TV. "Are you?"

"Of course we are. You've been in an accident. But you're safe in the hospital now."

Safe? the patient thought, as paranoia overtook his mind. *But, no one is ever really safe.*

“You came here with no identification. We need to know your name,” Dr Thomas said.

A chain of thought cascaded through the patient’s brain. He searched through the dark corners of his mind, desperately trying to recover pieces of information. *I must have a name.* His mind fixed into a loop. The information was there, but for some reason he couldn’t retrieve it. There was what felt like an invisible barrier in his mind: no name, no address, and simply no recollection of any facts about himself. The pieces were there, but they felt locked away from him. His eyes narrowed as he spoke slowly. “I can’t remember.”

Dr Thomas nodded. “It’s okay; don’t worry. You’ve taken a blow to the back of your head and you have some swelling that’s pushing on your brain. You probably have a severe concussion that may be affecting your memory.”

The patient felt for the back of his head. He touched the heavy dressing. *How did this happen?* Closing his eyes, he tried desperately to piece it all together. He tried to remember how he’d got there, how he’d cut his head, but his mind kept coming back to the questions—*What’s my name? Who am I?* No matter how hard he tried, all he could see was a black emptiness.

“Can you remember anything?” Carol asked, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder.

After a pause the patient shook his head. “No. Nothing. It’s all...dark.”

“It’s okay,” she reassured him. “It’ll be fine. Everything will come back once the swelling goes down.”

Dr Thomas stepped forward, removed his penlight from his top pocket, and clicked it on. “May I just look in your eyes?” He lifted his hand to the patient’s right eye and with his thumb held the eyelid still. Then he flashed the bright light into that eye. The pupil immediately constricted.

An explosion rushed through the patient’s head, sending him backward. He gasped, pulling his head away from the intense light. Suddenly a siren was screaming, a warning claxon echoing in his mind. He was in great danger; he had to escape. For an instant his hands grasped at the air in front of him. Then he was back in the room, the ECG monitor squealing as his pulse rate rocketed. Carol was holding his shoulders as he shuddered against the mattress.

“Another convulsion!” Thomas shouted, helping to hold the patient down. He turned to a nurse who had crashed into the room at the sound of the monitor’s alarm. “Get some Diazemol, please.”

The nurse rushed out and after a few seconds ran back in with a syringe that she handed to Dr Thomas. He struggled to attach it to the line in the patient's arm. Eventually, he held the arm still and connected it, driving the plunger, administering the anticonvulsive. Slowly the patient stopped shuddering and started to relax, his hands releasing the white sheets.

The patient lay on the bed as the tremors subsided. His eyes were still wide, gazing at the ceiling as he panted. The sirens retreated in his mind as a wave of relaxation passed across his body. He was safe again—for now.

"Should I call for Dr Connolly?" the nurse asked, taking back the syringe.

Thomas nodded. "Yes. Tell him the patient is awake and tell him that, as he suspected, he seems to have amnesia."

C H A P T E R 11

“And so there is nothing more you can tell me?” Dr Connolly asked, sitting on the corner of the patient’s bed.

“I’ve told you; I’ve told him.” The patient pointed to Scott and then to Carol. “And I’ve told her. You did the tests and I told you everything I can remember. I just don’t remember anything about myself.”

“Absolutely nothing?”

“Honestly, I wish I did. I could call my wife, or mother or brother and ask them to get me the hell out of here.”

Connolly stood up and paced around the bed, his hands driven deep into the pockets of his white coat. In the two days since the patient had been brought in they had performed most of the basic tests to assess his amnesia. They had started with paired associated learning tests and these showed a negative anterograde memory problem. They then moved on to tests for Clapperdale phenomenon, difficulties in emotional and perceptual learning; again, they showed to be negative. His implicit memory seemed intact.

After another day they moved to his retrograde memory, through famous face tests, trying to detect temporal gradients in the memory breakdown. This once again showed his memory, on anything not associated to him directly, was perfect. But he drew a blank on the events of his own past. It seemed his entire personal history to the point of the accident had been deleted.

“Okay, thank you, Mr...erm...Thank you,” Connolly said. “I am sure you are doing your best to help. If you don’t mind, I’d like to confer with Dr Thomas in private for a moment.” Stepping through the door, he motioned to Dr Thomas to follow him.

Connolly sighed as he ran his fingers through his hair. “Well, we appear to be getting close to nowhere. Physically the man is in good shape; even the swelling on his brain has subsided to near normal. If it’s not the direct pressure on his brain causing the amnesia, then I’m just not sure what else we can do.”

“I agree. We’ve tried all the basic textbook assessments and it’s showing nothing of a simple pattern,” Thomas added. “The repeat CAT scan’s now clean, but the PET scan we did this morning is showing some abnormal activity I can’t interpret.” Thomas sifted through the reports and pulled out a long strip of color images—they looked like color-coded relief maps. “The PET scan shows that here,” he pointed, “he has some errant neural patterns. It looks like the neurons are just firing in a repetitive loop—I’ve never seen anything like it. Just maybe, this is what’s causing the amnesia.”

Connolly grunted.

“Because this appears to be no ‘textbook’ case, I’m starting to think we need to have him looked over by a real expert.”

Connolly’s hand slipped from his hair and rubbed across the back of his neck. He was concerned about bringing in an outside adviser—it was a delicate situation. The conversation that morning with Mr Jones had been more sinister and more threatening than any before it. Jones had told him there was growing pressure for information from his seniors. McFee wanted results and he wanted them fast. It was becoming essential for them to know who he was and what, if anything, he remembered. It seemed strange to Scott and Carol, and even to Connolly, that they were directed to focus on his memory with little regard for his physical health. It was also strange the military did not know who the patient was. *If he is not one of theirs, then who is he and why are they so interested in him?*

Connolly had tried to explain to Jones that neurological trauma medicine was not an exact science, but Jones didn’t care. *We just want results and if you can’t get them, then we’ll replace you with someone who can. Is that clear, Doctor?*

“You seem a bit distracted,” Thomas whispered. “I notice you are unusually concerned about the progress of this patient. Anything to do with the guy upstairs?”

Connolly’s eyes narrowed and his bottom jaw locked. It was obvious Thomas knew what was happening. Jones had not exactly been discreet when hanging around the executive room. He knew this was a dangerous game, that people like Jones did not play around in matters of such gravity. The last thing he needed was Thomas to start any deeper inquiry. “My suggestion is, Doctor, you just run the tests I advise and nothing more. Don’t get any ideas about asking more than you need to know to keep him alive.”

"I'm a little unclear what may be threatening his life," Thomas sneered. "Certainly not his injuries anymore. I guess the military men yanking your chain aren't getting what they want."

Connolly suddenly lunged for Thomas's shoulder, pushing him back against the wall. "Be smart, boy!" he snarled. "There are things happening here that go beyond the obvious and certainly don't concern you. You know fucking well who runs this hospital, and these people don't fuck around." He glared at Thomas. "Don't think anymore than you need to. Don't ask anymore about this man. My advice is to look away—it's safer for you."

Thomas stared back in shock. In all his time of enduring the man's verbal abuse, Connolly had never physically assaulted him. He could see something new in Connolly's eyes—it was terror.

Connolly stepped back and straightened Thomas's white coat, his tone more calm. "Let me handle this—It's safer for us all." Recomposing himself, he brushed his hair back into place. "I think you're right. The sooner we hand this man over to someone else's care the better." He turned and walked down the corridor.

Thomas's eyes followed him and then he noticed them—two men who had been hanging around the hospital for the past two days. They were always around the room of the patient. Now in a heightened state of paranoia, he could see them for what they were. They were guards to the patient's room—probably military men.

* * * *

Carol leaned over the patient and pulled the needle from the vein in his left arm; a small backflow of blood oozed out. "Hope that didn't hurt," she said, smiling seductively at him.

Staring back into her hazel eyes, the patient felt her subtle advance. He noticed she was still holding his hand, applying pressure to the swab. He stared back intensely—giving the feedback she wanted, almost hypnotizing her. His instincts told him to play along, to make sure he brought as many people into his confidence as possible. He'd assessed he would need their help if he were to recover his memory, and more so to escape. From the moment he'd regained consciousness, he had sensed a growing alarm within him that he was in great danger. He knew something was terribly wrong, as no one had turned up looking for him. No relatives and no friends meant no one knew he was there.

The police had come in that morning to take a statement, but it seemed a half-hearted attempt, as if they were just acting a role. He'd heard the discussion between Carol and Scott. She'd said the attitude of the police sergeant had changed dramatically since the phone conversation that first day. *They're not interested*, Carol had whispered. *There's something wrong. Someone's got to them.*

Thomas had agreed. He'd suspected it was the "appropriate authorities" who had got to them and the charade was to quell any suspicions from him and Carol. Then he'd mentioned it: *they know we made the call.*

The patient watched Carol as she stood by his bed. He felt nothing for her—she was a mere useful tool to him. She appeared to be on his side, but he knew both she and Thomas could soon be turned—*as they all could.* All it would take would be a little fear and they too would be against him. He decided to try to keep her engaged. He squeezed her hand gently, making her pupils dilate.

"Has *anyone* come asking for me?" he asked. "Anyone at all?"

"No, not yet," Carol answered, smiling. "Hey, but it's only been two days. There's plenty of time for someone to turn up for you. I'm sure in the next few..."

The patient stared deep into her eyes and slowly shook his head. "No one's coming for me."

"Why do you say that?"

"I just know. Call it a sixth sense." He paused. "But I do know someone other than the medical staff here is more than interested in me."

Carol's eyes narrowed as she moved around the bed. "Why do you say that?"

"Dr Connolly, the chief. For a man in his position he pays too many visits, asks too many questions. He's too keen for me to recover my memory, as if he's on a time schedule."

"Because?"

"He's more interested in knowing what type of information I'm remembering than the general recovery of my memory. He's too contrived."

"Oh, I think that's your imagination," Carol said unconvincingly. "Everyone here is just concerned that you get better. We are a hospital, you know."

The patient simply looked back; he knew what was happening. He turned as the door opened and Thomas stepped in—he looked flustered. It was more than obvious he had been in a heated conversation with Connolly and now the patient was sure the clock was ticking.

"So," Thomas said, breathing out, "it looks like we're not able yet to assess what's the problem with your memory. But...we have some ideas."

Nodding slowly, the patient watched the exchange of glances between the two medical professionals. He had already worked out they were an item. Now he sensed Thomas was trying to let her know *the problem* was more than real.

“Are they sending an expert?” the patient asked.

The question caught Thomas off guard. “Err...What exactly do you mean?”

“Well, you say you’re struggling to help me. I assume neurotrauma is a fairly small specialty. I also assume only a few experts handle difficult cases of highly specific memory loss such as mine. I guess *they* need an expert.”

“Wow!” Thomas said, sitting on the corner of the bed. “You’re quite smart.”

“I lost my memory. I never said I was stupid.”

“Hey. No offense. Sorry. I didn’t mean it to sound that way.”

Carol moved closer and a frown crept across her brow. “What do you mean by ‘they’? You said ‘they’ need an expert.”

The patient looked between Scott and Carol. He was glad one of them had noticed his comment. “I just have a strong suspicion, by the way your boss is acting, that someone, somewhere is pulling his strings. I imagine a man such as Connolly is not disturbed by anything trivial. I can see real fear in his eyes, the kind of fear that intense pressure places on a man’s soul. The kind that comes when a man thinks his life is in danger. It tells me some serious people—they—are interested in my memory. Not him.”

Thomas looked at Carol and then he turned back to the patient, whispering. “Is there anything you’re not telling us? Or is there something you’re not allowed to tell us?”

The patient stared back. “Such as?”

“Something you do remember about yourself. Are you running from someone? Do you know if you have a problem with someone in the military?”

The patient shook his head. “I have no idea. Why do you ask about the military?”

“This hospital. Everyone knows it’s a military run facility, even though no one will say it,” Thomas said, looking to the door. “Outside I think you have some undercover MPs watching your door and upstairs I’ve been seeing a guy who’s not from our hospital. I’m just presuming you’re something to do with them.”

“Really, honestly, I don’t remember if I’m in the Army, the Navy or the god-damned Girl Guides. I just don’t remember. It might be easier if I did.”

“What about that thing you have?” Carol said, pointing to the drawer next to the bed. “Do you remember what it is or where it’s from? Maybe they want it.”

“Then why don’t they just come in here and take it?” the patient asked. “It’s a question I’ve been asking myself. If it’s of any value, then why is it still here?”

“Good point,” Thomas said.

“The police didn’t even take it as evidence. In fact, they wanted to stay some distance from it. Maybe they were told to leave it well alone.”

“It’s weird,” Carol said. “It seems an inane object but...”

“But what?”

“I don’t know. It’s just weird.”

“Many things are weird,” the patient said. “I just wish I could remember what it is.”

“Can’t you remember anything that can help us to help you?” Thomas asked. “You know, I’d be happy to try to make some inquiries for you.”

The patient shook his head again. “Maybe there’s something that’s different about my English and yours. I told you twenty times I don’t remember anything. I don’t even remember my name.”

The room fell silent for a long time. Scott simply stared at Carol and then looked back to the patient. “Okay, let’s not try to do this now. I can see it’s not helping you. Maybe you’ll remember more over time.” He paused. “But, I was thinking about your name,” he continued, standing from the bed. “It’s a little difficult just referring to you as him or you. I know it may not be the most important thing on your mind at the minute, but we can’t just keep calling you ‘thingy’.” He raised his eyebrows. “Maybe it’d be easier if you had a name. Why don’t we just choose a name with you? You can use it until you remember your real name. That way we can at least call you something.”

The patient looked back and shrugged. “I must confess, I have noticed the slight awkwardness when people address me. Except for Connolly, who just calls me Mr...and trails off. If it will at least stop you all skirting the subject, then I have no objections. That is as long as you don’t call me John Doe.”

“You can use my father’s name if you like,” Carol offered. “His name was Ellis.”

“That’s a kind gift,” the patient said. “I’d be honored to use his name for a while.”

“And you can have my mother’s name,” Scott suggested in the spirit of it all. “Her name’s Jane Landis.”

The patient raised an eyebrow. “I’m not sure that Jane fits me, so if it’s okay with you, I’ll use the Landis.” He paused to reflect. “Ellis Landis it is—for now.”

C H A P T E R 12



Four days after Ellis's admission, Connolly walked, trembling, from the executive office. He had tried to explain the situation, but Mr Jones had not received the information well. Jones became irritated and just shook his head. It was clear to Connolly that time was indeed running out and it looked like the military was about to intervene. Jones had seemed most concerned when Connolly had told him—*The longer the problem persists, the less likely it is Landis will recover his memory*. Jones had simply stated things needed to change.

Connolly knew they would hold him responsible and he feared it would mean they either fired him or fired at him. He knew that suggesting 'to bring in an expert' was risky, but it would allow the option of palming off the responsibility. He'd had enough of Ellis Landis. He wanted out. Because, as the days passed, he'd slowly realized he was someone close to the patient. Now he too might be at risk. They had made it painstakingly clear that no one other than himself, Dr Thomas and the nurse practitioner, Carol, were to interact with the patient. He knew that was not good news. He knew it fit into phrases such as *containment of information* and *damage limitation*. His hope was to pass Ellis on and return the hospital to normal.

* * * *

Jones waited for the door to close and then he picked up the red telephone, knowing McFee and The Council would share his own disappointment. He fully understood McFee's patience was wearing thin. He knew drastic measures would now be called for, even if it increased the risks. The phone rang through to Luke.

“Mr Jones?” Miss Davies answered. “McFee wants to know the update. He’s starting to get pissed off with waiting. He keeps reminding me we have a weapon poised to detonate while we’re babysitting the patient. I hope it’s good news.”

“I need to speak directly to McFee.”

“Oh. Then I guess it’s not good news. Maybe it’s better you tell him yourself. One moment.”

There was a minute of silence as Davies disappeared from the room to collect McFee. The instant she told him Jones needed to speak to him in person, she could sense McFee was ready to blow. Her pupils dilated and cheeks flushed as McFee tensed with rage. The corner of her mouth turned up slightly as her gaze roved across his massive frame.

McFee stormed past Davies and grabbed for the phone. “McFee.”

Jones could hear his frustration in that single word. “I’m not going to bullshit you; it’s going nowhere. Connolly has drawn a blank on recovering the memories we need.”

“And?”

“Of more concern is that for the first time today he told me we need an expert. Apparently, time is running out.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” McFee asked with concern. “I don’t need to be told time is running out. I know it better than anyone.”

“He says the longer the memory centers in his brain have a problem, the more likely it is the damage will become permanent. The less likely it is we can recover the information.”

There was a moment of silence. “Then I guess we must bring in some help. If the timer is counting down, then the knowledge in this man’s head may be the only thing to avert utter disaster.”

“Bringing in another person adds an element of risk, sir.”

“I know, but getting the secret is the priority and we need to know for sure whether this man does or does not hold it. Any other help can always be...sacrificed at the end of the mission. They won’t be the first and they won’t be the last. You can deal with them when you deal with the others.”

The corner of Jones’s mouth turned up for a fraction of a second. “What will you do?”

“I have a contingency plan. Davies and I had envisaged such a problem. We’ve been running some checks, and it looks like we might be in luck. I’ll place a call to Area 59.”

“The base.”

“General Dickson’s in charge of the facility; I know him from way back and he owes me a favor. Our army boys might just have a specialist in memory recovery in the area.” McFee sniffed. “We checked it out. We discovered that they’ve had all kinds of mind shit going on up at that center of theirs. I’m sure their brain butchers have worked out some way of getting memories out of people.”

“Couldn’t we just perform an extraction?” Jones asked.

“We could, but I’d rather try to keep this man alive if possible. He might just be the triggerman. But there is a remote chance he could bring us The Enigma, and above all, he could be one of the few members of The Enigma able to identify Gil.”

“Gil,” Jones repeated with distaste.

“For his treachery, The Council wants Gil’s head, and if there’s the remotest chance this man here can help, then he’s to keep breathing. Twenty years The Enigma has been a thorn in the side of our society. Those bastards have brought us to the edge of a civil war. Now these crazy fuckers have managed to get hold of our most powerful weapon.”

“Darwin,” uttered Jones.

“That means somehow, someway they have influential links in our military. This is starting to look like a deciding moment in our history. The Council won’t fail us, or these people at this critical point. This man appears to be the factor that could swing the balance back in our favor. He stays alive and we need to hope General Dickson can help us to get the memories.”

“But can you trust Dickson?”

“He’s on our team, although he has no knowledge of our operation the other night. And he certainly doesn’t know The Enigma has this weapon. I don’t want to start a panic in our people.”

“And if he asks questions?”

“He knows better than to ask questions concerning our operation on this side. He’ll be fine.”

“What should I do?” Jones asked, pulling a cigarette from his pack and lighting it.

“Stay there. I want you as back up should the situation get out of hand. You need to watch our boy and protect him. If The Enigma find out we have him and suspect we may get the secret, then they’ll make a move on him.”

“I have men placed around the hospital. No one will get to him.”

“Don’t get complacent. The Enigma will protect Gil at all costs and if that means taking out this man and even losing the secret, then they’ll do it. We know they have sleeper agents all over the place on this side. Trust no one.”

Jones drew deeply on his cigarette. "There are a few other things."

"Such as?"

"They gave him a name. Ellis Landis."

McFee paused, considering the name. "How ironic. Do they suspect?"

"Pure coincidence."

"A rather strange twist. If it was just luck, then it's of no concern. Anything else?"

"One of the junior doctors who admitted him. Connolly thinks he suspects something. He says we're to watch him, as he could be trouble. Connolly thinks that as he's leaving for another post he could do something—irrational."

There was a pause. "Tell Connolly to take him off the patient immediately, give him whatever bullshit story he needs to. It should be enough for now."

"Right."

"But if he looks like he at all gets close to understanding or could indeed do something rash, then eliminate him straight away. Don't wait until we'd planned. Above all the integrity of the secret is the priority. Clear?"

Jones smiled as he blew out a cloud of smoke. "Crystal."

C H A P T E R 13

Elisha Sienna floored the accelerator of her silver Porsche Boxster and the engine sprang to life, catapulting the car forward with ferocious vigor. She jabbed hard left with the wheel, pulling out from behind the large road tanker that had held her up for some time. In a second she was alongside it, blasting down the straight road at close to ninety.

The driver looked down from the cab into the open cockpit of the Porsche, and the beauty of the woman driving the car stunned him. Her long, light brown hair blew backward, lifted by the wind. A pair of black Ray-Ban Cat sunglasses perched on her head gave her the look of a sixties film star. Her green eyes dazzled in the sun as she glanced up at his cab, two jewels against her blemish-less skin. Her slender nose complemented her strong cheekbones and strong chin. Then, as she smiled up at him and her perfect teeth glowed white, he yanked his horn three times, eliciting a provocative wave.

Elisha relished the warm sun on her face as she thundered down the I-40, heading for the prearranged meeting point near Drake. She popped the car from fourth to second and slammed on the brakes as she approached it, one of the last diners made from an original silver bullet railcar. The car's engine revved wildly as the Porsche pulled from the road into the small dusty parking area.

Sitting inside, a lone patron watched her climb from the car. He peered over the rim of his coffee cup, watching her athletic body as she strode through the door and confidently walked over to his booth. He looked up and smiled as she gracefully slid onto the bench directly in front of him.

"Doctor, I'm glad you could make it. I hadn't expected the pleasure of seeing you again so soon," he said.

She nodded and straightened out the wrinkles in her dress. “General, it’s always a pleasure to see you. I’m a little surprised as well that I was asked to come here so suddenly. What’s it about? Is there something wrong?”

Dickson had ensured the diner was empty; he had even told his men and the “wait-staff” to leave them alone. The closed sign in the parking lot would keep unwanted company away during their meeting. It was a well guarded secret that the diner on I-40, just south of Drake, was actually a cover entrance for the military. In the walk-in freezer in the back of the kitchen, hidden under a floor panel, lay a circular hatch. The hatch led to a vertical tunnel that dropped fifty feet via an access ladder. At the bottom of the ladder ran one of many tunnels that crisscrossed the state of Arizona, interconnecting the many secret bases. The military used them to bring people in and take people out of the bases, away from prying eyes. Conspiracy theorists had speculated on secret entrances and tunnels. They had written about Munds Park rest stop near Flagstaff some years ago, and a network at the start of Lake Powel, near Page. Recently, someone had proven tunnels ran under Wikieup, Arizona, all the way to Area 51. It had been Mr Max Oberman, the great UFO hunter, who had revealed that piece of news and brought media attention and conspiracy theorists in their hundreds. Dickson was more than determined that one of the last secure tunnel access routes—that from the diner at Drake running to Frenchman Flats—would not be discovered. If that meant eliminating the likes of Oberman, then it was simply a matter of national security. He no longer cared that Oberman was famous.

“It appears that in a strange turn of events,” Dickson started, “we will need your help sooner than I had thought. Things went wrong with the mission. There was an incident and I’m sorry to say...it involves him.”

Elisha’s face turned pale. “What the hell’s happened? Is he okay?”

“He’s alive and physically well; that’s the important thing. But there are several complications,” Dickson said. “First, it appears he’s received a major head trauma and as a result he has amnesia. It looks like he’s forgotten everything about himself and, above all, the secret may be lost.”

“Oh my God. What happened?”

“This we don’t know. There are at least a few hours of time missing from when we lost contact to when he was dumped at the hospital.”

“Hospital?”

“In that time, he seems to have lost his memory. I can only assume it was an accident with a vehicle, but it’s unclear what happened out in the desert. Maybe someone got to him or maybe something’s gone wrong with the device.”

“Where is he now? I need...”

Dickson interrupted. "That's the second problem. The Council has him, at Kingman."

"Oh shit. They have him? What the hell are we going to do?"

"Don't panic. As long as he has amnesia, then he's valuable to them. They want the secret just as much as we do. He'll be safe as long as he holds on to the information." He paused. "I also suspect they think he can identify Gil."

Elisha placed her head in her hands. "We need to get him out of there. We need to get him away from them now."

"No. We need to be careful. If for one moment they suspect they could lose him, the secret or the device, then they'll kill him. They'd rather that than for us to get him back."

"We can't fucking well leave him!" Elisha protested. "God knows what they'll do to get his memory back. His mind is a fragile thing. If they try to force his memory, then they could do irreparable damage or worse—they could even kill him."

"And they know that. They're not stupid," Dickson said. "In fact, General McFee from Luke Air Force Base contacted me yesterday."

A look of surprise crossed Elisha's face. "McFee? He's one of The Council's top people. He contacted you?"

Dickson nodded. "I was surprised, too. He was the last person I expected to hear from. Anyway, he told me he has a problem, a serious problem. He told me he has a patient named Ellis Landis and this patient has amnesia." Dickson smiled. "Dumb idiot has no idea I'm involved. He told me he needed some specialist help and he preferred to keep this out of civilian hands. Said he couldn't tell me what it was about."

"What does he want from you?"

"He needs an 'expert' to help to crack this man's mind, to try to bring back his memory. He wondered if the army had anyone up at MINDS with a program that could help."

Elisha sat upright, shaking her head. "You mean me. You want me to do it."

"I can't think of a more ideal person to take on this challenge. Having you close to him, working on him, is perfect. That way McFee will give us a little more time to get what we need."

"But it's not that easy. I mean—I'll need a lot of specialist..."

"You'll have the full support of the team at MINDS and you'll have full access to all their resources to help crack him."

Elisha shook her head vigorously. "It's not a case of 'cracking' him. We need to be careful; he's linked to the device. His mind is delicate and you just can't

force it.” Dickson raised an eyebrow as Elisha continued. “Trying to force the memory recovery could activate the security protocols and that has major risks—not only for recovering his memory, but also for his life.”

“Is it that bad?”

“If in any way we try to break his memory, we could destroy everything. I mean, Christ, at minimum he could become locked and never recover his memory or his identity. But with his mind as it is, with the secret linked to the device, the sudden shock could kill him.”

“You’re the doctor. You know better than I do. What do you suggest?”

“I have to think about this and take some advice. I need to understand better the way the device works,” Elisha said. “I mean I need to find out what we have at MINDS. This isn’t the kind of thing I was working on. It’s out of my field. I assume there’ll be teams there that can help me but...”

“Can you do this?” Dickson asked. “If I get you the right people?”

Elisha inhaled deeply and sat back. “Well...If there’s anyone who is going to try this, then I’d say I want it to be me. I just don’t know if my personal presence will help with losing the amnesia or cause even worse problems. I think I’ll only know in the instant I see him.”

“Can we get his mind back? The secret is vital to the operation.”

“I know many new methods are being developed up at MINDS that potentially could help with this. But I’ll need time. This can’t be rushed; there’s too much risk.”

“You know that for this man I’m willing to give as much time as possible,” Dickson said, placing down his coffee cup. “However, you’ll have to answer to McFee and The Council. When I get back to him, and by suggesting you, I’ll be effectively putting you under their supervision. I can guess they’re more anxious for results and they have less of a luxury of time.”

“Do you think The Council are willing to kill him if he doesn’t get his memory back?”

Dickson nodded slowly. “Absolutely. They have everything to lose in this war. Darwin is a massive risk to their way of life and they know it.” He stared at Elisha. “McFee knows that if we get the information first, then it’s the end for him, the end for all of them. If at any point he discovers we’re involved, then he’ll pull the plug and risk cutting his losses. He’d rather lose the secret and Gil than think we could fire the weapon.”

“We could just get him away from them. Get him back...”

Dickson shook his head. “It’s too risky. They have him under the highest security. I’m sure they’ve put their own men on alert all the way from the hospital

to the institute. They have access to a lot of hardware. We'd be a crater in the road before we could get anywhere safe."

"But..."

"But nothing. We have to keep them thinking they're in control, that they're running this operation and that he's safe. Every second you're with him you can presume somehow they're watching; somehow they're listening. At least in MINDS we control the environment and the information flow. It'll be harder for them to tap us. If he recovers his mind and things come flooding back, then at least we'll know first and we can limit what they get to know. Trust me: this is the best way to protect him."

"And what if he doesn't get his memory back; what if the secret is lost?"

Dickson glanced away for a second. "We can be patient up to a point. Then the mission takes priority—that was the agreement by us all before we started this."

Elisha looked down.

"We all knew there were risks and we all agreed that no *one* is greater than the whole. You have as much time as McFee will give and then..."

"Then what?"

"I have every faith in you, Doctor." Dickson stood up from the table and wiped his mouth with a napkin. "The Enigma is relying on several things here. First, that you can do this job before The Council take him back. Second, that McFee knows nothing of our involvement in The Enigma, or the entire mission will be jeopardized. And finally, you in no way compromise the overall mission."

"I won't."

"If you feel at any point things are getting out of control, then you need to move to a terminal solution. Then pull yourself out immediately. Is that clear?"

"I understand my orders, General," Elisha said, standing from the table. "I have a lot to lose in this if it goes wrong. I don't intend to fail. But, if it comes to doing my ultimate duty, then you can be assured I won't let them have him."

Dickson placed a hand on her shoulder. "You're an extraordinary woman. I know that's why we can all count on you and it's why I've always admired you. If the time comes to choose, then I have every faith you'll do what's needed. Good luck."

Turning away, Dickson walked toward the kitchen, heading for the freezer and the hatch to the tunnels below. Elisha stepped through the door and pulled it closed behind her. This news had come as a shock to her, but she was determined to make things right, to recover the secret. She fired up the Porsche and in a cloud of dust headed out into the late afternoon.

She needed to prepare. Time was short.

CHAPTER 14

“Why the hell are you doing this?” Thomas shouted at Connolly. “Why?”

Connolly sat behind his huge desk and lifted his hands in a shrug. “It’s simple. I don’t think you need to spend any longer on this patient. Mr Landis has no need of your limited skills anymore.”

Thomas’s face creased with rage. He knew this was just another pile of Connolly bullshit to wind him up. Thomas had been responsible for the patient since admission and still felt he could get somewhere before handing him off to the specialist. He also had a personal attachment to the case. He felt deep down there was a great deal more to this than was obvious—it was the military. Things had gone out of protocol. It was as if Connolly, guided by his higher authority, was moving to keep the patient as secret as possible.

“I can’t accept this,” Thomas protested. “This is my patient and I’ll be seeing him through to his discharge. I know why you’re doing this and you’re a coward with no ethics.”

Connolly rose from behind his desk, his eyes burning with rage. “Now look here, you little piece of shit!” Connolly ranted, “you’ve been difficult since the day you arrived in my department. You’ve been obstinate, unruly and disrespectful. I have no problem in dealing with all of these. Now you’ve crossed the line. I will not have some lower-class idiot like you challenging my professional opinion.”

“Lower-class...”

“It’s two months until you finally get out of my hair.” Stepping around the desk, he pushed his face against Thomas’s. “So. As you don’t accept my decision

and you question my ethics, then I have no further choice. You are suspended on full pay until your transfer to Phoenix.”

“What?” Thomas said, his eyes bulging with disbelief.

“Go home, Doctor. We no longer need your second-rate services here. This is a decision on behalf of the executive committee.”

They stared at each other. Thomas’s face filled with rage and Connolly’s grew smug with content. After a moment, Thomas spun on his heels and marched from the office, slamming the door behind him. Turning, he headed for the elevators, cursing as he marched down the corridor. He banged on the call button and kicked the elevator doors.

* * * *

Ellis looked up as Thomas burst through his door.

“I’m sorry,” Thomas said. “But I’ve just come to tell you they’ve taken me off your case.”

“Did they say why?” Ellis asked with concern, standing from his bed.

“Well, they gave me some crap.” He shook his head. “It doesn’t matter, I’m out of here. I just wanted to say I’m sorry I couldn’t follow you to the end and I hope they, or someone, can help you.”

Ellis shook his head slowly and ran a hand across his chin. “I’m sorry, too. It means things have changed. I can only guess this means time is running out and they think you are on to them. I’m concerned for you, for your safety.”

“I have to be honest, I’m concerned for your safety,” Thomas said, now more as a friend than a doctor. “Do you think *anyone*, other than them, knows you’re here? Do you think they’ll let anyone know where you are? I mean you saw how the police were. This whole fucking thing stinks,”

“No, I guess no one knows where I am. And I get the impression it’s important they don’t let anyone know I’m here. I think they want to keep me a secret.”

Thomas looked around and then moved closer to Ellis. “Man, this just isn’t right. There’s some strange shit happening in this hospital and it has to do with the military. I’m not sure they have your health at heart. Feels more like they’re just waiting for you to get your memory back. Judging by how Connolly’s reacting, they seem to be getting impatient about it.”

“Yeah.”

“Do you think it would be better, safer, if more people knew you were here? Do you think it would be harder for them to do anything to you if at least people knew about you?”

“Well, I think it can only help. If no one knows I’m here, then I’m vulnerable. If I were to disappear, who the hell would know? But why would you want help me?”

“Oh I’ve got my personal reasons. Anything that could drop Connolly in the shit would feel good for me right now. Let’s say I’d like to give him a small leaving present.”

Ellis raised his eyebrows. “I think this could be dangerous for you. Are you sure you want to do this?”

“Oh yeah. They’ve as good as fired me. What else can they do?”

Ellis looked at Thomas and imagined what they could do. He knew things were serious. Dr Thomas seemed to be a last hope, a last chance to get a message out to anyone who could help him. “So do you have a plan?”

Pulling his cell phone from his coat pocket, Thomas turned on the photo camera feature. “Just stand over here in the light.” The camera clicked three times. “That’s good.”

Ellis looked at the photo on the small LCD display. “What now?”

“One of my best friends works for Cable Six News. They’re always looking for good human interest stories. I think you’ll be right up their street. I think when you go on air tonight, Connolly will have a fucking fit.”

Ellis grabbed Thomas’s wrist and stared him in the eyes. “Do this and then leave for Phoenix and take Carol with you.”

Thomas shrugged and then smiled. “It’s no problem, except for Connolly. I’ll tell them my name is Connolly when I give them the story.”

“Be careful. I have a feeling Connolly is the small fish in this big pond.”

“Well let’s hope the sharks eat him,” Thomas said, patting Ellis’s shoulder and then walking to the door. “I just want to wish you luck. If—when—you remember who you are, please come and look me up in Phoenix. I’d like to know *who* the real Ellis Landis is and more so what the hell that thing is for.”

“Yeah, me too.” Ellis looked at Thomas. He felt humbled that this man was about to carry out such an act for him. “Thank you. I know you didn’t have to do this.”

“Hey. Isn’t that what friends are for?”

“I guess so,” Ellis said as the door closed behind Thomas. He knew Thomas was his only hope.

C H A P T E R 15

At eight in the evening, on the eighth day after the arrival of Ellis at the KRMC, the Kingman Cable Six News aired as usual. Twenty-one minutes into the newscast a small box appeared on the screen to the right of the newscaster. Inside it was the photo taken by Dr Thomas.

“This man, known today as Ellis Landis,” the newscaster said with a plastic smile and full set of porcelain teeth, “is looking for your help. He was taken to the KRMC in the early hours of the morning of March the eighth. He was mysteriously dumped at the ER following what appears to have been a hit-and-run accident. Eye witnesses from the ER report he was left by two women who immediately disappeared without leaving their names.” The newscaster continued, cocking his head for dramatic effect. “Unfortunately for Mr Landis, he was left with no identification. And the trauma to his head has left him with what is described as ‘a rare amnesia.’ He cannot remember anything of his personal past.” The screen zoomed in to fill with a larger grainier image of Ellis. “At Cable Six, we are appealing to anyone to come forward with information about this person. Relatives or friends can call this number.” A free dial number appeared at the bottom of the screen. “Or they can contact the KRMC directly.”

Simultaneously after the broadcast:

Miss Davies slammed her TV, grimaced and then ran down the corridor toward McFee’s office. This had been most unexpected and all but threw their covert operation into chaos. Now it was public knowledge he was in the hospital. It would only be a matter of time until someone made a move on him. More than that, it meant someone on the inside was helping him and that could not be allowed. She was determined to locate the mole.

Caine shook his head, amazed this could have leaked. Quickly, he picked up the phone to Dickson to deliver the news. He knew this potentially made things more urgent. Public knowledge of Ellis could force McFee to take drastic action, possibly the rapid disposal of their man. The urgency now was to get Elisha into the hospital and get Ellis moved to MINDS where he would be much safer.

Shelly Truman turned off her TV, guilt rising in her throat. She'd felt bad when she had left him slumped against the ER doors. Now that she knew he'd had a complete memory loss, she felt worse. Reaching for a bottle of Wild Turkey to anaesthetize the feelings, she suddenly stopped to think. Maybe she could try in some small way to respond to the request and help him. She just wasn't sure what she could do.

Mr Jones placed down the red phone and marched out of the executive conference room. Storming down the corridor, he slammed through Connolly's door. McFee had been pissed, really pissed and was now leveling blame at Jones. He was now responsible for the leak, so he would need to sort things out.

"What the hell was *that* all about?" Jones raged, grabbing for Connolly's lapel, pushing him back onto his desk.

"What? What in God's name are you talking about?" Connolly said with genuine surprise. He obviously hadn't seen the TV stunt. He squirmed backward with a look of fear on his face.

"Our patient's face has just been blasted all over cable TV! There was an appeal for someone to come forward! Our man is compromised!" Jones shouted, spraying spit on Connolly's face. "Did you approve this stupid fucking stunt?"

Connolly lifted his hands, shrugging. "I have no idea what you're talking about..." Suddenly his eyes closed and he released a long sigh. Shaking his head, he uttered a single word. "Thomas."

CHAPTER 16

Dr Thomas stood in the kitchen of his third floor apartment, his Sony Vega TV on with the volume cranked high. Smiling broadly, he prepared a chicken sandwich. *Yeah, fuck Connolly! I hope this ruins his career.* He placed the top slice of bread onto the chicken and patted it down before licking mayo from his fingers.

He never heard the pick slide into the lock of his door.

He pushed the sandwich onto a plate and collected his diet Coke before walking through his small apartment. Stepping around his battered old couch, he sat down square in front of the TV, the couch sagging. *I hope they burn Connolly for this,* he thought, taking a bite of the sandwich and smiling. As he turned down the volume and fixed his attention on a rerun of *Happy Days*, the silent, leather-gloved figure slipped through the door and into the apartment. Thomas bit into his sandwich again. He laughed loudly as the Fonz berated Richie.

The intruder moved with great stealth from the door. He passed down the small entrance hall and toward the moving shadows of the living room. His rubber soled cowboy boots allowed perfect silence. With a black bandanna half masking his face, he looked like a bandit from an old western movie, ready to rustle cattle. Between his hands, he held taut a thin steel-wire garrote. Step by step, he inched forward into the flickering blue light of the room. His eyes narrowed, but like the seasoned professional he was, his heart rate never climbed. Inch by inch he approached the back of the couch, watching Dr Thomas's head bob with laughter. Slowly he raised the garrote, opening the arc of the wire, bringing it close to Thomas's head.

As Thomas laughed, the intruder snapped the wire in front of his face and pulled hard backward, jamming his foot against the back of the couch. He

watched as Thomas's head jerked backward violently and the sandwich flew into the air. Thomas's eyes bulged, his mind in total confusion at the sudden pain across his throat. Flailing his arms wildly, he grasped at the chord that was cutting deeper into his neck. His body arched violently as he fought to escape. His heart pounded with the intoxicating rush of adrenaline and his lungs screamed for air. Looking back over his shoulder as best he could, terror gripped him as he saw cold killer eyes staring down at him. He lunged with his right hand and grabbed the bandanna, revealing the twisted smile on Mr Jones's face. His vision then began to blur as the lack of oxygen started to bite. *I have to do something now, if I am to escape*, he thought in wild panic.

As Jones pulled harder, Thomas fought back. His flailing legs smashed into the glass of Coke, sending it spilling across the floor, leaving a dark stain on the rug.

The panic filled gurgling coming from Thomas's gaping mouth told Jones he was winning. He looked like a freakish angler, struggling to land some bizarre thrashing fish. Altering the angle of his grip, Jones leaned backward, putting his full weight on the garrote. "That's it," he said, hearing a noise like a plastic tube collapsing.

As Thomas felt the sickening crunching within his throat, he knew his own trachea had just caved in. His world started to blacken and the waves of panic began to subside. His last efforts to remove the wire from his throat were feeble, as his arms had turned to lead. He felt himself drifting from the commotion of the room. His life flashed before his eyes and his thoughts turned to Carol. Then, as even those memories drifted away, he casually accepted that he was already dead.

CHAPTER 17

It was close to eleven when Carol entered the darkened apartment. She'd expected to find Thomas waiting for her, holding a glass of champagne, gloating at his revenge. The silence chilled her—it awakened a deep instinct within—fear.

Stepping into the living room, she searched for any sign as to where Thomas was—*Things look to be in order*. Then, walking around the couch, she looked down and could see the dark stain splashed across the rug, as if someone had spilled a drink. She knelt down and touched it—*Still wet*.

Her throat became dry and her breathing intensified—*Something is not right*.

Quickly she walked into the kitchen and looked in the sink. There she found a plate smudged with mayo. Thomas had been there, eating. Her mind flicked to the stain on the rug and a strange instinct told her to look in the garbage. Panic started to well within her as she saw it—the half eaten sandwich. Now her mind raced; she was putting the puzzle together. *Someone has been in the apartment. Someone surprised Scott. For some reason he never finished his sandwich—and he always does—and he spilled his Coke—Maybe a struggle*.

Fear started to grip her tighter as she ran through to the bedroom. Looking around in panic, she hoped to find some clue to where he was. Suddenly, she saw it on the bed, a small handwritten note. She lunged across and grabbed it, opening the small folded piece of paper and reading three simple words—*Gone to Phoenix*. In that instant her panic grew into pure terror, as she knew this was not her lover's handwriting. Her mind jumped to the Cable Six News, it flashed to Connolly and then finally came to rest on Ellis. Her eyes slowly closed. She knew her life was also in danger.

Without hesitation she turned and fled from the bedroom, twisted down the hall and slammed open the door. She was out in the main hall, tearing toward the exit, her hands fumbling in her bag, desperate to find her car keys. She knew she had to get out of there, the stain was still wet, and the intruder—kidnapper, killer, whatever he was—must be nearby.

Looking back through tear filled eyes she could discern his shape—a tall thin figure running down the corridor toward her. It was death.

Sprinting out of the main lobby, she staggered across the street, almost losing her balance. She looked around desperately, clinging to her bag, praying there would be someone in the road, someone to help her. Then a thought crashed over her like a wave—*Anyone could be after me. Anyone could be with that man. Oh my God, I can't trust anyone.*

Screaming with terror, she ran to her small red Nissan and yanked open the door. As she flung herself into the car, she could sense the ever-closing presence of her hunter. Like the grim reaper approaching her, with his scythe at the ready.

Now in full panic, she screamed again and fumbled wildly to jam the key into the ignition with her right hand. She then slammed down the central locks with her left.

Jones hit the car, banging his arms onto the hood to add to the intensity of the chase. He turned and stared through the windshield at the terrified face of his prey. Something in his eyes showed that the chase aroused him. As the engine tried to kick over, he reached into his long black jacket and slowly pulled out his favorite handgun, a Ruger KGPF-331. He pointed the 152mm barrel at the windshield, the special .38 round in the chamber ready to explode in her terrified face. As he squeezed the trigger, the car jumped backward, sending him reeling across the hood, sprawled onto the ground. The gun fired into the air with a crisp bang.

Carol turned the wheel furiously and jammed the small Nissan into drive. Flooring the pedal, the tires screeched as she pulled away, the car swerving down the road. She screamed once more—it seemed to help—and gripped the wheel tightly. She expected to hear the rear window explode and feel the shredding pain of a bullet in the back of her head. Neither happened.

Trying desperately to regain her composure, she realized she had to run. She had to get as far away from Kingman as possible. She was certain now, having seen that man's face, Scott was already dead. She needed help, and she needed to hide. She knew if she approached the local police, she would be in the military's hands within an hour and dead within two. She would head to Seattle—her mother would hide her until she could think what to do.

* * * *

Jones picked himself up from the road and dusted himself down before holstering his gun. He had been an instant too late coming back from the car in which he'd dumped Thomas's body. He'd been clumsy—she had seen his face. He didn't care, as he had plans. Reaching into his coat pocket, he pulled out a small communications radio that used ultralow frequency scrambled signals—low power but long range. He called the air base, asking for a fast response.

* * * *

The small red Nissan was thirty miles from civilization, on a dark desert road, when the attack came. The Lockheed Martin F-16 Fighting Falcon turned in for the kill from thirty thousand feet. It banked hard left and the pilot used images from the LANTIRN system for identification, which displayed on a Honeywell color flat panel display. The heat of the car's engine was a bright red glow against the near black background of the desert. The pilot flicked across the Cooley hat on his joystick to select the Maverick air to surface missile and waited for a good lock tone. With a dull beep, the plane's systems easily sealed Carol's fate.

Carol sobbed heavily over the wheel, long streaks of mascara trailed from her eyes, down her cheeks and dripping from her open mouth. Her last thought was of her love, Scott Thomas. She never saw the flash in the sky. She never knew anything of the direct impact of the high explosive weapon that ripped through the welded shell of her tiny Nissan. The force of the explosion lifted the car twenty feet off the ground, sending the tumbling flaming wreck from the road onto the edge of the desert.

The pilot signaled a direct strike, pulling the F-16 hard right and accelerating away from the attack zone.

McFee nodded solemnly on the other end of the radio. Their deaths had been regrettable but necessary; they were too close and had already risked the mission. It was not his style to take out civilians, but the events of the past week had changed everything. Now, protecting the secret was the only priority and all peripherals were expendable. Thomas's stunt meant he had suspected something about Ellis, so his death was a necessity. If Thomas knew, then he was sure Carol knew and her termination had been a requirement too. He turned to Miss Davies and ordered in the cleanup crew; there was to be no evidence left in the desert. Next he would deal with the bigger problem—Ellis.

* * * *

Thomas's body was never found. Jones took it away and placed through one of the many industrial meat grinders at his disposal. The great force of the tungsten carbide counter rotating grinding blades shattered the dead man's skull and bones like porcelain. Even Thomas's hard enamel teeth, a source of pride all his life, were reduced to powder. Jones collected the pulp with matted hair, which flopped from the grinder. He took it to an area within one of the secret base perimeter fences and dumped it into a waste-burning pit. Then he covered the remains in aviation fuel and burnt them. Finally, he ordered the shallow grave filled with sand.

Jones lit up his cigarette. "This is the price for landing me in such shit." He looked across the sand; there was plenty of space for the others. The moment they transferred Ellis to MINDS, he would set to work on Connolly's fate.

CHAPTER 18

After two days of absence, Ellis suspected Thomas and Carol were both dead.

He watched with distaste as Connolly stepped into his room, moved over to the blinds and opened them. Bright morning light streamed into the room, hurting Ellis's eyes and bleaching out the images on the television. Ellis had been glued to that television. Somehow, he felt he might stumble on some trigger that would help him remember the past. Turning his eyes from the small screen, he locked them onto Connolly—repulsion creping across his skin. Ellis thought he was a worm, a coward who had sold out two innocent people—*For what?*

“Good morning, Mr Landis,” Connolly started in an insincere, cheery voice. “I hope you slept well in our fine establishment. Do hope your new nurse is looking after all of your needs.” He paused, waiting for a response that never came. “Good. Well, I have some good news for you today. It appears you are recovered physically and that means we can get to work solving your small memory problem.”

Ellis stared back blankly. An urge passed through him to lunge forward and throttle the arrogance from Connolly. He craved to twist his head violently until the cervical spine cracked and broke. In his mind he played out the actions as if each was rehearsed—*Am I remembering how to do such things?*

“I have a new guest outside, a specialist,” Connolly continued, strutting around the room like some bad thespian. “I'm sure she will be able to help with your ailment. You should know she's from an institute that specializes in this type of trauma and this type of problem. On special request, she has been asked to oversee your case personally. She comes highly recommended. May I show her in?”

“Is Dr Thomas off my case?”

Connolly’s eyes shifted and he swallowed. “I thought you’d been told that Dr Thomas had decided to take some time off before his move to Phoenix. I am sorry he was so thoughtless not to have said goodbye.” Connolly paused for too long. “Well, should I show your new doctor in or shall we, too, be rude and keep her waiting?” Connolly smiled weakly. Turning to the door, he opened it, calling the doctor.

The beautiful woman who glided into Ellis’s room took him by complete surprise. Her beauty rushed across him, sweeping his senses away—it was a stronger reaction than it should have been.

“Good morning, Mr—Landis,” Elisha said in a professional tone, fixing her eyes on him. Something momentarily passed between them, something like an old familiarity that warmed them both. Elisha blushed slightly and looked away before the others noticed. She paused for just a second. “My name is Dr Elisha Sienna. I’ll be taking your case from now on. How do you feel today?”

Everything about her stunned him. Her almost bewitching presence dropped his defenses. He threw his legs off the bed and stood up quickly. “I feel fine.”

“Please sit,” she said, gesturing to the bed. “I just want to introduce myself and explain what’s going to happen in the next few days.”

Ellis immediately sat and looked up at her. “I guess I’m all yours, Doctor.” His eyes widened for a second.

She stared down at him, looking and hoping for any sign of recognition. But it seemed as if he was seeing her for the first time. She could sense something inside him, but knew he had forgotten her. Disappointment gripped her, but her face never betrayed her. She understood that if they suspected anything, both she and “Ellis” would be dead. She composed herself and started on what she suspected would be a difficult journey. “I’m not sure if they explained, but I’m an expert in matters of neurocognitive dysfunction and memory trauma.”

“I’m already impressed.”

She paused. “I was asked by Dr Connolly and the administration of the hospital to come and assess you, to see if I could help you to recover your memory. I am aware from your notes and consultation that some rudimentary tests have been performed, but no memory therapy has been tried.”

“Very rudimentary.”

She paused again. “With your permission, I’d like to put you through a series of tests. I’d like to confirm the type of amnesia and then move on to some therapies. That is, of course, if you agree?”

Ellis looked up at her, hypnotized. Not only was she divine physically, but also she was deeply intelligent and possessed a distinct authority. He felt a strong attraction to her, which muted all his self-preservation instincts. "I'm sorry, what did you say your name was again?"

For an instant, her lush lips parted and then her mouth turned into a one-sided smile. "That's very funny, Mr Landis."

"Please, call me Ellis. It's less formal and in fact I own neither name, so they're both fine with me."

She paused for a second and stared into his eyes. "Ellis—do you agree?"

Connolly stood watching the obvious spark between them. He jotted notes onto his small notepad: *An expert bonding with her patient*, he wrote as he watched her. *Just drawing him into her confidence.*

He glanced back to the previous page and the impressive list of credentials he'd noted. He then wrote one more at the bottom of the list: *Fantastic ass.*

"Will you be needing any further help from me?" Connolly asked.

"Not at the moment, Doctor," she replied without looking at him. "I'd like some time with my patient, to start to make a more detailed analysis. I'll call you if I need anything else. Oh, and before I leave today, I'll drop by your office to give you an initial assessment."

Connolly raised his eyebrows and rubbed his hands before turning and stepping to the door. "By chance, do you happen to like champagne?"

"Well, actually it's not to my taste. I'm more of a Coca-Cola person."

"Ah. Very well. If you need anything, and I do mean anything, then please stop by my office." The door closed behind him.

"Alone at last," Ellis said. It didn't get a reaction from the stunning doctor.

"Do you want me to help you?" she asked in a serious tone as she folded her arms. "Do you really want to get your memory back? I've come a long way to help you and I need you to take me seriously." She looked for acknowledgement. "We have a time pressure; the longer the damage remains unchecked, the more risk there is of a permanent problem." She paused and her eyes narrowed. "If anyone can get you through this, it's me. But I'll need your help."

Ellis raised his hands. "Hey, sorry. It's just that they've had me cooped up in this room for over a week now and I'm going a little stir-crazy. Things have become dark around here and well...with you...I'll be a good patient. I promise." He crossed his fingers and held them up.

"Good. Because I take my work seriously and I've been asked to come here on high authority to help you. I'm good, but I will need all of your help and concentration if we're to be successful."

Suddenly a series of thoughts flashed through Ellis's mind, almost releasing him from her spell. He'd been blind-sided by her—*Is this a ploy?* She'd pulled his guard down and almost sucked him in. *You've been asked to come on high authority—I bet!* He'd been stupid to fall for this, one of the oldest tricks in intelligence. He would need to be smarter and play the game if he were to have any chance of survival.

As much as anyone, he needed his memory back. He needed to know who he was, why he was there, who was after his mind and for what reason. Stunning as she was, he would not fall into the trap. He would change things and use the doctor to achieve his own goals. If his memory did recover, he would play dumb—he wouldn't let them know anything other than he wanted them to know. No, she was dangerous.

"If you need some air we can go outside," she offered. "I saw there's a small courtyard out back with some tables and chairs. We can grab a soda and start out there."

"You mean I can leave my room."

"You're not a prisoner here," Elisha said.

Ellis paused. "Well, that's good to know. It just sort of felt like it."

"Come on, let's go."

Turning, Ellis collected his robe and discretely opened the top drawer next to his bed. Reaching inside he removed the device—he wanted it with him. He then followed Elisha from the room. Stepping through the door, he cautiously scanned along the corridor. Then he saw them. Two men were sitting on a bench. One was reading a newspaper while the other was tapping out a message on a small PDA. Examining one of them closer, he noticed a small piece of clear plastic running from the neck of his shirt up and behind his ear. *Not a prisoner?* he thought.

* * * *

Bathed in the warm morning sun, sitting at a small wooden coffee table, Elisha spent the morning explaining the basics of amnesia to Ellis.

"The first signs suggest you're having a problem with your long-term memory," Elisha said. "Events beyond a few days. On the face of things, it's most likely to have been the impact to your head that triggered the problem. However—until I eliminate everything else, I can't be sure it's the definitive cause."

"What else could it be?" Ellis asked, a little confused.

“Some memory lapses can be induced by physical trauma. But different things such as alcohol withdrawal or even chemical imbalances in your brain can induce them. A lack of Thiamine, for example, can cause a memory problem known as Wernicke-Korsakoff syndrome.”

“Sounds nice.”

“It is possible you had some memory problems before the accident.”

Ellis paused to think—*What happened before the accident? Where was I?*

Sipping her soda, Elisha looked cautiously sideways at Ellis. “There are many drugs available now that play with memory. They’re easy to get hold of. Have you heard of the date rape drug? You can get hold of that on every street corner.”

“Not one I regularly buy.”

Elisha shook her head. “I can’t take anything for granted at this point. There is a problem. *If* your memory loss was induced by pharmacologic means or something other than the trauma, then all evidence may be gone after all this time.”

Ellis looked surprised. He’d naturally assumed his memory loss was from the day of the accident and induced by the bang to his head. Now his mind was spinning. “So you’re saying it is possible I may have induced amnesia. That I could have had this before I was hit by the car.”

“Absolutely. Secret service uses it all the time.” She looked at Ellis for a moment. “The enigma is this...”

The word exploded in Ellis’s head like a grenade—*What does that mean? What does that mean? The Enigma?*

Elisha paused for an unusually long time, looking at him as if waiting for him to react. She continued. “If someone did want to erase your memory, then you would never remember why they did it. That’s exactly why they do it. Maybe someone doesn’t want you to remember.”

Ellis sat back and a puzzled look crossed his face. “But isn’t the most obvious solution among a group of solutions usually the correct one. The simplest thing is I was in a hit-and-run, I banged my head and lost my memory.”

“Is it the most simple?” Elisha asked. “I’ve read the case report carefully. You were naked, in a hit-and-run. By the sand in your abrasions, you were probably out in the desert. The blood on your head was clotted for what looked like an hour. Two in the morning, the chance of being found out on a desert road by two women is next to zero. The ones who brought you here hit you. That’s why they left so quickly. They may have stolen your wallet and ID, but also every item of clothing?”

“Maybe they were desperate for money?”

“Then it’s strange they left a precious looking piece of silver in your hand.” She looked toward the pocket of his robe. “So if you sum it up, it seems you were about an hour out into the desert, naked with no ID and with some strange metal object in your hand. Maybe you had some problems *before* you were hit.”

Ellis stood up and turned from the table, feeling for the back of his head. “No, it doesn’t make any sense.”

“I’m not saying it does. However, as a doctor I have to eliminate everything and make sense of what happened so I can cure you.”

Ellis continued to shake his head.

“I need to do the tests from scratch and cancel any other possible causes of the amnesia. I need to be sure what I’m dealing with before I can effect the correct treatment.”

Ellis’s mind was a whirl. It had seemed simple a few moments ago. Nevertheless, a seed was now growing in his mind. He started to wonder what had happened to him before the accident. *Could someone have induced my memory loss? Why? Why would they leave me naked with just the device?* His thoughts concentrated on the device; it was such a bizarre part of the whole mystery. He had not understood why someone had not simply taken it away from him. His mind felt clouded and confused.

“We need to start the tests as soon as possible,” Elisha said. “I need to see whether there are any pharmacological traces or other underlying causes. Then we need to assess just what is wrong with you and decide what we can do to help.”

“How long will the tests take?”

“Two days if we start right away.”

“Do you think I’ll get my memory back?”

Elisha looked into his eyes. “I hope so. I really hope so.”

C H A P T E R 19

Elisha rode the elevator to the top floor and then turned to walk down the corridor. She clutched a series of files containing the test results and her summary report. Knocking on the dark wooden door of the executive room, she waited for a response.

“Enter,” a muffled voice said from behind the door.

Stepping into the dimly lit room, two menacing figures greeted her. One full of authority and the other seemingly more sinister—she instantly disliked both.

“General McFee?” she asked, already knowing who he was from the pictures she had seen some days earlier.

“Well, I don’t wear these stars because it makes the uniform look chic.”

The door closed behind her. “I have the first report as requested.” He was not the first general to see this today. Some hours earlier she had sent the reports by means of her contact to General Dickson. She had concluded that no one had tampered with Ellis’s mind. No one had tried to wipe him, and the device had not gone into a critical safety mode. They were all relieved, as it gave hope of a full recovery. Dickson had signaled she should disclose the minimum to McFee, just enough to buy them more time. He’d said it was now the perfect time to suggest MINDS.

“Please sit down, Doctor,” McFee offered, as Mr Jones slid a chair toward her.

The room felt oppressive; dark shades blocked out all the daylight. The thick rich brown wool carpet absorbed any noise. The long mahogany board table, surrounded by twelve deep red leather chairs, added to the stern feeling.

“Would you like me to start?” she asked.

“Be my guest,” McFee said, sitting back in the squeaky chair, ready to listen.

Elisha cleared her throat. “Well, I have completed all standard tests. There seems no evidence that his memory loss is in any way caused by anything other than the trauma to the back of his head. I found no traces of pharmacological agents or any other sign his mind has been—manipulated.”

“Good,” McFee said, the dour expression on his face unchanging.

“However, I can’t be one hundred percent sure. It’s a week since he was brought in and all chemical traces would be gone from his blood by now. But the scan does show the neurons are not...”

“We should conclude it was the trauma,” McFee said, shifting in his seat impatiently. “You can dispense with telling me what he doesn’t have. I need to know what is wrong with him and how fast we can get his memory recovered.”

“It’s complicated.”

“Of course it is. That’s why I asked for a specialist.”

“He has specific damage to the neurons in what is commonly believed to be the memory center. Anatomically there appears to be no major damage, but he seems to be caught in a physiological blackout.”

“Blackout?”

“The connections for the memory are there and seem to be intact, but they don’t work normally. The PET scans show errant loops of activity.”

“Will he recover?”

Elisha paused. “Without doubt he’ll get either partial or even total memory recovery.” She knew this information would keep “Ellis” alive and buy them time. “It’ll just take some special therapy to jump-start the connections and break these loops. Not something I can do here. It needs specialist therapies.”

McFee nodded slowly. “The answer is yes. You can transfer him to your lab. Just be aware I am not a patient man and I *need* what is in your patient’s head.”

Elisha opened he mouth, but McFee continued.

“I fully understand that some of your research up at the lab is on the, shall we say, on the fringe of legal medicine. But, that’s all right. I can give you full discretion to use whatever methods are necessary to bring him back. No matter what grave or lasting effects you have on him, there will be no comeback. Is it clear?”

“I’m glad we’re aligned, General. I can do a lot for him at the, as we prefer to say, institute.”

Elisha stood to go when McFee spoke. “There are a few other things.”

Turning, she could sense what was about to come. His tone spoke of threats.

“First, no one is to know he is there or to be allowed to contact him. I want you and you alone to discharge him from the hospital. No one is to have any idea where we’re transferring him. If you’re asked, and you shouldn’t be, you can say

he's gone to a respite home in Ohio. I want you to drive him personally to your lab, no drivers. I'll ensure you have an event free journey; my teams will be nearby should anything happen."

"Fine."

"Second, any information you gain from him is to be considered above top secret and a matter of national security. You are not to keep any records of what he says or writes. Any notes must be immediately destroyed and a full list of all MINDS personnel working with him delivered to me."

"We'll destroy everything."

"Third, he is to take a small silver device with him and he is to have it with him always. No one is to ask about the device or to touch it. Again, it is a matter of national security. Should anything, and I mean anything, happen with the device then you are to isolate the area and contact me."

"Anything else?"

"Finally, the moment you crack him and he regains his memory, he could start to talk about strange things, possibly delusional things. Ignore it and forget it. I suggest you lock him in whatever secure room you have and call us immediately. We will then take charge of him from that point on."

Elisha stared back at the face of McFee. His eyes showed he meant what he had just said. Even so, she knew the second Ellis cracked and recovered his memory she would pick up the phone, call Dickson and hand over "Ellis" directly to him. "I understand perfectly, General. I've understood clearly the sensitive nature of this case, and I can assure you we deal with this level of secrecy daily."

"Good."

"I also understand your need for speed, but must remind you the mind is not a simple lock. It may take time to recover his memory and keep him alive."

"I need just the memories, Doctor, just the memories. Time is pressing."

* * * *

Jones watched as she walked from the room, his evil eyes peering after her. Clicking his teeth, he closed the door. "It's a risk letting him go."

"I knew she would ask for the patient to be transferred to MINDS. It's state of the art and probably gives us the best chance of recovering the memories. It also has one major advantage I like—it's secure."

"I have the hospital secured."

"The hospital has security that's got more leaks than a sieve. Look how easily that junior doctor pulled that cheap stunt. I'm already getting reports that at least

one unknown woman has been enquiring about the patient. Better that he goes there.”

“Am I to keep an eye on her when she gets to MINDS?”

“Of course. I want everybody’s eyes on all of these people, all the time. I also want someone on the inside, someone close to him. My trust is extremely low and the risks are extremely high.”

“Do you want me in the lab?”

“No. If Dr Sienna gets too suspicious about our activities, she may start asking more questions of her superiors. They then may start to ask me questions and we don’t need that. Find a doctor we can trust. Get him drafted on the team.”

“What happens once they get the secret? It’s hard to imagine we can allow it to be out of our direct control.”

“Once she uncovers the truth about what our friend knows, she may become—irrational. Like everyone who gets too close to the secret, she and the entire team at MINDS are expendable. There can be no witnesses.”

C H A P T E R 20

Elisha's silver Porsche streaked out past the boundary of Kingman. It screeched left from the junction onto the Sixty-six, heading north along the straight desert road toward Walapai. The sun blazed in through the open roof, hitting Ellis's face. He was glad of the sun and felt reinvigorated by the wind blowing through his hair. He'd been locked inside for too long and something in his soul craved freedom. He had considered several times whether he should try to escape the second they got onto the highway. He thought about forcing Elisha off the road and taking the car. However, the deep down voice buried in his subconscious told him it was a futile plan. He had no idea who he was and no clues where to go. He had no friends, no contacts and no money. Besides his own lack of resources, he knew the military was transferring him and would be tracking his every move. He wouldn't get more than a mile before they picked him up. His only hope now was that the woman driving the car could recover his memory. Until that point, escape was pointless.

Looking across at Elisha, he watched the smile on her face as she enjoyed the car. His gaze moved up across her delicate face to her eyes, fixed on the road, gazing through her sunglasses. "Do you always drive so fast?" he asked, glancing across at the speedo, which was nudging eighty.

"I love to drive here; it makes me feel free. I love this car, which they built just for speed. It'd be unfair to drive it slowly." She reattached her gaze on the open road that rushed before them and squeezed the accelerator harder. "Where I come from it was frowned on to enjoy yourself—seen as antisocial behavior. Can you imagine a place like that?" She waited. "It's a different mentality to here.

Here you can express yourself and be free and enjoy life. That's why I chose to come here. Don't you think we all should be free?"

"Everyone should be free. But they should also try to stay alive and not end in a flaming car wreck."

"I hope my driving doesn't make you nervous. You need to trust me. I'm a better driver than I am a doctor." She smiled widely.

"Have you been here long?" Ellis asked, stretching his neck.

"No, not so long. A few months. I guess that's why I'm still acting like a kid in a candy store, just experiencing the place. But I'm hoping to stay here forever now." She glanced across at Ellis. "Maybe soon you'll remember where you're from. Maybe you'll remember the people who are missing you."

"I'm not sure anyone's missing me. No one came to the hospital to find me. That is—except you."

Elisha reattached her gaze on the road and the conversation died.

The road ran straight and to the north. Out on either side stretched the desert. The houses had disappeared some miles back, leaving nothing but vast expanses of sand colored terrain. It felt strangely familiar to Ellis, but it also felt a little hostile. In his mind, he knew that being out in the desert, out in the wilderness, held a great significance, but he couldn't recall it. It was something buried deep in his past. Suddenly, off to their right a small group of rabbits that had been scurrying near the road bolted for their burrow.

"I love it when they do that!" Elisha squealed. "They're such funny little creatures, but they always seem so timid."

"Rabbits weren't always so timid, you know. Once they were brave and fierce. The Hopi knew it and passed stories about them from generation to generation. One story told of the rabbit trying to kill the sun."

"Kill the sun?" Elisha said, looking sideways at Ellis.

"It was very hot...The desert animals were all withering during Hadatso, or 'The Great Heat'. The only cool shade or water to be found in the blistering heat turned out to be mirages. Rabbit decided he must kill the sun to relieve the torment. So he set off to the eastern edge of the world, determined to shoot the sun the next morning as it leapt into the sky. He practiced shooting his bow along the way, becoming fiercer with each arrow. However, it seemed a wasted effort, because the sun watched him the entire time. The next morning he rolled some distance away from where he normally appeared and leapt into the sky..."

"Leapt? What do you mean?"

"A long time ago that's the way the sun used to rise, not slowly but in one giant leap. From night to day in an instant. So, Rabbit was taken by surprise and

he couldn't get off a shot. The battle continued for many, many days. Each day Rabbit was sure to get a shot, and each day the sun chose a new place in the sky to appear. Rabbit became braver and wiser with each day.

One morning the sun was careless and rose more leisurely than usual—and soon found an arrow buried deep in his side. Rabbit was jubilant! He danced and sang praises to himself...until he saw the gaping wound in the sun where his arrow had pierced. Liquid fire gushed from the wound and poured onto the earth, burning everything in its path. Rabbit was terrified, and ran scared, looking for a shelter.

They say that Rabbit has never recovered from his fright. To this day he still bears brown spots from where the fire licked at his fur. And he is no longer the fierce, brave hunter, but instead runs in fear at the slightest provocation.”

“Wow! That's beautiful.”

Ellis turned and looked at her. “The sun hasn't been the same either. He now rises slowly, peering wearily over the countryside before committing himself to rising. The wound made him a little more cautious. He also burns brighter, so no one can sight an arrow on him ever again.” He paused. “I fully understand his paranoia. You never know if someone is waiting for you over the horizon.”

“Do you remember any other legends?” Elisha asked. “They could be a link to unraveling your memory. It's not common to know of such things.”

“Yes. Strangely hundreds. I seem to have a mass of information buried in my brain, from Hopi legends to Mayan culture, from early history to modern political history. Maybe I watched too much History Channel in the hospital.”

“Is there anything in particular? Anything that stands out?”

Ellis thought. “Yes, two things. I have a strong recollection of...hieroglyphs. A deep knowledge about Egyptian mythology, but I don't know what it means. And something else now I think about it. I have a strong knowledge of...of the bible.”

“Is there some link you can make? Is there something in particular about what you remember?”

Ellis shook his head. “Nothing in particular. Maybe I'm a historian.”

“It's a good sign,” Elisha encouraged, nodding her head. “It's a link to your past and to who you are. It's a thread that can help us during our work at MINDS. Try to focus on it in the next few days.”

Ellis looked north to the stretch of desert and he wondered to what kind of place he was going. Somewhere that to first impressions was hidden out in the middle of the desert; out away from prying eyes. “What is MINDS?” he asked.

“It’s a medical institute for cutting edge research into mental disorders. It’s an acronym for Medical Institute for Neuro Disruptive Syndromes.”

“My kind of hotel.”

“We cover a vast range of research at the facility. Everything from behavioral disorders, learning disorders to degenerative diseases of the brain and including, as I’m sure you’ve guessed, amnesia.”

“Why so far out in the desert?”

Elisha raised her eyebrows. “Well, it’s meant to be a secret.”

“I like secrets. Tell me.”

“Okay—much of our research into neurons needs lots of vivisection, animal labs. Work on rats doesn’t attract much unpopular attention.”

“The rats always get a bad deal.”

“However, we do much of our work on primates and this invokes much bad feeling in the animal rights community. When they created the institute, they decided to move it to a discreet location. It was considered safer.”

“I see. So who owns such a facility?”

Elisha looked away out into the desert. “Some government funding from the NHA, but a lot of private venture funding, by project, from the big pharma companies. They’re interested in looking for the next big breakthrough in mental disease. We do all right for funding.”

Ellis glanced out of the corner of his eye and noticed they were rapidly approaching a gray car in front of them. Seeing its hazard lights flashing, he understood it was stationary. A man was waving frantically for them to slow down. The distance between the Porsche and the car was decreasing at a frightening rate. He glanced back to Elisha who was still staring into the desert. *She hasn’t seen it*, he thought. Ellis suddenly went rigid, jamming an imaginary brake pedal. “Look out!” he screamed.

Looking back to the road, Elisha quickly yanked the car to the left, sending the front jarring out violently, inches from the other car. Then the rear tires broke away, the maneuver too sudden for the suspension to handle. The Porsche began to skid sideways down the road, smoke erupting from the screeching tires. Elisha grappled with the wheel, fighting to regain control, but it was too late.

Ellis clung to the dash, fighting against the G-forces as the car spun wildly like a bucking horse trying to throw its rider. In his mind, he suddenly felt distant, as if an observer to the incident. Consumed in a sudden darkness, he could hear a blazing warning siren and a muffled voice shouting to him. He gasped as the car left the road and skidded out onto the desert surface. A cloud of dust burst into

the air like a mini tornado. Finally, a hundred feet from the road, the car stopped. Ellis immediately snapped back into the car.

“Holy shit!” he said, looking across at Elisha. “That was too close.”

Her eyes widened and then she broke into a hysterical laugh. “Oh...my...God,” she said, as the dust swirled around her, making her cough. “I am so sorry. I wasn’t concentrating. I was too busy thinking about Rabbit.”

Slumping into the seat, Ellis was just happy to still be alive. “What the hell was that? Shock therapy?” he said. “I either remember or die!”

Elisha stopped laughing. Looking down, she nervously moistened her lips with her tongue. “I’ll be more careful,” she said, starting the engine and turning the car toward the road. “I’m sorry.”

In silence, they tracked north. Then, after a small desert town, they turned left onto a winding road that meandered up toward the Grand Wash Cliffs. Ellis simply stared out into the desert. Elisha’s reaction had said it all. He was trying to remain mentally composed. But he guessed he was in big trouble and his comments had been close to the truth. But he’d seen something else in her reaction, something he felt he could use. She’d showed concern for him, genuine concern. Maybe she was working for them, but now he felt he had a chance to get close to her. To use her for his own purposes and it gave him hope. He planned to get under her skin like a tick and crawl his way into her mind. Once there he would take control of her. It was obviously necessary, knowing that as they got closer to the institute he became deeper and deeper embroiled in this dangerous game. The high altitude aircraft accompanying them for most of their journey acted as a constant reminder of his danger. Then, as they rounded the final corner and approached the MINDS complex, his suspicions shifted to certainty.

On a small plain a hundred feet below the road squatted the institute: a low white complex built in the shape of cross. Sterile white marble walls contained small, highly tinted, reflective blue glass windows that ran the length of the building. In front of one of the arms sprawled a wide-open parking lot. Marked out on the black asphalt were hundreds of white parking spaces. From the south of the parking lot ran a single, long approach road that curved toward the first razor wire perimeter fence. It carried on, through a set of towering electric gates, toward the second outer perimeter fence. There lay the entrance, bordered by a military style checkpoint with a single red and white pole barrier. Guarding the entrance stood three tall soldiers dressed in desert camouflage gear.

As they snaked down the road and approached the checkpoint, Ellis could see the guards were heavily armed. Each of them held Colt M4 Carbines, normally carried by special operations forces, a stockier version of the M16A2. They

sported big ammo belts and were carrying flash-bangs, stun grenades, pepper spray and spare clips. Each wore black sunglasses and had a throat mike communication system. *They must have some nasty vivisectionists in the area to be this concerned*, Ellis thought as the Porsche stopped at the gates.

One of the guards stepped to the car while another began an under car search with a long mirror. The third stood some way back, aiming his weapon at them.

“Identification and entry permits please,” the guard said in a robot like voice.

“Doctor Elisha Sienna,” she said clearly and carefully, handing over a small white plastic photo card. “And here’s the permit.” She passed across a folded piece of white paper that carried the State Department seal on the top.

The guard turned and headed into the small shack.

“Quite some security you have here,” Ellis said casually as he looked around.

“As I said—we have many threats from many parties that don’t agree with some of our work here. It’s for everyone’s protection.”

The guard returned and handed the white card back to Elisha. “Okay, you can go in.” With that there was an electric buzz and the huge razor wire covered gate rolled sideways as the red and white barrier pole lifted.

Elisha nodded and then drove them into the compound. Passing through the second gate, they carried on along the curved road to the parking lot. Turning at the end, they moved through the lines of cars parked near the building, finally stopping. They stepped from the car, Ellis grabbing a small duffel bag he’d been given at the hospital. Then they walked across the short distance to what looked to be the only entrance in the building—a large stainless steel, featureless door.

Ellis watched as Elisha pulled something from her pocket and waved it in front of a metal plate just beside the door. Immediately there sounded a high-pitched tone and the door slid open. To Ellis’s surprise, the door did not lead to a corridor but to an elevator. He followed Elisha inside, trying to glance at what she had used to get in to the building. In her left hand was a small metal cylinder a few inches long. *Is that the key?*

Elisha could see where Ellis was looking. She smiled as she lifted the small metal tube and removed the cap. As she twisted the end, something like red plastic appeared. Applying the lipstick to her mouth, she rubbed her lips together. The door closed on the elevator and it started to descend—a long way.

C H A P T E R 21

Glancing around the elevator, Ellis noted there were no buttons, no indicators—nothing. “And if I want to step out for some fresh air?” he asked, counting in his head, trying to estimate just how deep they were going.

“You just need to ask someone and they’ll be happy to take you up.” She paused and turned to him. “You’re not a prisoner here. You’re a volunteer. We even pay you a wage and you’ll get some cash the moment you arrive and register. If at any point you want to quit and leave, all you have to do is say, and you’re free to go.”

“And just where exactly will I go?” Ellis said, knowing the answer.

The elevator came to a gentle stop and the doors glided open, revealing a long featureless white corridor. Bright lights reflected off the stark walls, almost making the view uncomfortable. Along the corridor were evenly spaced unmarked doors. He wondered what could possibly lay behind them.

They walked past three doors before entering the fourth, which led to a small office with a desk. Sitting behind it was a painfully thin woman, her face no more than a skull with two soulless eyes stuck into the black, bag-lined sockets. She had scraped her lank ginger hair into a bun on her head, dragging her skin even tighter.

“Welcome to our institute,” she mumbled in a croaky voice. “My name is Clarice and I’ll be helping you with the never-ending paperwork we have here.” She sighed slowly.

“Sounds like my kind of party,” Ellis said, staring at the ghoul before him.

“Please take a seat, Mr Landis,” she offered, waving a skeletal hand. “It will undoubtedly take a long time to get all your details. I’m sure it will be equally painful for the both of us.”

“Not really,” Ellis said, taking a seat. “You see, that’s one of the few benefits of amnesia. There’s not a lot to fill in on the forms.”

Elisha laughed, but the clerk simply pulled a pile of papers from the side of the desk. She laid them out in front of Ellis. “Well, we can try Mr Landis, we can try.”

Elisha placed a hand on Ellis’s shoulder and patted it firmly. “Good luck. I’ll see you in my office in about an hour. You’ll need to fill in the forms and then we’ll take some photos. After that, we’ll give you some fresh clothes. If there’s anything you need during your stay just ask Clarice and she’ll be happy to oblige.”

Clarice raised her eyebrows and slowly shook her head.

“Don’t worry. I’ll try not to be too demanding,” Ellis said. “Just show me where the caviar, girls and booze are and I’ll help myself.”

“There’s no box on the form for sense of humor,” Clarice said dryly.

Elisha laughed as she turned and walked from the room, heading to her office. Before arriving, she detoured into one of the many labs on that level of the institute. She intended to brief some of the MINDS team on the latest information.

* * * *

Sitting in a small lab were two of the key personnel at the institute, Dr Heinz Hellhammer and Dr Carlo Jeffries. Dr Hellhammer was a prizewinning researcher from the former East Germany, near Dresden. He looked like some evil doctor from an old B-movie. His graying hair was cut close to his head and he had a fraction of a black mustache above his thin lips. On his face he wore small round spectacles that could only have been created in the former Eastern Bloc. To add to his stern exterior he wore a long white lab coat with a high-buttoned collar.

Carlo could only be described as Hellhammer’s Igor. He was small and thickly built. He had a pronounced stoop that made him walk in a strange way, dragging himself around the lab. On his head were masses of thick matted black hair that curled down, almost covering his bulbous eyes. The right eye turned out at a severe angle. He was the perfect henchman for the evil looking Dr Hellhammer.

In truth, neither man was anything like his physical appearance. Dr Hellhammer was a quiet and sensitive person who took his research very seriously. He had

worked tirelessly on the study of degenerative mental diseases in the elderly. He had become convinced he could not only slow the problem of dementia, but also, with stem cells, recover lost memories. Most of his latter work was developing combination pharmaceutical and “memory therapy” to recover memories in amnesiacs, thus understanding the complex reversal process. The military saw promise in his applications for using drugs to rapidly reverse the amnesia of their agents induced by enemy brainwashing. So they had selected him to work with Ellis. Hellhammer was a strict observer of the rules, and when they gave him orders he would follow them to the letter.

Carlo was a fun loving genius out of the west coast start-up belt of med tech companies in southern California. He had been working on electromagnetic systems for recording memories and storing them on digital electronic media. His work had been considered bordering on madness, but certain key members of the board at MINDS understood the amazing value of this technology. If it could be realized, they would be able to take memories directly from people and store them for the future. For the military, it meant immediate access to secret information without the need for long-drawn-out interrogation processes. They would simply download the memories of any individual. Carlo saw that for amnesiacs, he could recover buried memories, store them and then replay the data to help them relive the events. But his greatest dream was to be able to re-install memories directly into their minds and even the minds of others.

For their innovative fields of work, both men had been selected to work with Dr Sienna; their skills would prove invaluable. She was determined to unlock Ellis’s memory without risking a total meltdown, and these talented men could help. Walking over to Hellhammer, she could see he was filling generic blue gel caps with his own formula of powder. The pharma therapy could begin immediately. “Good morning, Doctor,” she said, smiling.

“Ah, good morning, dear Elisha,” Hellhammer said in a strong German accent, his pronunciation precise. “Has our patient arrived?”

“Yes. He’s down the hall filling in the required release papers. I’ll settle him into his room and then I’d like you both to meet him.”

“His notes show him to be a very interesting case,” Hellhammer said, smiling. “It will be a real pleasure to work on him. I have every faith we can help him to recover his memories. As always, we shall remain discrete with the process.”

Carlo crossed from the far side of the lab, carrying a bunch of fine wires and cranial stick pads. “Don’t fry his brain with that cocktail of chemicals, Helly. I remember the last one. You juiced a little too much serotonin and sent him out of whack. Remember?”

Hellhammer smirked and returned to filling the small pill capsules. “Well, my patient eventually recovered,” he said. “While I remember that yours is still sitting in the funny farm with half of his cerebrum cooked from your high-powered magnetic impulse system.”

A grave look of concern crossed Elisha’s face as she glanced between Hellhammer and Carlo. To her great relief, suddenly they both burst out laughing.

“Just kidding, Doc,” Carlo laughed, as he high-fived Hellhammer. “Just our lab rat sense of humor. None of our patients ever ends up with mental mush.”

“No. At our level of research and with these potent technologies, they tend to die first,” Hellhammer added, with a serious look on his face. “German humor.”

Elisha breathed heavily. “That’s not funny, guys. The last thing we need to do is cause any harm to this patient. I’m trusting that you both know exactly what you’re doing.”

Carlo and Heinz exchanged glances.

“There’s a real time pressure on us from the boys upstairs. They want results and they want them yesterday.”

“Any idea what this is all about?” Carlo asked, coiling the wires. “I mean they called me off a pretty heavy NSA project for this. It must be real top level stuff.”

“I gave you the brief and told you absolutely no questions are to be asked,” Elisha said. “I need to know the second it even looks like he’s getting his memory back. Time is everything.”

“Doc, you know as well as we do,” Carlo said, “any attempt to force the mind of an amnesiac too fast can result in a complete block or a complete wipe of his mind. We can only go so far so fast without the risks increasing. We can push it, but you gotta know what that means.”

“I’d prefer not to push too fast,” Hellhammer said. “The balance of neurotransmitters I’m dealing with is extremely sensitive. If we get it wrong, we could induce paranoia, schizophrenia and even suicidal tendencies. I haven’t lost a patient yet and I don’t intend to lose one now because one of the brass needs fast results.”

Elisha stepped toward the door. “I know you’ll do your best. I’ll try to buy us more time.”

C H A P T E R 22

“I know it’s hard down here, but you can smile if you so wish,” Clarice said, winding the film of the Nikon.

A bright flash erupted and Ellis flinched, his head reeling slightly from the intensity of the light. He suddenly felt a halo around his vision and, for the second time that day, a sensation of becoming distant.

“Now just look to me and we’ll get a nice one for your files.”

Ellis stared at the camera and the flash came again. The burst of light passed through his cornea, across the fluid in his eyes, before striking his retina. In a millisecond the signal thundered down his optic nerve and slammed into his visual cortex. The signal set off a chain reaction, sending an explosion of impulses showering across his brain. His eyes stretched wide open and his head jarred backward as he tumbled from the stool. Slamming to the floor, his body convulsed wildly.

Suddenly he was strapped into a seat, warning sirens blaring in his ears, red flashing lights glowing through choking smoke. Then he heard a disembodied voice screaming at him, “Take it! Take it!” He turned, desperate to see who was speaking, but he blacked out and the visions evaporated.

In an instant he was back, with Clarice kneeling over him. Elisha crashed through the door, rushing to his side. He could hear a siren in the building and could see a red flashing light in the corner of the office. Clarice had hit an emergency panic button, alerting the staff they had a problem with a patient.

“Oh my God, what happened?” Elisha asked, taking his shaking hand.

Ellis tried to scramble to his feet, but like a newborn calf he staggered, off balance. Lurching forward, he grabbed hold of Elisha, staring up into her eyes, his

heart thundering in his chest. "I think...I remembered something. I remembered something." He moaned, and then as his eyes rolled upward he collapsed, unconscious.

C H A P T E R 23

When Ellis awoke, he was lying on white sheets with his head resting on a foam pillow. For a moment he couldn't think where he was, but as he looked around he remembered he was at the institute. Glancing down, he could see he'd been dressed in simple cotton trousers and an orange T-shirt. He was unsure just how long he'd been unconscious.

The lights in the small apartment were dimmed and soft classical music drifted from a Bose sound system built into the ceiling. The minimalist décor of the small room gave it a feeling of space. A few black and white prints adorned the walls, and a couple of air plants perched on the steel and glass furniture. A plasma screen hung from the far wall, and before it sat a small workstation with a keyboard and mouse.

Elisha stood over the bed with a small clipboard in her left hand and a small paper cup in her right. She wore a long white lab coat and her visit appeared to be official. "How do you feel?" she asked in a gentle tone.

Ellis looked up into her eyes. "Fine. I guess I must have passed out when they took the photos. I remember being seated on the stool and then I blacked out." He sat up slowly. "But I can say waking up isn't so bad with this view."

Elisha smiled and placed the clipboard on the bed before offering Ellis the small cup. "Easy, tiger. Maybe these will calm you down." From her pocket, she produced two small blue gel caps—the work of Dr Hellhammer—and presented them to him. "It appears you had a small epileptic seizure. I guess it was triggered by the flash from the camera."

“I always thought epilepsy was triggered by strobe lights of a certain frequency,” Ellis said, cupping his hand to receive the pills. “I’m surprised a single flash would set it off.”

“I saw in your notes that it happened before, in the hospital. It’s probably the result of the accident and it should be transient. We’ll give a small dose of anti-epileptics within your medical regime.”

Ellis stared at the small innocuous looking pills and then looked at Elisha. “So what’s the prescription?”

“It’s a complex mix of uptake inhibitors, neurotransmitter proteins, stimulants and anticonvulsants. Don’t worry; it’s not the strongest medication we give here.”

“Sounds delicious,” Ellis said, swallowing the pills and rinsing them down with the small cup of water provided. “So what will they do to me?”

Elisha picked up the clipboard and noted the time and dosages. “They’re designed to—liberate your mind. To help it remake the old neural connections and reduce any inhibition you may have from imbalances of chemicals in the brain.”

“Sounds like a bad acid trip.”

“Well, you may get some early side effects. Nausea, light-headedness, paranoia and above all you may have hallucinogenic experiences or delusions. But they’ll pass and we’ll take care of you.”

Ellis moved to stand up—it sounded a stronger cocktail of drugs than Elisha had made out. “Hey, I don’t want you doping me up like a lab rat. I need to remain lucid.”

Elisha pushed him back down gently. “Don’t worry. They’ll enhance your thinking, not dull it. That’s what we need from you. We’re trying to stimulate your memory back, not suppress it. Just relax and try to sleep. Tomorrow we start in earnest.”

An awkward moment passed as they stared at each other. For Ellis, it felt as if the natural thing were for them to kiss each other goodnight. He felt his mouth go dry and he swallowed as her eyes drew him in. He could sense she, too, wanted to kiss him, but she turned and walked from the room, simply glancing back at the door.

“Goodnight,” she said.

Ellis sat on the bed, shaking his head. *Am I genuinely falling for her?* No matter how lonely he felt, he would need to keep his distance.

* * * *

A gentle alarm and a voice drifted from the sound system, waking Ellis. “Good morning, Mr Landis. We hope you slept well. Please can you prepare yourself, and in thirty minutes someone will come to escort you to treatment room number three.”

Looking around the room, Ellis felt a strong sense of paranoia had grown in the night. The piped in voice felt intrusive and it made him wonder whether the sterile looking space was bugged. He scrutinized the room, wondering if they had him under some kind of covert observation. Suddenly his mind flashed to the device. Leaping from the bed, he raced to his small duffel bag—he couldn’t lose the device. Dropping to his knees, he reached inside, hoping they hadn’t taken it during the night, putting his life in danger. Great waves of relief passed over him as he felt the hard metal object—*No one has taken it*. He then scanned the room, almost certain someone was watching him.

Maybe this is a test.

He turned slowly to a mirror affixed to the wall and started to imagine it was one-way glass. Standing up, he moved across to it. He examined the edges and then slowly started to pry it from the wall. To his surprise it lifted easily, revealing nothing but a solid wall behind.

Oh God, what incredible paranoia. These drugs are having a strong effect on me already. I need to keep control, he thought, digging his nails into the palms of his hands and looking around.

Within half an hour, an assistant was escorting him to the entrance to lab three, or, as they preferred, treatment room number three. Entering, he wondered if he had just stepped onto the set of some bad science fiction movie. Masses of strange machinery and interconnecting cables covered every inch of the lab. At the heart of it stood something resembling an executioner’s chair, complete with hand and ankle straps plus a head restraint. Directly above it hung a giant articulating robotic arm with large cables and pistons hanging from the joints. Perched at the end of the arm was a small metal ball.

Ellis glanced to the far side of the lab at the large glass mirror—certainly this time a window for the observation control room. The door next to it creaked open and a hunched figure appeared—Carlo. The set was complete. Ellis didn’t know whether he should fear the machine or Carlo more, as both looked equally intimidating. He watched as Carlo limped across to him.

“Mr Landis.” Carlo beamed. “It’s a real pleasure to meet you. I did see you last night but you were busy convulsing on the floor and foaming at the mouth. So we never had a chance to be introduced. My name is Dr Jeffries, but the world calls me Carlo.”

Ellis felt a little more comforted as he shook his hand. “Sorry to have been so rude last night. Normally when I’m fitting I do take the time at least to say hello.” He turned and gestured to the machine. “I’m not sure I like your pet here. Please tell me it has nothing to do with my therapy.”

Carlo looked around and smiled. “Oh, don’t worry, it looks scarier than it is. I just built it to look that way for dramatic effect.”

Ellis stepped toward the chair at the center of the room. Again the drugs were taking effect; he felt as if his mind were racing with a huge caffeine rush. He felt sharp and efficient, not doped as he’d first feared. However, he was sure his paranoia was growing at an alarming rate, almost consuming him. He distrusted the huge machine and although Carlo seemed affable, he was not convinced of his intentions. “I can’t say I’m totally persuaded. What does such an evil looking contraption do to a frail human body?”

Carlo suddenly ignited at the chance to discuss his life’s labor. “It’s an ultra high-power, highly focused, electromagnetic induction system. I call it simply *The Mind Expander*.” He shuffled over to the heart of the machine and climbed onto the chair to reach the strange ball of the robotic arm. “This is the terminal part of the device and the most important piece. It pumps out *huge* amounts of electromagnetic energy into a beam of a diameter of less than half a millimeter. I can then direct the beam to any location and any depth in your brain.”

“Sounds healthy,” Ellis said, playing with the straps on the chair.

“Oh, there’s no harm. It just acts as a stimulator for the brain—gets the old synapses firing at full power. Depending where I put it and how I pulse the signal, I can induce certain effects and get specific results.”

Ellis raised an eyebrow.

“I’m going to use it with you to try to jump-start your memories. Hopefully your brain will take over and restore your mind.”

“Can’t we just bang my head with a hammer or something more civilized? Having vast amounts of highly focused power rammed into my brain, however therapeutic you say, is not what I call appealing.”

Carlo laughed, offering the seat to Ellis. “I can assure you it really is safe. I’ve had several sessions in it myself. As you can see, no ill effects whatsoever.” He laughed. “Come on, let’s give it a small go so you can see what it does. Trust me, it’s safer than crossing the road—especially for you!”

Reluctantly Ellis climbed into the chair while Carlo secured him in by the Velcro straps. "Why the straps?"

"Sometimes the mental stimulation can trigger muscular spasms. I don't want you falling on the floor and disrupting the program midcycle. That's the one thing that could be dangerous," Carlo said, slipping a cap with hundreds of wires onto Ellis's head and securing it in place. Then he slowly raised the chair until Ellis's head was a few centimeters away from the ball.

"Well, you're all set, captain. I'll just go and fire her up and you can sit back and enjoy the light show."

"I can't wait."

"It'll be brief for the first session, just enough for me to map you out and calibrate the baseline power settings." Carlo waved and stepped back through the door to the control room.

Suddenly the room was plunged into darkness, and in the eerie silence Ellis could hear his own heart pounding in his chest. The drawn out wait was almost too much for him. With a metallic clunk, a low red light came on, making the lab appear like a submarine at battle stations. Ellis held his breath and readied himself for the impact of the falling depth charge.

"Okay, Ellis, we're ready," Carlo's ethereal voice said over a speaker in the room. "Just relax and enjoy the ride."

Electric motors kicked into life and metallic gears meshed as the robot's great arm spun above Ellis. It twisted in great loops, moving the ball to just behind his head. Ellis could sense the great machine slowly powering up, an electric charge building around him, making his hair start to rise with static. Then there was a dull thud and a hum like a high-voltage electric current. Ellis gasped as a blinding white light suddenly filled his entire vision.

"Do you have any visual disturbance?" Carlo asked.

"Yes. Yes, my whole vision has turned white," Ellis said anxiously. "It's very unnerving."

"Good," Carlo said. "We're on line."

The robotic arm whirred and moved quickly to the side of Ellis's head. The visual effects immediately stopped, but now he could hear a high-pitched whining in his ears, loud and clear. "I can hear something..."

"It's okay; everything is good. That was just the visual and auditory center test, to ensure I'm in the right frequency range. Everything is normal. You should enjoy this."

Then the arm moved for a final time and suddenly Ellis felt like he had been dragged from his body. It seemed he was hovering in front of a giant 3D cinema

screen, with his recent memories being projected in full surround sound. His mind flashed with the journey to the institute, the testing at the hospital. Then he could see the faces of Dr Connolly, Elisha, Scott and Carol as they all talked in unison. Their voices were mixed in a mash of sound. His mind tumbled through the mass of TV channels he had seen, the images vivid in his brain. Somersaulting through space, he dropped, before landing back in the emergency room. He could hear them working on him, the airway in his throat sliding down, making him gag. He then screamed, feeling someone was trying to wrench the device from his hands.

Stepping back further, he was in a car, his head throbbing with pain. He could hear two women arguing in front of him—fragments of conversation.

“Damn it, Shelly!”

“We gotta take him to a hospital...”

“...If they find us, they’re gonna kill us...”

Then he was back lying on the road, his head thundering from the impact. He could feel his naked skin against the harsh road surface as he grasped the device tightly. *But, what is the device?*

Before his mind could answer, he was running, disoriented into the road. Turning, he could see the harsh headlights approaching him at high speed. He gasped, pushing out a hand to fend off the car, but it hit him with terrific force, tossing him into the air. Before crashing to the ground he searched further back, to the minutes before the accident. His mind scrambled to see the information, but it was as if he was standing at a line. On this side of the line lay his memories—and beyond the impenetrable barrier nothing but a cold black void. Gasping, he strained to cross the barrier, to break through and see who he was.

What is the device? What is the secret? What is The Enigma?—Who am I? Who the fuck am I?

He could feel himself screaming into the void but no sound came from his mouth.

C H A P T E R 24

Clarice picked up the telephone at her reception desk. She listened and nodded before patching through to Sienna's office. "Dr Sienna, I have someone on the line calling for Mr Landis."

Elisha sat bolt upright. "Who is it?"

"Well..." Clarice said slowly. "She says she's the patient's...sister. She says she wants to speak to Ellis."

Elisha stood from her desk, her mind buzzing. "Did she give a name?"

"No. She said she wanted to speak to him and no one else. Sounds like a local accent."

"Patch her through to me, please."

There was a brief pause and then the line connected. "Hello, who is this? How did you get this number?" Elisha asked. The line went dead. Elisha redialed Clarice as fast as she could. "Clarice, please call security and ask them if they can trace that last call. I want to know who it was and from where she was calling. I also need to know how the hell someone got the number to this facility. What the hell is security doing?"

* * * *

Elisha rushed through the doors of lab three. She needed to know from Carlo if anyone had been in touch with the lab. She was concerned, as now someone had gained access to a network of secret telephone numbers linked through the military grid. It was possible that a caller could gain direct access to Ellis in one of the labs. Entering, she saw Carlo helping Ellis from the chair. Ellis seemed a little

wobbly on his feet. "How did it go?" she asked, walking over, trying to mask her concern about the call. "Is everything okay?"

"Well, we hooked in," Carlo said, steadying Ellis. "Managed to get to the memory center and managed a partial recovery back to the accident. But then it's a blank."

"A blank? What do you mean?"

"It's normal early on," Carlo said. "We can easily get the connections firing of the recent memory. But it takes a lot more time to start to get the right matrix of frequencies to dislodge deeper memories. I need to analyze the grid and then create some potential phase maps we can use in the next session. It'll be slow, but that's normal."

"And how do you feel?" Elisha asked Ellis. "Was it okay?"

"It feels like my brain has been through a fast spin cycle in a washing machine. Besides that, the machine isn't half as bad as it looks."

"Any feeling of slipping into another seizure?"

Ellis shook his head. "Well it's a bit hard to tell among all the mind warping sensations. I just hope not all the therapies will be like this."

"Don't worry, this afternoon's session will be a little easier. You're scheduled to have a hypnotherapy session directly with me. Look, why don't you go freshen up, we'll have a little lunch and then we can start when you feel ready."

Ellis looked at her eyes as she glanced away. "Everything okay with you? Did you want to tell me something?"

Elisha stared back as her face flushed slightly, just enough for Ellis to notice it. "Fine. Everything is fine."

"Sure?"

"Sure. I just need to have a debrief with Carlo to help with this afternoon's session."

Ellis nodded slowly and walked to the door. "I'll be in my rabbit hutch if you need me. But I guess you guys know that."

Elisha turned to Carlo and whispered. "By chance did anyone call the lab today?"

Carlo shook his head with surprise. "No. The only people who ever call this lab are you and Helly. Phone's been quiet for the past few days. You expecting a call?"

"Maybe yes. I just want you to tell me if anyone other than Dr Hellhammer or I call this number. And under no circumstances allow anyone other than me to talk to Ellis. Is that clear?"

"You're the boss, Doc."

* * * *

Elisha walked back to her office and immediately dialed Dickson. “Something’s happened. We’ve had a phone call. Someone’s looking for Ellis, someone claiming to be his sister.”

“How the hell did they get through?”

“I have no idea. But I think someone other than McFee knows he’s here.”

“This complicates things. We need to take extra care. People are asking lots of questions, people like Oberman.”

C H A P T E R 25

The stretch limo passed through the gates to Luke Air Force Base and stopped at the guardhouse. Opening the window, Mr Jones handed a sheaf of papers to the guard.

“Who’s in the back?” the guard asked, trying to look through the mirrored glass.

“Confidential,” Jones replied.

“I’m sorry, sir, but I need to know who’s entering the base. Please open the doors.”

Suddenly the phone in the guardhouse rang and a soldier answered. He nodded three times and then replaced the receiver before walking to the limo. “It’s okay; let them pass.”

“But I didn’t...” the guard protested.

“General’s orders. Let them pass.”

Jones closed the window and the limo passed inside the base. It headed out toward one of the many disused hangars at the far end of the airfield. Turning in his seat, he dropped the partition to the back of the car. “I guess you’re pretty pleased to get a personal invite by the general,” Jones said. “Not often he thanks people in person for their work.”

“Well I must confess,” Dr Connolly said, “it is civil of the chap. I guess it means he was pleased with the way I handled things during this, shall we say, crisis.”

“Oh, he’s pleased. I mean the patient recovered and there was no major scandal. I guess the general considered it a real...hit.”

“Well I do hope it’s the air force’s tradition to celebrate with champagne like back in Britain. I am a little partial to the drink myself. You?”

“Nope.”

The limo passed the outer edge of the airfield and turned onto a disused road, heading west. After a few minutes it pulled up outside a low squat hangar. Stepping from the car, Jones opened the door for Connolly—he was the perfect chauffeur. “This way,” he said, leading the way to the building.

“Is the general here?” Connolly asked, looking at the run-down structure. The walls were crumbling, stripped of paint, the windows boarded with corrugated iron. “I’d have thought he would have nice private accommodation.”

“He has something he wants to show you first,” Jones said, holding the door open to the dark space beyond.

Connolly stopped, his heart suddenly racing as he realized how distant the rest of the base was. “You know, I’ve just realized that I have a very important appointment this afternoon that I’d completely forgotten about. Maybe it’s better...”

“This way, Doctor,” Jones said, signaling inside the hangar. “The appointment can wait.”

Connolly looked at the dark opening. It seemed a cavernous mouth waiting to devour him. Again, he glanced back to the main base. His hands were sweating and his knees began to feel weak. He now knew fully where Jones was leading him. “I think I understand you,” he said quietly. “Please don’t do this. I can give you money.”

“Money? What do I need with money?” Jones said, sniffing. He looked down, brushing his right foot in the dirt. “You know, I’d prefer it if you ran.” He looked up. “I always like a chase. Bit like a foxhunt, old boy. Tallyho and all that shit. Being the gentleman I am, I’ll even give you twenty seconds head start. Bit of a sporting chance, my English chum.”

Connolly stared at Jones. He knew inside the building lay certain death; outside he had a slim chance. “You’re a bloody bastard. You’re all bloody bastards.”

Jones simply smiled.

With a rush of adrenaline, Connolly turned and began to sprint away from the building, his tie flailing behind him. He knew if he could reach the main base, he could survive. He ran toward the runway, waiving his arms frantically at a sole F-16, his only hope.

The pilot never saw or heard him as he throttled up the engine, drowning out the shrill screams.

“One...two...three,” Jones counted slowly, ambling over to the limo and popping the lid to the trunk. Inside lay a large black duffel bag—his weapons bag that traveled everywhere with him. “Eight...Nine...” He slowly opened the bag and reached inside for his weapon, a Heckler and Koch MSG 90. Releasing the safety, he turned to look toward the fleeing Connolly. “Fifteen...sixteen...seventeen.” He closed the trunk, resting the rifle on it. Slowly he zeroed in the sight and dialed in the windage.

As Connolly sprinted across the dusty ground he screamed for help like a frightened child and tears formed in his eyes. He prayed he could make it to someone—anyone. They would never kill him if there were witnesses; they would never risk it. Then, as the plane roared up the runway ahead of him, he felt a searing pain rip into his back, just below his right shoulder. The 7.62mm round shattered his scapula, smashed through his ribs, clipping the top of his right lung before passing out through his chest. He stumbled forward in shock and skidded across the ground, creating a cloud of dust.

Disorientated, he sat up as a vice-like grip crushed his right lung. He had seen enough gunshot victims come through his ER to know what was happening inside him. The waves of confused panic subsided as he resigned himself to the fact that the gunshot was surely fatal. The amount of blood running down his chest and pooling on the ground was far too great. He slowly turned back to look at the limo, his right arm limp at his side.

Jones placed the crosshairs between Connolly’s eyes and squeezed the trigger. The silenced round left the chamber and one more witness disappeared into the desert.

C H A P T E R 26

Elisha looked at Ellis's face in the dim light of her office. He appeared peaceful and some of the age induced by recent events had receded. As he lay on the couch in a hypnotic state, she cast her glance over his body. Then she leaned forward slightly, as if to kiss him. Before meeting his lips she remembered her role and her mission. She knew it was far too great a risk. If he suddenly realized, then reality might come crashing in on him and it could be far too much. The security protocols would take over and the results could be fatal. No, she had to keep distant and allow him to remember of his own accord. She sighed and continued the session.

"Ellis, I want you to clear your mind. I want you to take yourself far away from here and think of another place—a place you've been before. Can you do that for me?"

"Yes," Ellis said in a dreamy voice. "I'm there, I'm in that place—It's far from here."

"Okay, I want you to let yourself drift and tell me what you see. Just describe what's around you."

A frown crossed Ellis's face for a second and then it disappeared. "I've found myself among a great crowd of people. A sea of people and they're holding...holding banners and flags. There's hundreds and hundreds of people. I'm trying, but I can't see to the front of the crowd. I don't know what it is they're all looking at. Wait, wait I can see them, the people are shouting, I think they're shouting at some other people. It feels...so hostile."

"What are they shouting, Ellis?" Elisha asked quietly.

"I can't hear the words. There's too much confusion. But the voices, the voices are angry, as if people are protesting something. I can hear them shouting as they wave placards. They're protesting... Wait. Wait. I can see—police. They're in riot gear, pushing back on the crowds, forcing the crowd backward. It's frightening." He paused as a pained look crossed his face. "The crowd is surging and I'm feeling trapped; I feel like I'm being dragged along like a pebble in a river. I can't move against the current of bodies." He swallowed. "I can hear someone shouting... a woman... She... she..." Ellis screwed his face in pain. "She's fallen beneath their feet and she's trapped under the crowd. They're trampling her and I can see her twisted face turning blue. Oh God, she can't breathe, she's suffocating. Her blue tongue is lolling from her gaping mouth." He paused again. "Now someone is shouting across a PA for the crowd to become calm but... but it's getting out of hand... The crowd is surging again and throwing their placards at the police. They're screaming and shouting at the police, angry voices. Above them I can hear whistles and dogs barking. It's getting out of control. The crowd is surging again against the wall of police. I think they're going to break through to a small group of officials."

"Look into the crowd, Ellis," Elisha urged. "Do you see any familiar faces? Do you remember anyone?"

Scanning the crowd, he turned full circle. "There's a man and a woman; they're looking down at me and screaming. They're screaming for me to run, to run to the back of the crowd."

"Do you know who they are?"

Ellis's eyes screwed tightly shut. "No. I know their faces but... But I don't know who they are. I should know who they are but..." Suddenly there was a huge roar in the crowd and a blinding flash of white light. Ellis felt himself hurled to the ground by the concussion wave as screams erupted from all directions. He could hear the flip-flop of body parts raining down around him. Survivors began to flee in panic as the police surged into the crowd, batons raised. Looking from the ground, he could see the man and woman who had spoken to him. They were lying motionless on the floor, blood seeping from their ears as the crowd surged past them. "I think they're dead," Ellis said calmly. "Yes—They're both dead."

"You know them. Try to remember. Let your mind flow."

Ellis struggled to recall the faces of the people lying dead before him. Fighting hard, he tried to open his memory, to go beyond the wall of darkness. "No. I don't know who they are. I can't remember... I can't... Oh Christ, they're dead... They're all dead." He could see where the blast had cut a huge crimson

swathe through the crowd, littering the ground with dismembered corpses. He could feel the warm splashes of blood running down his face as he stared, wide-eyed. "They're all dead."

Elisha put a reassuring arm on his shoulder. "It's okay. Let the vision go. Let it go. We'll go somewhere else." She waited a moment. "I want you to go back to the day of the accident, when you were found in the desert. I want you to play backward in your mind all the events."

There was a pause as Ellis drifted back to the day of the accident, replaying the scene in his darkened mind. "I can't. It's locked."

"Unlock it, Ellis. You can do it," Elisha said, fixing her eyes on his face.

"I said it's locked. It's not that simple. You have to think about it to unlock it and I can't remember how. I can't remember the secret. I can't remember how to unlock it."

"Your memory. It's vital. You need to try. Try to unlock it. Try."

Ellis moaned as he fought with his mind, digging deeper and deeper into the blackness, but his efforts were futile. "I'm sorry...It's locked...It's locked."

"It's okay. We can try again. Just relax, just relax and let your mind flow freely. Just let it fill with pleasant images and as I count backward from ten, I want you to come wide awake. Slowly now: ten...nine...eight...waking now...seven...six...five...more awake...four...three...two...almost there...and one, wide awake."

Ellis's body relaxed as the words drifted through his mind and the ghost that seemed to have rested on his face vanished. Stretching and yawning he emerged from the hypnotic state. He looked fully refreshed, as if he'd had a peaceful sleep. "Well? Did we get anywhere?"

"Slowly, Ellis, slowly," Elisha said, turning the lights up. "I think it'll take some time and some more work, but we'll get there. It may come out in these sessions or in one of the labs. It may even come out in your dreams. Tonight I'll put you in the sleep monitoring lab in case the process has started."

"Did I remember anything?"

"Yes. You remembered a demonstration. A demonstration that went wrong. You told me of the insanity of the police and the explosion within the crowd. It killed some innocent people, some people very close to you. Do you remember? Do you know what it was?"

Ellis shook his head. "I don't remember any demonstration."

"You need to think about that demonstration. It's crucial. Everything in your life, everything changed from that moment on. It's the start of this enigma."

Again the word exploded in his mind—Enigma—it meant everything and nothing all at once. The whole thing was an enigma, a riddle he had to solve. He was sure he was part of something bigger, something important and that he and the device were at the heart of it. Looking at Elisha, he wondered why she kept choosing that word.

C H A P T E R 27

McFee sat in his office, two stories below the ground at Luke, anxious for the update from Dr Sienna. He knew the information in Ellis's head was the key to the whole mission. He was concerned The Enigma had definitely recovered Darwin. All the recent search efforts had turned up nothing, not a trace. Time was rapidly running out until the suspected detonation date. The only way to stop it was to gain access to the secret.

Miss Davies sat in front of him, flicking through a pile of reports, all marked Urgent. "There's still nothing, sir. We've tried all known frequencies and scan patterns. We've had the special pod delivered to us and fitted to an F-16 fighter. For the past forty-eight hours it's been flying sweep patterns over the whole desert. Nothing."

"Do you really understand what will happen if they fire this weapon? It will wipe out everyone."

"I know full well how dangerous Darwin is. I have no illusions that if the worst were to happen, our way of life is gone." She pointed to a file. "We're doing everything we can. Intelligence picked up something an hour ago. By some chatter we intercepted, it looks like the subject is tied in. There's talk they've lost control of their 'key'. There's no doubt he is the key master."

Looking up, McFee was happy to hear they were getting somewhere. "Good. This brings us a step closer to the *real* problem. I have a feeling this time we're going to get to Gil."

"You want Gil so much?"

"The Council wants Gil."

Davies paused. Like everyone, she knew the history between Gil and McFee. “He could know who Gil is,” she said, sliding a blue folder marked Top Secret across the desk. “These are all known members of The Enigma we’ve had under surveillance, and he doesn’t figure anywhere in our records. No one has ever seen him or heard of him associated with them.”

“Interesting.”

“That means he could be a very high-ranking member. Obviously close enough to the upper echelon of their command to be trusted with the key.”

“Maybe that’s why they haven’t moved on him yet,” McFee hypothesized.

“These people would kill their own children if they had to. It’s strange they’ve not tried to take him out.”

“I agree. They’ve had more than one chance to get to him. It tells me they still need him alive and they need him to recover his memory as much as we do.”

“Maybe Darwin isn’t active yet,” Miss Davies suggested. “Maybe they still need the secret to set off the weapon. That means we could eliminate him and ensure Darwin is neutralized.”

McFee paused for a long time. “And what happens after we stop the weapon? The hard truth is it’s only a symptom of the bigger disease—The Enigma. If we neutralize this threat without destroying them, there’ll just be another weapon in the future.”

“I guess so.”

“I’m hoping this man knows something else. Maybe he really is one of the few who actually knows who Gil is. He could be crucial to solving the real problem of The Enigma. Eventually he could be the one who delivers Gil to us.” McFee raised one eyebrow at Miss Davies. “I think when Dr Sienna cracks his memory we’ll get more than we hoped for. I’m convinced we’ll solve both the problem of Darwin and The Enigma all at once.”

“You’re still convinced the date we have is when they plan to set off the device? Not before?”

“We all know what that date means to them and their beliefs. They’ve announced it as their day of apocalypse since the incident at Janada. I’m sure if there were any chance to start the countdown and hit us on that day, these lunatics would do everything to make it happen.”

“I remember Janada.”

“For them it’s a holy war, and times, dates and places all have great significance.” He looked up at Miss Davies. “Mr. Ellis Landis might be the key to ending that war.”

Suddenly the white phone on his desk rang loudly, making Miss Davies jump.

“Right on cue,” McFee said, reaching over with a massive hand to grab the receiver. “Hello...Yes, patch her through.” He placed a hand over the mouthpiece and mouthed that it was indeed Dr Sienna. “Doctor, thank you for calling. Do you have any updates?”

Elisha sat in her office twirling the phone chord in her hand. Moments earlier she had given the full debrief to Dickson. “General. It’s early days,” she started. “Ellis has not yet had time to start the full regime of tests and therapies that will...”

“Please refer to him as the patient,” McFee interjected in a stern voice. “It is better for all parties not to become, in any way, attached to this man. It may also be better that he does not start to assume any new identity. If we as a group build on this fantasy that he is indeed Ellis Landis then we will only reinforce this in his mind. Then we may never recover his true self and character.”

“I’m sorry, General. I will refer to him as...the patient in future,” Elisha said, gritting her teeth. “I just want to say we have no progress so far. But we can assume from the first battery of tests that he should have a full memory recovery.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Our expert in mapping says there seems to be no anatomical destruction of his memory cortex, just a physiological disruption that is blocking his memory. The key is time.”

“Has he mentioned anything of the device?” McFee inquired. “Has he tried in any way to...use it?”

“No. Today he left it in his room. He doesn’t seem interested in it.”

“I told you to keep it with him always!” McFee exploded. “That is an order! Do you hear me? Always!”

Elisha reeled back from the phone. She had no plan to have the device with Ellis, just in case they triggered the memory. “Yes, General. I heard you and you can be sure we’ll keep it with him from tomorrow onward.”

“My patience is wearing thin, Doctor,” McFee said in a menacing tone. “Just remember I have great influence over MINDS and who can work there. It is in your professional interest to show results. This case will decide your future within the military. Clear?” He slammed down the phone.

“I gather she got the message,” Miss Davies said, folding her arms and looking longingly at the enraged McFee. “She doesn’t know that for the specific memory to be unlocked, he needs to be holding the device. She has no clue how such an advanced technology works. So, does her report match our inside contact’s report?”

“Yes. It’s exactly as he said. I doubt this soft approach is going to work. She has limited time to try the safe methods of getting his memory back,” McFee said. “The Council has granted that in two weeks, we are to move to the next phase of this recovery plan.”

“Two weeks?”

“They are concerned the date of the apocalypse is approaching, so they’ve authorized us to use any method available to recover the memory. To do this, all I need is his head in an ice bucket.”

“There’s a high chance we’ll lose everything if we resort to less conventional methods.”

“If Darwin goes live then we lose everything anyway. Before we get to that point, I’ll sanction anything—even The Corer.”

C H A P T E R 28

Leaning forward, the technician stared into one of the many screens within the sleep lab monitoring room. They displayed a series of camera images and EEG traces coming from a small supercomputer. The inputs from the computer came from forty selectively placed electrodes, mounted on Ellis's head. They mapped out his different brain wave patterns and suggested when he was entering the crucial phase of REM sleep. They were capturing the data in the hope of identifying certain wave patterns suggestive that he was crossing dreams and memories. Carlo would then use this data in *The Mind Expander*.

The sleep chamber resembled a small prison cell, straight and narrow. It had nothing but a bed and six positioned cameras to monitor facial and body movements. Above the bed was a parallel port for data cable. Running from the data port to Ellis's head was a thick cable. The discomfort of the cable had made it hard for him to fall asleep, but eventually, through sheer exhaustion, he managed to drift away. Ellis's face filled the face-monitoring screen as he slowly drifted into REM sleep. The drugs flowing through his body helped sharpen the neural connections.

Ellis's dreams emerged from the darkness of his mind as a confused collage of separated images. The institute, the hospital, the desert, but as a thread through them all ran Elisha. She walked backward, just ahead of him, her eyes enticing him to follow her. Then she placed a hand into her pocket and pulled something out. "*Take it,*" she whispered provocatively, holding out her hand. Ellis tried to see what she was holding, but smoke enveloped her hand. Looking back from the hand, he saw she was no longer there. "*Take it,*" a voice said frantically to his right. Ellis was suddenly strapped back into his seat, sirens blaring around him,

his lungs filling with thick smoke. “*Take it!*” the voice screamed. Suddenly, Ellis lurched sideways with the sensation of violently falling as the chair shuddered. He wanted to scream as he fell from the bed and slammed into the floor. Immediately he was jarred from his dreams. Lying on the floor, he kicked wildly, pulling at his clothes as if they were burning. He stared wide-eyed as the technician ran in.

“It’s okay. Everything is okay. You just had a bad dream,” the technician said, holding Ellis’s shoulders. “It’s normal. Part of the effect of the drugs. Take some deep breaths and then I need you to write down quickly everything you remember. Write it in the dream journal, every detail.”

As he sat upright, the tremors subsided. Ellis was sweating, but back in control. He shook his head as a feeling of deep fear enveloped him. The dream had been so real, so vivid, as if it was a memory. “It’s coming back. Slowly, but something is coming,” Ellis said. Then his eyes widened. “I don’t know what it is, but...I think it’s something terrible.”

CHAPTER 29

From low Earth orbit, a Lockheed-Martin third generation “Keyhole-class” spy satellite tracked a small object moving north across Arizona. The object was heading toward the Grand Canyon. A controller in the National Reconnaissance Office headquarters in Virginia had, upon specific orders, positioned the top secret, new “movable” geostationary satellite above that location. The near perfect mirror of the optical telescope flexed electronically to remove any atmospheric distortion. The encrypted signal from the transmission dish passed directly below, casting a narrow beam of EMR. Once on Earth, a set of military receiving antennas relayed the signals through a digital converter into a bundle of fiber optic cables. These turned and ran deep within the ground before heading north to a relay station. This boosted the signal and finally delivered it to the monitoring complex. An operator sat inside a nuclear impact proof complex, deep within the ground, ensuring the satellite was tracking the correct object. Using the maximum real-time zoom of the satellite, he brought a single word into focus—Porsche.

Pulling back the image, the operator then patched the transmission to the field agent who had requested the track. The perfect video image of the Porsche Boxster appeared on a small LCD within the nondescript gray sedan of Mr Jones and Miss Davies. Clearly visible were Elisha and Ellis through the open roof, their hair blowing in the wind, as the car sped north.

“Looks like they’re heading to the Grand Canyon,” Miss Davies said, watching the images. “How very romantic.”

Mr Jones simply huffed as he drove the car. Babysitting on a weekend was not his idea of performing his duties for The Council. He had signed up for much

more productive work. "Very nice," he muttered. "I'm surprised you know the meaning of the word 'romance'."

Miss Davies smiled weakly. "Oh you'd be surprised. I have a very soft spot, right about here." She placed a finger over her heart and then drew it down her chest, across her stomach and between her legs. She laughed.

"I know who that soft spot is for," Jones said. "Trust me, you have no chance. General McFee is married."

"No, he's not," Davies said. "Everyone knows his wife's dead."

"He's married to his revenge. Since Gil ordered the assassination attempt that took her life by mistake, McFee has sworn to avenge her. That's why he's taking this case so personally."

"Wouldn't you?"

"If in anyway this man can bring him to Gil, then he'll make it happen. Why do you think he hasn't pulled the plug on him already?"

"Because he holds the secret. If the countdown has started, only this guy can stop the weapon."

"Bullshit and you know it," Jones said. "No fucking countdown has started. He wants this guy's memory back for his own personal reasons. If he gets the secret, then he gets control of a banned weapon. You know as well as me he has his own plans for Darwin."

"Maybe."

"He thinks he can turn it on them and wipe out The Enigma in one fell swoop. You know they're rumored to all be injected with a drop of Gil's blood as part of their initiation. McFee thinks if he can get Gil, then he gets the specific DNA trace that every member of The Enigma carries. He can then target them all at once with the weapon."

"The end of The Enigma."

"So that's the real reason he wants this guy alive. If he knows who and where Gil is, then he's of immense value to McFee."

"You think McFee's insane enough to fire the weapon with such a close DNA match to us?"

"He watched his wife's head get torn off by a piece of shrapnel and her brains splash across his face. The man will do anything to get The Enigma. That's why we're taking this joyride today. He wants to protect his asset no matter what. If they work out what McFee's really planning, then apocalypse or not, they'll ice their own guy."

* * * *

Following the gray sedan two miles behind was a similar nondescript government-issue car. At the wheel sat Abel, and in the passenger seat sat Caine. They were intercepting the “secure” transmission with a new system Dickson had recently delivered to them. It was known as simply “The Black Box,” and was capable of unscrambling any secure data transmission. With it, they were monitoring all the relayed data bursts coming out of, or going into, Luke. Once they had learned of the surveillance operation to follow Ellis, they simply tuned in.

“Now how come she gets a sweet Porsche?” Caine complained, tapping the screen, “while I get to drive around in something my grandfather would be ashamed to be seen in.”

Abel simply glanced across at him.

“Well, what would you care? You wouldn’t know a Porsche from a pickup,” Caine said, waving a hand at Abel. “Unless it fires point three eight rounds or blows people’s limbs off you wouldn’t know nothin’ about it. But if it has a trigger and a magazine full of bullets, then you would be able to tell me the name of the guy in the factory that made it.”

Abel smiled ever so slightly.

“Shit...” Caine moaned. “Old snake eyes, Mr Jones, at least gets to drive around with one of *the* finest looking women ever to come out of the academy. They may call her ‘Beauty and the Beast’, but, hell, it’s better than being stuck with just ‘the Beast’.” He waited for a reaction that never came from Abel. “Give me ten minutes with her and—Bam! I’d...”

“Yes?” Abel asked calmly.

“Well...I’d give her a little of the Caine magic.”

“I’d be picking you up from the morgue in the morning.”

“Oh yeah! But what...a...way...to...go!”

“Maybe you should keep your mind on the mission,” Abel suggested. “I’m sure you’ll get a chance to fire your weapon at her soon enough.”

“Well I’m just wondering what the hell I’m doing, working on the weekend, taking a drive up to the goddamned Grand Canyon,” Caine moaned.

“Dickson needs us to protect our boy,” Abel said.

Caine shook his head. “But if McFee’s team believe they’re protecting him from us, then why the hell do we need to be here?”

“Third party,” Abel said. “They’ve been getting multiple phone calls at the institute. Someone has tried several times to contact him. It’s not us and it’s not McFee.”

“Then who is it?”

“That’s what has Dickson a little spooked. He has no idea, but he’s very concerned. He suspects that outsiders may have some hint of what’s happening.”

“Outsiders?”

“He’s concerned certain people are getting close to the truth. Oberman is at it again and Dickson suspects he could be involved, and that could mean big shit for us all. What Dickson finds a little unnerving is that even on the lines to the institute, they can’t trace the caller.”

“And so?”

“And so, we’re taking this nice daytrip to ensure no one else gets to him.”

“So why risk letting him out of the institute?” Caine asked.

“Dickson and Elisha think that being in the desert may trigger his memory. They need to try anything to shake his brain free. They’re concerned this third party might spook McFee into doing something stupid. Time’s running out. So that’s why you’re here with me.”

“Damn. Still wish I was with Davies.”

* * * *

The silver Porsche ripped along the road as Elisha floored the accelerator. “I hope you enjoy today. I mean—I know it’s a long way and all, but they say the view is just so incredible. I hope you like what you see.”

“Do you always take your patients out on the weekend?” Ellis asked as they snaked north on the 180, heading toward the entrance station.

“Only the ones I’m intending to throw into the canyon,” she said, smiling. “I just thought you might like to get some air after being inside for so long. You did say you were getting stir-crazy again. I thought it might help to freshen up your mind.”

“I’m not sure if I have a mind anymore and I don’t think any amount of fresh air will ever help me. What with these drugs, the experiments and the delusional dreams I’m having, I think my mind is completely fried.”

Elisha looked across at him and then pulled the car into a parking place close to the canyon. “So what did you dream of last night?”

“Hey, I’m off work. It’s the weekend, remember,” Ellis said. “How about for a change you tell me what *you* dreamed of last night.”

Elisha's mind flashed back to her dream. She lay in a naked embrace with Ellis, making passionate love to him, their bodies covered in a film of erotic sweat. She mouthed, "I love you. I've always loved you," before crying against his shoulder.

"Nothing in particular," she lied, blushing slightly, unsure whether or not Ellis had noticed her reaction. She looked away.

An awkward moment passed before Ellis turned his head to take in the view. He then looked back at Elisha. "Seriously. Thanks for bringing me up here. I know you didn't have to. I know it's your weekend and you have better things to do than babysit the man with the vacant brain."

"It's my pleasure. I mean, I don't know anyone here yet and well...you're alone and in the institute. It's not much fun in there on the weekend."

"It's not much better in the week."

"I thought we could...well at least spend some time together," she said with a smile. "It's as much for my sanity as it is for yours. I never came to this place to be stuck inside all the time. Not when there are so many beautiful things to see here. Besides, I like spending time with you."

Ellis's emotions crashed. One voice told him he needed some human contact. It told him if he was to make it through this, he needed her. And already he felt he was falling under her spell. The other screamed to be wary of her. It reminded him that in some way, knowingly or not, she was working for the military and this made her dangerous.

"Let's go look at the view," Elisha said, pulling the car door open.

He gazed after her as she stepped from the car. His fists clenched as he watched her walk toward the edge of the parking area. Shaking his head, he followed her, joining her near the wooden platform at the edge of the canyon. For a second their hands brushed against each other.

"Sorry," Ellis said.

Elisha smiled at him. "It's okay. I don't mind."

Ellis looked away nervously. "It's beautiful, really beautiful. It almost takes my breath away."

* * * *

Half a mile down the road, Mr Jones pulled the car into another parking spot. Two other cars and a large old camper van sat on the far side. He surveyed them quickly—*They are of no significance.*

Bringing the car to a stop, Jones pulled out his handgun, ensuring it was loaded. He was ready to get to Ellis should anything untoward happen. McFee had ordered them to stay close to him—*Just in case The Enigma tries to pull the plug on him*. McFee had been on edge at the sudden, unannounced outing.

Looking across at the LCD of the satellite image, Jones asked for a broader view—to check whether any other parties were in the area. “This is ridiculous. Dickson allowing them out like this. What kind of stunt is he pulling?”

“I have no idea, but they seem cozy,” Miss Davies said. “Maybe Dickson thinks a romantic walk near the canyon will help him. But I guess you wouldn’t understand about romance either.”

Jones glanced up from the monitor. He seemed amused by Davies. “When you learn that romantic walks don’t have to end with a bloodbath and body parts in a black sack, then I’ll think about taking a walk with you.”

Miss Davies simply smiled and fluttered her long eyelashes. “I told you, I only have eyes for four stars.”

“Keep dreaming, sweet...” Jones looked up before he could finish. He watched as Caine and Abel’s car rounded the blind bend.

“Oh man. It’s them.” Caine said, glancing back, trying to slide down into his seat. “What the hell are they stopping there for? That ain’t normal operative protocol.”

“Shit! They’ve seen us,” Abel said, glancing across at the car. “Jones was looking right at us.”

“Do they know it’s us?”

“I think it’s highly likely,” Abel said sarcastically as he accelerated. “We’re not exactly that hard to see. A black dude and a white dude in suits, in a company issue gray car, up at the canyon on a Saturday morning. You don’t look too much like a fucking Japanese tourist, do you?”

“Well, I got narrow eyes if that helps.”

Immediately, Jones’s senses went into overload—*It’s a hit*, his mind concluded. *We need to stop them! Now!*

Before Miss Davies could react, Jones had slammed the car into drive and they were bolting forward. The tires scrambled for grip on the loose surface as a cloud of dust erupted into the air.

“What the hell?” she shouted as the LCD tumbled from her lap.

“Arm up! We have trouble!” Jones ordered, pulling out onto the highway, the tires screeching as the back end fishtailed wildly.

Looking in the mirror, Abel could see the sedan in pursuit. He pressed the accelerator hard as the car snaked along the road. “They’re on us! Get ready!”

Gripping the wheel tightly as his jaw locked, he cursed that they had been discovered through such a basic error.

As the two cars thundered down the road toward Ellis and Elisha, Davies hitched up her dress, ready for action. She reached onto the backseat and opened a large black canvas duffel bag. It held an assortment of assault weapons. Choosing a fully automatic M16A2, she slammed home a magazine and cocked the weapon. "Let's roll!"

Caine turned and looked through the rear window at the car gaining on them. He smiled as he saw Miss Davies climb half out of the window and perch herself on the door. She had her M16 at her shoulder, one eye closed to take aim. "Hot damn. What a woman," he said, pulling out his pair of Browning BDMs. "Now that gets me off!" Opening the window, he leaned out, aiming the weapons back toward the pursuing car.

The muzzle of the M16 erupted in flames as the point two three Remington rounds left the gun at nearly a thousand meters a second. The gun kicked hard into Davies's shoulder. She smiled widely, her pupils dilating as the rounds slammed into the back of Abel's car with a dull thud. "Oh yeah! That's better than sex!"

Ellis suddenly spun as he heard the approaching bangs, his pulse immediately racing. He paused for a second and then grabbed for Elisha's hand. His instincts and training were taking charge. "Gunfire! Let's go!"

"What?"

Dragging Elisha over to the Porsche, he dumped her into the passenger seat, slamming the door closed. Then he slid across the hood to reach the driver's side. Vaulting the door, he jumped into the seat, quickly reaching for the ignition key. "Buckle up!" he ordered as the engine burst into life.

The exchange of gunfire was approaching fast. He slammed the car into first and popped the clutch, making the car swerve across the parking area. Tourists stared at them in amazement. Hitting second gear, he floored the car out onto the road, just inches in front of Abel's car.

"Look!" cried Abel as the Porsche emerged before them. "Why the hell are *they* running? No one's shooting at them."

"Beats me," Caine said, leaning out the window, letting fly with a twin volley from the Brownings. "Just maybe, normal people run when there's gunfire." The bullets crashed into the hood of Jones's car. One slammed into the windshield, blasting a wide hole in it and passing close to Jones's head.

“That son of a bitch is using dum dums!” Davies screamed to Jones. “I like his style!” She let fly with the rest of the magazine until the gun stopped—empty. “I need more bullets! Pass me a mag!”

Ellis floored the accelerator, clipping the apex of each curve as they screamed down the road. Reaching across, he pushed down Elisha’s head when he heard the roar of gunfire directly behind them. The needle of the speedo pushed up past one hundred as they streaked ahead of the pursuing cars. The tires clawed for grip in the corners and then dragged the car down the straights. It hit one forty before Ellis braked hard for the next set of bends.

“And you said my driving was reckless!” Elisha shouted, digging her fingers into the seat. “Just don’t scratch it!”

Ellis didn’t flinch, his eyes full of purpose as he stared down the road. Already he was putting a vast distance between them and the following cars. But he had no intent of stopping until they were safely at the institute. He suspected there might be more than the two cars in pursuit—possible air support. His senses raced near overload.

Jones glanced down at the LCD and the image of the Porsche. Seeing it was now nearly a mile ahead of them, he slammed on the brakes, almost sending Miss Davies flying from the car. “They’re away,” he said, spinning the car in a dramatic pall of smoke. “They’re heading back toward the institute. We can desist.”

“What?” shouted Davies, pulling herself back into the car. “But I had them. We could have taken them down.”

“Those are not our orders for today,” Jones said, glancing at Davies, his eyes burning. “Seems McFee was right. He knew they might make a move on the subject. Looks certain they want to wipe him out before we can crack him. Jesus, they must be part of The Enigma. We need to tell McFee.”

“Well if you’d have let me nail them,” Davies said, slamming the smoking gun back into the bag, “then maybe we’d have found out if they really are part of The Enigma. Jesus! They may have led us straight to Gil.”

“Open road gun battles on the south side of the Grand Canyon with hundreds of tourists watching, are not the best way for us to remain under cover.”

Davies folded her arms and shook her head. “Then we take out all the tourists as well.”

“Hopefully none of them got us, or more importantly, the subject, on camera,” Jones said. “You should call McFee. Tell him what happened and tell him about the two men in the car. Then phone the authorities and remind them that no matter how many camper loving, happy snappy tourists report this—it never happened.”

“Well, I just hope that if they got me on camera, my ass didn’t look too big.”

* * * *

“Where the hell did everybody go?” Caine asked, looking back and then ahead.

“Seems they gave up the chase,” Abel said. “I guess we can say we fucked up today.”

“Huh?”

“We didn’t exactly stay covert, did we? It won’t take a rocket scientist to work out who we’re working for.”

“Oh.”

“I just hope to God they don’t make the link to Dickson. McFee may just be a little paranoid now about Ellis. Let’s hope he doesn’t do something rash.”

“Hey, but at least there’s no chance now of someone like Oberman getting to him,” Caine said, smiling. “I guess they’ll be driving their butts off to get back to the institute. Dickson shouldn’t be too pissed off.”

Abel looked across, shaking his head. “What can you see on the black box? Are they still in the area?”

Caine reached down into the foot well and pulled out the remains of the black box. The twisted hunk of plastic had a huge bullet hole through the screen, smoldering wires hung from the back. “I think it’s dead.”

“Oh, Dickson’s gonna just love our work today.”

* * * *

“Are you okay? Are you hit?” Ellis said as they sped down the highway.

“I’m fine. Just a little shaken,” Elisha said, trying a half smile. “A gun blazing car chase along the rim of the Grand Canyon wasn’t my idea of a nice day out.”

“Do you have any idea who they were?” Ellis asked, glancing sideways. He was sure Elisha would deny any knowledge.

“Like I said, we have a problem of very aggressive antivivisectionists against us. They must have followed us from the institute. I think they wanted to send us a message,” she said, her eyes dropping. “More importantly, are you okay? Did you get hit?”

Ellis shook his head slowly, knowing she was lying. “Not even close.” He guessed she would be under orders to trot out the usual cover story. Something deep in the back of his mind knew exactly the sounds of the weapons that had

been fired. He was sure a group of biothugs wouldn't be touting a military class automatic rifle and driving a government issue car.

He felt torn between his clashing feelings for her. He knew she was not who she claimed to be. He knew she was "one of them." No matter how hard he now tried to convince himself she was just an innocent person being used in this game, he knew he mustn't trust her. His instincts told him that eventually she would betray him. A storm of paranoia induced by the drugs and the tests surged through his mind. A deep schism in his personality was growing. It was as if a sinister alter ego was talking to him—*You will need to work this out alone.*

This incident changed everything. His mind raced out of control—fear, paranoia and desperation fueling the voice that was taking charge. Simply hoping to get his memory back was becoming futile. He knew now it was time to change the pace of his plans. This attempt on his life meant he had to move faster—he was falling deeper into greater danger. Fighting through the intense mental overload, he began to work on all possible exit strategies. He looked across at Elisha and fixed his attention on her. The voice talked to him, telling him that some plans meant she would live, while others required that she wouldn't—they would decide later.

C H A P T E R 30

They had returned safely to the institute and Ellis had left Elisha near her office. She had seemed more than anxious to get to her phone. His mind was churning like a high-speed propeller as he staggered toward his room. He knew he needed to somehow unwind before his drug charged mind exploded.

Climbing into the bath, Ellis slowly allowed himself to slip beneath the surface of the water. Nervous exhaustion and the stressful return in the car had brought him to the point of collapse. His mind had been racing all day, pondering why they had suddenly come after him and why they had opened fire. It made no sense. If they wanted to kill him, they could simply slip something into the blue gel caps. Repeatedly he replayed the events in his mind, searching for what was wrong. They'd given up far too easily and their return to the institute had been too simple.

He relaxed as the warm water washed over him. It soothed him as he slipped deeper, his mind beginning to unwind slowly. He was sure if he could stop thinking about the riddle for just a minute, the pieces would fall into place by themselves. For days now, not just today, his mind had been racing—turbo charged by the strange blue gel caps he was eating three times a day. Each time he wondered what loony chemical cocktail they would give him next. With the mild delusions and the growing voice of paranoia, he had considered stopping the treatment. But he knew that as time wore on there was a growing risk his amnesia would become permanent. They kept telling him that. Weighing all the risks, he decided to continue Dr Sienna's program, lost days to the drugs or not.

Finally relaxing, his mind began to blur between reality and fantasy—*Did I imagine the gunfire? Am I starting to have stronger paranoid delusions?*—but it had

been too vivid, surely not something created by the drugs. They were real cars and real automatic weapons. Again, something didn't fit in his mind. *Something was wrong today.* Pushing himself against the end of the tub, he plunged his head under the water. Lying there, holding his breath, he listened to the blood pulse in his ears, tapping out the steady rhythm of his heart.

Then he heard it.

He wasn't sure, but he thought he heard someone talking inside his room. Quickly, he emerged from the water and wiped the foam from his eyes.

"Hello?"

He waited, but no reply came. He strained to hear whether someone was there, moving in his room. The only noise was the slow dripping of the water from his face into the bath.

"Hello?" he called once more. "Is that you, Elisha?"

Again, no reply. Slowly he stood in the bath and wrapped a towel around himself as he stepped out. As the water dripped rhythmically onto the floor, he heard it again. It was just a fragment of conversation, a male voice and possibly a female voice. He stepped toward the bathroom door straining to hear, but he could just make out a few fragmented words.

"Hello?" he said, now agitated. "Is somebody there?"

Walking from the bathroom into the middle of his sitting room, he strained to hear. Once more he caught a fragment of conversation, a man and a woman speaking in hushed tones. Squinting, he tried to make some sense of the words, but they were too broken and too distant. He tried hard, but the voices were receding. Then, as he stood in the room, he had a bizarre sensation. He realized the voices might actually have been in his head. He placed a hand to his forehead as the room started to spin slowly—*What drugs are they giving me? What the hell are they doing to my mind?*

Steadying himself, he sat on the edge of the bed. Everything in his head was confused. They were two separate voices, two voices not talking to him but to each other...Two...

Suddenly the answer was clear. The nagging seed that had been growing in his mind all day had sprouted and grown, and now it was obvious.

They weren't shooting at us. They were shooting at each other!

In an instant he understood the gunshots had erupted *before* the cars had emerged from around the corner. When they had tried to escape, the car behind was so close they could easily have shot them. *But they didn't—because they were shooting back at the car behind.*

Ellis sat and placed his hands to his temples—*There are two groups—not one, two. And maybe they both need me alive. Why?*

Standing up, he quickly paced around the room. He now understood why it was so confusing, why it was so fragmented. He was stranded in the middle of two groups. *Both want what is in my head. Both are competing for my memories—Who are they? And who is Elisha working for? Does she even know there is another group?*

It was now more dangerous than he could have imagined earlier. Two warring factions meant things could get out of control fast. He suddenly thought of the device. Turning, he reached into his duffel bag, pulling it out. He turned it over in his hands—*What is this? What does it do?*

Suddenly the voices in his head became clearer, as if suddenly he'd cranked up the volume. Staggering backward, he crashed into the wardrobe as the voices echoed right inside his mind. He turned and dropped the device—paranoia surging through him. Grabbing wildly at his hair, he slumped into the corner of the room and his eyes bulged from his head. He screamed at the receding voices, “What the hell are you doing to my mind? What are you doing to me?”

CHAPTER 31

The lights in lab three slowly grew brighter, hurting Ellis's eyes. At the far side stood the control room, its one-way mirror glass staring out onto the lab. Suspended from the ceiling was the huge robotic arm, and there below the evil looking mind chair. Through the door of the control-room appeared Dr Hellhammer. As always, he wore his high collared buttoned white doctor's coat.

"Good morning," Hellhammer said, bowing his head slightly. "How are you tolerating my mind opening drugs? Are they helping much?"

"Helping may be the wrong word," Ellis said, his bag lined eyes burning into Hellhammer. "I'd define it more as—wreaking havoc. And I can't say the bouts of nausea and paranoia are so enjoyable. I can't think and I can't sleep."

"Well, I'm sorry you find them a little disagreeable," Hellhammer said. "There are bound to be unavoidable side effects. The most important thing is that we recover your lost memories. They should at least free your neurons and help with today's set of experiments."

Ellis stopped short of the chair and raised an eyebrow. "You know, I really don't like the way you keep referring to my therapies as—experiments. It always sounds a little...risky."

Hellhammer began to prepare the chair. He opened the Velcro on the wrist and ankle straps. "Oh don't be worried. We only destroy one or two minds in a week," he said straight-faced. "German humor."

I hope his science is better than his jokes, Ellis thought. "You know, the only reason I'm continuing is because the only person I can trust is myself. And I need him back to be able to do that."

“This reaction is normal, Ellis. Please try to not be too concerned. We’ll look after you and everything will return to normal once we stop the medication.”

“The sooner the better.”

“Now if you’d like to climb aboard we can see if we can’t free up your memory a little more this time. We also want your mind to recover. Carlo has programmed in a new matrix that you should find agreeable. Things will start to get better. You’re over the worst.”

Ellis reluctantly sat in the chair and allowed himself to be strapped into it. Glancing around at the prototypic looking contraption, he wondered if it went wrong, would it really melt his brain. He wasn’t sure, but he thought he saw a small grin on Hellhammer’s normally stern face as he scurried away into the control room. He couldn’t help but think he was running as if to get away from the huge robotic arm—today his paranoia had hit a peak.

“Good morning, Ellis,” Carlo’s voice said from the speakers in the lab. “Helly told me you’re a little worked up today. Sorry man, but it’s normal. I’ll do what I can to help with the machine.”

“You can try,” Ellis said.

“I just want you to sit back and relax as best you can. Let the machine do the work. We’re gonna run a secondary program based on the last data, to try to just stimulate the looped neurons. I hope we can bridge the synapses and free up some memory.”

“You know I didn’t enjoy it last time. What makes you think I’ll prefer it this time?”

“Just wait and see. It’ll be better.”

Suddenly the lab was plunged into darkness, except for the faintest of a red glow. The robotic arm groaned into life. With the sound of gears and motors, it began to position itself close to his head.

“Okay, close your eyes and relax,” Carlo said. “Just let your mind go.”

Ellis closed his eyes and suddenly there was a tremendous buzzing in his ears. His body tensed and then, as the robotic arm weaved around his head, bursts of electromagnetic radiation pierced his skull and bombarded his neurons, eliciting wild images in his mind. He felt lifted out of his body, his mind free from his brain. Consumed by some crazy light show, he spun through his thoughts. Strange visions of colors and lights, accompanied by vivid sounds, streamed through his consciousness. Some seemed random, but for an instant he heard a distorted voice—“Take it!”

Turning through the emptiness, he tried to follow the voice. He stretched out his hands to grasp the disembodied sound, but he was too slow. Before he could

find the voice, it tumbled down a spiraling vortex of light, escaping him. He had heard this voice before in his dreams.

Suddenly he had the feeling someone was in his head with him. Someone was watching him from the shadows of his own mind. Turning again, he strained to see who was there, hiding in the dark recesses. Then, just for a second, he could see a face in the shadows of his mind. It was too dim to discern properly. He ran toward it, but it twisted, stretched and fragmented before him into a million pieces.

“No!” Ellis screamed, lunging forward, desperate to see the crumbling face. He felt sure that if he could just see it, he would recognize it. He seemed to know who it was and its importance. Slowly, as the last fragments dissolved, a word drifted in his head, a word he didn’t understand—*Gil*.

He sensed the face would help him to know, help him to make the link. He concentrated his mind on bringing the fragments back together. Straining against the blackness, he gasped as he forced the memories to regroup. Reaching out a trembling hand, he found the face began to come back into focus, the pieces regrouping from the furthest corners of his darkened mind. Ellis’s heart pounded and his eyes grew wide—he was about to make the vital connection. He was about to understand. Then with a great rushing he was torn from the face, sucked back out of his memories. The machine stopped and his mind returned to the lab.

“No! I was close!” he screamed as his eyes opened. “Don’t stop! I’m there!”

Carlo’s disembodied voice came loud over the speaker. “Ellis. Sorry to stop mid-session, man, but you have an urgent phone call. I wouldn’t normally do this but...”

Ellis looked up in surprise, his gaze roving around the lab—*Who the hell is calling me? What could be so important?*

Hellhammer stepped from the control booth and walked over to the chair. Quickly he tugged on the heavy Velcro straps and freed Ellis. “From your EEG waves, I’d say we were starting to get somewhere,” Hellhammer said. “The loops were starting to slow; it’s a good sign. You mustn’t forget what you experienced, as you need to use it to return to that point. Please make the call brief. Carlo hasn’t closed the session and your mind is in a very unstable state. If it wasn’t her, we would never have stopped this.”

Ellis’s head buzzed, charged with static electricity. He fully understood what Hellhammer was saying: his mind felt as if it was a wide open door with a great wind blowing through it. Jumping from the chair, he almost ran to the small

control booth. He pulled open the door and stepped into the confined space. “Who is it?” he asked.

Carlo looked at him and held out the phone. “It’s Dr Sienna, but it’s a bad line, I could hardly hear her. She just said it was extremely urgent and that no matter what we were doing, she had to speak to you. Life and death.”

Ellis took the phone and then looked at Carlo. His intent was clear; this was a private call. Carlo immediately understood and smiled, giving a small salute as he ducked out of the room, closing the door behind him.

Ellis looked at the phone and then slowly pressed it to his ear. “Hello? Elisha, what’s wrong?”

“Is that Ellis Landis,” an unclear woman’s voice said through heavy static.

“Yes. Elisha, is that you? This line’s terrible. I can hardly hear you.”

There was a long pause and then the voice became suddenly clear. “Ellis. This isn’t Dr Sienna. I’m sorry, but it was the only way I could get to you. Please don’t hang up.”

“Then who the hell are you?”

“This is your sister.”

Ellis’s heart began to pound in his chest. “My sister?”

“Listen to me. I can’t tell you how I know, but you’re in extreme danger. I need to talk to you urgently. I have something...something very important to talk to you about.”

“But...”

“Please don’t get into a conversation now, as I’m sure this line is not secure. I’m going to send a taxi for you and the man driving will know where to bring you. Come now or don’t come at all.”

“But I don’t understand.”

“I can’t explain now. But you don’t have much time.”

* * * *

Ellis stormed from the control room, the door banging open. Carlo stared up from the chair, which he was checking. He watched as Ellis strode across the lab toward the door.

“Everything okay?” Carlo asked.

“Fine!” Ellis shouted, making to leave. “I’m leaving. I’ll be back later.”

“But we haven’t finished the program,” Hellhammer said. “You can’t leave now. Leaving things half open in your mind can be extremely dangerous, Mr Landis. Your brain’s activity is in a highly unstable state. You risk entering any

manner of delusional states. It's better you stay. We need to finish the program and close the loops."

"I'm afraid your toys will have to wait," Ellis said, walking to the door. "I need to meet Dr Sienna urgently. She said that if anyone asks, tell them I'm in a session in the machine."

"This is dangerous," Carlo urged.

"Life is dangerous," Ellis said, passing out through the door.

Hellhammer turned to Carlo, his face grave. "This is most irregular. We had strict orders to keep him in the program. The general needs to hear about this. Mr Landis needs to be controlled. With his mind open he could experience undesired side effects."

Ellis walked quickly up the corridor and leaned into Clarice's office. "I need out now. I have to go to town for a while."

Clarice looked up from her desk in surprise. "But does Dr Sienna know? It's not normal protocol."

Ellis smiled and gave a thumbs up. "Of course she knows. She knows everything. She just called me in the lab and told me to come urgently."

Clarice looked suspiciously at Ellis. "But it seems a little irregular. I mean...Dr Sienna didn't mention anything to me."

"Of course not," Ellis said, thinking quickly. "It's a military matter, very hush-hush. She did say it was urgent, matter of life and death, and that I should get there as soon as possible. You don't want to keep the good doctor waiting."

Clarice nodded slowly, eyeing Ellis. "Ah. I see. Okay, I'll call for our taxi guy. He normally should be here in twenty minutes."

"No, it's fine, Elisha's already arranged a cab for me," Ellis said. "I just need to get some things from my room. But don't worry; your friends will be able to keep an eye on me. I mean, look what I'm wearing." He tugged on the front of his bright orange T-shirt and winked.

Clarice smiled weakly and picked up the telephone to the guardhouse to call an escort. She paused. "This isn't right," she said under her breath, placing the receiver down. She knew what trouble she would be in if things went wrong, so she called another number.

C H A P T E R 32

Ellis slammed the door of the cab closed and leaned down to the window. “So where’s the place?” he asked, holding out a fifty-dollar bill.

“I was just told to bring you here to town and then to tell ya Oldtown Coffeehouse,” the driver said, taking the fifty. “You need a ride back? That’s a good fare for me.”

“Yeah. Give me your cell phone number. I’ll call you when I’m done.”

Ellis took the driver’s card and then watched as the cab pulled away. Looking around suspiciously, he presumed they had followed him. He knew he was under constant surveillance—he hoped his ploy would work. Walking quickly south, he traversed the street and then traversed back, constantly checking behind him. He wasn’t hard to spot in his almost fluorescent orange T-shirt. After walking around for ten minutes, he saw exactly what he was looking for, a large Kmart. He rushed over and quickly entered the store.

* * * *

“He’s in the Kmart,” Abel said, peering through his field glasses. “I guess he just wanted to come to town for some groceries.”

“He can pick me up some cold suds,” Caine said, picking at his nails. “Maybe the latest edition of Playboy. Hmm.”

“The caller told him the cabdriver would give him the address. It seems strange they should meet in a Kmart.”

“Hey, maybe she’s a checkout girl. Who the hell knows?” Caine sighed. “Anyhow. What I don’t get, is why they keep allowing him out of the fuckin’ lab. I

mean, it would be simpler for all of us if he just stayed in there. What security protocols do they run?”

“I told you, Dickson wants his boy to pick up the trail,” Abel said. “He’s hoping it’ll help him to remember something that’ll crack his memory. Let him out to roam around, find some clues.”

“Well I suppose it has one bonus for us,” Caine said. “It’s a way for us to pick up the collateral contacts. Our boy’s gonna lead us right to her today.”

“I hope so. The sooner we eliminate any third parties, the better,” Abel said, watching as Ellis walked around the store. “We need this contact. It’s essential we eliminate her as soon as possible. From her local accent, I guess it’s one of them. Once we identify her, we can get her friend. That should tie up most of the loose ends before Oberman has a chance to get any information from them.”

“Can you still see him?”

“He’s at the back of the store. Too hard to see, but he seems to be motionless—probably talking to his contact.” Abel watched for a minute longer. He could see the subject, still in the Kmart, his bright orange T-shirt clearly visible. “Okay, that’s enough. I’m moving closer to see who the fuck she is,” Abel said, stepping from the car.

“Hey. If he didn’t get me a beer, can you?”

“Just get on the phone and have someone pick up his cabdriver,” Abel said. “Find out where the meeting really is. Tell them to cut his fucking hands off if he won’t talk. I have a bad feeling.” He then set off across the road, stepping behind a white transit van. Stealthily he moved across to the entrance, glancing inside. In an instant he knew what his instincts had told him. Slipped over one of the cardboard offer boards near the back of the store was the bright orange T-shirt.

Ellis had escaped.

C H A P T E R 33

Ellis pushed open the door to the Oldtown Coffeehouse and stepped into the noise. Near the counter was an assortment of townsfolk. Some sat eating bagels, some drinking and reading, while others just gazed out of the windows at the passing world. Chatter and the clink of coffee cups filled the air.

He walked around, suspiciously looking across the faces for any sign of a trap. An old man stared up over his paper and then looked down again. Ellis tensed.

“Mornin’,” the man behind the bar said.

Ellis turned and nodded. “Good morning.” Stepping to the back of the room, he moved toward a set of booths situated down the left-hand side. Sitting in the third one, looking directly at him, was a woman. Her washed-out eyes stared at him from within a drawn face. She cupped a large steaming mug of coffee between her hands. Ellis thought she looked cheap with her peroxide hair in tight curls and her Lycra floral dress—her look matched the voice on the phone.

As Ellis walked over, her eyes never left him. He could feel her gaze roving over his body.

“You’re more handsome than I remembered,” she said as he approached.

Ellis looked around and then sat down opposite her. “That’s a strange thing for my sister to say,” he said. He started to wonder if this was another elaborate trap—just another trick to play with his mind. “So I guess you’re not my sister.”

“No. No I’m not your sister,” Shelly admitted. “But I had to get your attention. I couldn’t say who I was on the phone.”

Paranoia coursed through Ellis. He scanned around to see if there were agents watching. He looked at her angrily and grabbed her wrist roughly. “Enough games. Who the fuck are you? And what do you want?”

"I'm the one," she whispered. "I'm the one who hit you in the desert. I'm the one who dropped you at the hospital. My name is Shelly Truman."

Ellis stared at her in amazement. "Oh." He released her wrist.

"Hey, I am so sorry," she said genuinely. She pulled back her arm and rubbed her wrist. "Really I am. I just never saw you in the darkness. You just sort of appeared out of nowhere. I tried to stop but, you know...I'd got a little liquored up and I just didn't see you. I hope you can forgive me."

"Well, I seem to have survived," Ellis said. "The only real problem is you took my memory away."

"I know. I saw the appeal on the TV and that's when I thought I'd try to help. I saw your eyes and I just felt for you; you looked so lost. I couldn't stop thinking you must need some kinda help. So that's what I need to talk to you about."

"So do you know who I am?" Ellis asked hopefully. "Did you take my ID?"

Shelly shook her head slowly. "No. We found you as you were. No ID, no nothin'. You were absolutely naked." Her tongue betrayed what she was thinking as it moistened her lips. "I'm sorry, I can't tell you who you are."

"So why have you phoned me? Why did you want to meet me?"

She pulled up a small silver hip flask from under the table and poured brown liquor into her cup. After slipping the flask back into her pocket, she sipped her coffee and looked at him over the rim of the cup. "I've never done anything good in my life," she said. "After the appeal, I kinda got a little juiced. While I was lyin' on the floor I heard a voice in my head sayin' I had to do somethin'. I don't know if it was guilt or Jesus." She shrugged. "Hearin' a voice like that kinda makes you reflect on things."

"I know what you mean about hearing voices."

"So I thought I'd do anythin' I could. At first I just thought it might help by tellin' you where we found you. Maybe it might help you to find your family or somethin'. So, I sobered up and I called the hospital. It was at that point I understood."

Ellis frowned as he looked at her. "Understood what?"

"Understood you had a big problem," she said, looking around. "They just plain denied you were there, even after what the TV said. They said it'd been some mistake, a mix up. I just knew they were lyin' an' all; I could hear it in their voice. Thinkin' where we found you, and now them sayin' you were never there, I got suspicious." She looked around again and lowered her voice. "Call it feminine intuition or something like that. But, when we hit you in the desert, we saw some car lights. I think someone was looking for you." She paused. "With all this, I didn't believe what they was sayin' at the hospital, so I called in a few favors. I'm

not proud of it, but I've slept with enough doctors in that hospital to get the information I needed. Threatenin' I was about to reveal *all* to their wives was sure enough to get some information on you."

Ellis smirked.

"Eventually they said you was in a special room, kept out of the way. They said it was a secret as to where they was takin' you." She smiled, sitting back. "They ain't no secrets at pillow time. If you know what I mean."

Ellis nodded and raised an eyebrow.

"Some of my friends in the bars said something strange was goin' on out at the bases. They said a lot of military guys was nervous. They said they've been looking for something that's missing, something important. I put two and two together, and I figured it could be you the military is lookin' for."

"Maybe you figured right."

"There's all kinds of shit going on, but, as always, they seem to be covering things up. The latest I heard was that some doctors and nurses had also disappeared from the hospital."

Ellis gritted his teeth.

"They say they was the ones lookin' after you. I can't help but think you're in real danger." She sipped her coffee again. "I pulled on a lot of friends to get the number to that place where they said they were keeping you. I have a friend who worked on the phone network when they built the place and he gave me some direct numbers. He also told me how to call there without bein' found. He really shouldn't have, but he's a good man. I've been callin' there for a week. They denied that you were there, but I knew."

"Who denied I was there?" Ellis asked with someone already in mind.

"Some bitch of a doctor called Sienna. Talked to me like I was a piece of shit on her shoe."

Ellis closed his eyes and shook his head. "Elisha," he whispered under his breath.

"Anyhow, today it seems I got lucky. I thought that sayin' I was her, like I did, I would have a better chance to get to you."

"I guess so," Ellis said. "Thank you for making such an effort to find me. It's more than kind of you. I'm not sure why I deserve it."

"I think this world would be a much better place if more people looked out for each other. Especially if they knew someone was in danger."

"Yeah. It would be a much nicer world." Ellis paused "I know I'm in danger and maybe you are, too. Maybe after this meeting, in even more danger."

"I reckon so."

Ellis leaned forward, now hopeful of a lead. “Well, now I’m here, we should be brief. It won’t be long until they find me. Is there anything else you can tell me to help me?”

“There’s not much and maybe it won’t help a heap, but I can at least tell you exactly where we found you. That may help you somehow,” Shelly said, pulling out a small torn and folded yellow state map.

“You keep saying ‘we’. There was someone with you?”

“Friend of mine. I’d rather not drag her into this and she doesn’t know anything more than me.”

Ellis nodded.

Shelly unfolded the map and placed it on the table. Slowly she traced her finger across it. “Right here. Right near Frenchman Flats. You just ran out into the road, coming from this direction.”

Ellis stared at the map, memorizing the features and the coordinates. “It looks like it’s just miles of empty desert. What the hell was I doing out there?”

“Uh uh. Don’t be fooled. That piece of desert has some of those so-called secret bases out there. You know...the ones no one’s supposed to talk about but everyone does.”

“Bases.”

“We reckon it was something from one of them bases that was making all those flashes in the sky. I gotta say it unnerved us a bit, you know, as we could hear airplanes buzzin’ all night. Last thing you want is for them to fire some god-damned rocket at you by mistake.”

“No. That wouldn’t be good.”

“We’ve seen strange things before, but these lights were like...really weird. It seemed like you was comin’ from the direction where we saw the flashes. And that’s where the headlights came from, too.”

“When?” Ellis said, leaning forward. “When was this?”

“About an hour before we bumped into you there was the bright flashes out in the desert. Then when we saw from where you was comin’, I said to Jayne—that’s my friend—‘Damn, I bet this guy is from one of them bases.’ And with them keeping you so hush-hush, I’m positive you are.”

“Maybe.”

“There’s just a smack of secret service or military about this whole thing. I’ve seen it before when something happens out at one of the bases. The whole town feels it, just like now.” She sipped her coffee. “In fact, there’s been a very strange lookin’ guy askin’ a lot a questions lately.”

“Who?” Ellis asked abruptly.

“Huge guy with a big head, thick glasses and a beard. Kinda gives everyone the creeps. Everyone’s suspicious about what’s happenin’. No one wants to talk.”

“You could easily have stayed out of this; no one would have known.”

“Honey. I already have a ticket to hell for when I die. I feel that I got you in this mess with hitting your head and all. Maybe I’m trying to get a little credit back with the man upstairs. When you hear voices in your head, you should listen to ’em.” She smiled. “Also I just thought you were so damned cute.”

Ellis smiled back. “Is there anything else you can tell me?”

“No. It was all so damned fast. I just sort of thought that tellin’ you where we found you would maybe help you to remember. Maybe you can at least take a drive out there and see if you can find your clothes or maybe your ID.” She traced her finger across the map again. “As I said, the only place I can imagine you were coming from was one of the army bases. But God alone knows why they stripped you and only he knows why they’re not tellin’ you somethin’.”

Looking around, Ellis reached into his pocket. “Was I carrying this when you hit me?”

“Yeah. It gave me the creeps. What is it?”

“That I also don’t know.”

Shelly simply nodded. “If I was you, I’d try to find out someone who can help you to figure out what that is. Just be careful. I had a friend many years ago who found a strange lump of metal out on the flats. They say it had all kinds of strange picture writing on it.”

“Hieroglyphs?”

Shelly shrugged. “Some suggested he’d found parts of a space ship. The curious thing was that the metal just vanished—along with him. He was never seen again.” She pointed at the device. “Maybe someone out in the desert is missing this? Just be careful who you ask about it. That big guy, he was askin’ a lot of questions about if anyone had seen any pieces of metal, anything with strange writing on it. Maybe you and him have got something in common.”

Ellis raised his eyebrows and placed the device back into his pocket. “Thank you. I’m glad you made the effort to find me. I’m sure it’ll help. So, thanks. I think you got your credit back. I guess now I need to find this big guy. He seems to be looking for the same things as me. Maybe he knows what this is.”

“I’m glad I found you. Maybe when you get this whole mess sorted out and things cool down, you might like to look me up and buy me a drink. Just cruise by any of the bars; you’ll find me.”

“Maybe a nice lady like you shouldn’t drink so much,” Ellis said. “Maybe I’ll buy you dinner instead.”

Smiling, she reached across the table and held his wrist. “You just need to promise me one thing, honey,” she said, standing from the table. “Don’t you tell anyone about this little meeting. I may not be the brightest girl in town, but I do know enough about these things to know *they* don’t like witnesses. My suggestion is your amnesia stretches a little further to include me, until this is over.” Slowly she smiled again. “I hope you find out who you are, and I hope it’s someone you want to be.”

Ellis watched as she slipped on a pair of dark glasses, walked from the table, across the coffeehouse and out through the door. She never looked back.

He felt at least now he had a starting point. Somewhere he could begin his search. For a moment, he felt a flash of hope. He waited and then walked out of the coffeehouse himself. Crossing the street, he ducked down a small alleyway heading back north—*I’ll meet the cab far away from here.*

Walking up the alley, he noticed a large bundle of rags heaped on the ground. Pieces of cardboard lay scattered near them. In front of the rags stood a small cup, and next to it a hand drawn sign with “The end is nigh” scrawled on it. Something caught his eye. Beneath the words were small, almost indiscernible marks. Leaning closer to look, he could see they were hieroglyphs. He read them and noted they too spelled out “The end is nigh.” Suddenly he was startled by a rough voice coming from the rags.

“Spare some change, friend?”

Ellis felt a strong desire to walk on, but something had been strange in the voice. Looking closer at the rags, he could see an old tramp lying buried within them. His face was worn and dirty, reddened from the elements. His hair was long and matted, but above all, a great sadness filled his eyes. Ellis slipped his hand into his pocket and pulled out a few dollars. Placing them in the cup, he could see a smile spread across the old man’s face.

“Do you realize the end is nigh?” the old man said.

Ellis shot backward with shock, his head spinning wildly. The old man had spoken—without moving his lips.

“You can hear me?” the old man asked with his mouth still closed.

Ellis suddenly realized that when taking the money from his pocket, he had also pulled out the device. He immediately looked at it as it tingled in his hand. His heart leapt in his chest and he gasped for breath.

The tramp stared at the device and then looked up, horrified. “My God. It’s you. You have the device.” The words of the tramp echoed in Ellis’s head.

Ellis staggered backward, staring at the tramp. “What’s happening?” he gasped. Then, as fear surged through his body, he turned and fled down the alley, trying to escape the haunting voice. It freaked him out as it drifted into his head.

“Yes. You know the end is nigh! You know! We are The Enigma!”

Running, his mind flashed to the drugs they had given him at the institute and then to the experiment that morning. Hellhammer’s words jumped at him—the warning that they hadn’t finished the experiment, that his mind was unstable, that they hadn’t closed it. Finally, his thoughts returned to the device—*What is it? What the hell is this thing?*

Charging out of control along the alley, his heart fought to escape from his chest. He banged like a maniac off the walls, near the point of complete breakdown. As the entire world lurched sideways, he crashed to the street with his head spinning. His eyes widened as he gazed at the device, which glowed brightly in his hand.—*What the fuck are they doing to my mind? What the fuck do they want from me? Someone please help me! For God’s sake, help me!*

His screams echoed down the alley.

CHAPTER 34

Shelly slammed the door of the gold Pontiac and slumped into the seat. Reaching across to the glove box, she pulled out 'old faithful', a small leather bound hip flask loaded with vodka. She took a long hit and closed her eyes, savoring the burning in her throat. "Why the hell did you track him down?" she whispered, placing the flask back. "What goddamned fool thing are you doing?"

Shaking her head, she started the car, glancing in the rearview mirror. It was then she saw him. Leaning casually against a wall, some way back, stood a man in a black suit, white shirt and black tie. On his face he wore a pair of mirrored sunglasses. Shelly instantly knew what he was and what it meant. "Oh God!"

She started to tremble, trying to pull the car away from the curb casually and drive down the street. Nervously glancing back, she could see a gray sedan arrive next to the agent. The door opened and the agent slid into the car—*Is he reaching in his jacket for something? A gun?*

Turning right, she began to add some speed, her heart now pounding in her chest. She wasn't sure which way to go—*Home? Jayne? The police?*

She knew all these choices were futile. The first choice would only lead them straight to her family and endanger her children—she would never do that. The second choice would simply serve to tell them who Jayne was—she would be selling out her friend. She considered for a moment the police, but her heart knew the answer. The men following her probably already had control over the police. They would simply hand her over to these guys and that, too, could only mean one thing—her death. Mr Ellis Landis was obviously meant to stay a secret and they intended to keep him that way. Her only hope was to outrun them and then hopefully disappear—forever.

She knew the desert roads south of there better than anyone. She decided she would lose them out there and then double back to head north—they'd never keep up.

Caine drove the car, his eyes locked onto the gold Pontiac some way ahead. The outcome was certain—they would get her. She could try to run, but they had enough access to advanced technology to track her down wherever she went. She was a danger to their plan, she had contacted the subject and she could even know something of the secret, something about the device. He looked across at Abel who was checking his arsenal of weapons. He smiled as the hunt for their quarry started.

Shelly turned off the ninety-three and cruised down onto Stockton Hill Road, gently adding a little more speed, just enough without alerting her pursuers. She would take them out past Canyon Road and then lose them out there; there were plenty of blind bends and switchback roads. Nervous sweat soaked her back and a craving for booze clambered over her body, induced by the terror. Reaching for the small hip flask, she took another blast. She had to escape and the booze would keep her focused. Eventually she snaked out onto Canyon Road and then hammered the accelerator, the engine of the Pontiac growling with torque. The car blasted down the road half out of control, kicking dirt into the air.

"This is more like it!" Caine said as Abel started to hang out through the car window. "Nail the bitch!"

Shelly struggled to keep the car on the road. The combination of booze and terror made her driving erratic. The car swerved across the white central line as she clipped each curve in the road. Suddenly there was a crisp bang from somewhere behind her, making her flinch. Glancing in the mirror, she could see the agent hanging from the window of his car. He held his arms high, aiming a large pistol at her. She saw the flash and then the rear window imploded with a terrifying bang, showering her with splinters of glass. She screamed, yanking on the wheel, trying desperately to make the car weave.

There was another bang and a loud thud next to her as the back of the passenger seat exploded, foam erupting into the car. *Oh my God, I'm going to die*, she thought, flooring the pedal. She glanced down into the foot well, and there, lying in shards, was her hip flask. "You fuckers!" she screamed, flying along Canyon Road, praying for another vehicle—*someone—anyone*. She hoped that if there were witnesses she would be safe, that they wouldn't dare kill her in daylight. Then through tear-streaked eyes she saw a small white Dodge trundling some way ahead of her. She was closing fast on what seemed her only hope of staying alive. She wiped the back of her arm across her weeping nose and made for the

small car. Flashing her headlights and thumping her horn she tried to attract attention. "Hey! Hey!" she screamed out the window.

There was another bang, a dull thump and with the sound of flopping rubber, the car started to lurch out of control. The tire was hit. In a terrified panic, she tried to gain control, but the speed was too great. The Pontiac screeched sideways off the road and then the wheels hit a large rock, launching the car upward. Screaming, her body went weightless, her limbs flailing against the roof and then she gasped. The gold Pontiac flipped and slammed down hard on its roof with a mighty crash. Then it rolled over and over, eventually coming to rest upside-down in a cloud of dust.

After a moment of unconsciousness, Shelly awoke, dazed, confused and in unbelievable pain. Lying in the wreck of the car, she was jammed at an awkward angle against the roof. As her tongue passed around her blood filled mouth, she could feel that many of her teeth were either shattered or missing. Her nose was filled with a mixture of blood, dust and mucus. A massive swelling sealed her right eye. Slowly she became aware of a dull aching in her right arm. Looking down at the elbow, she could see that the force of the impact had bent it completely backward, leaving it at a sickening angle. Waves of nausea passed over her.

"Are you okay?" a voice said through the broken side window. "Are you alive?" The face of an old man peered into the wreckage. He was stooping—the driver of the old Dodge. He pulled feebly at the twisted metal of the door, but it wouldn't budge. "Don't move. Just try to stay still and I'll go get help."

Gazing back through the misted vision of her left eye, she saw the man and her mind became clearer. She was in danger. She remembered that two government agents had shot her off the road. She remembered Ellis and then she thought of the device. At once her terror returned as she saw two shadows dressed in black approaching behind the old man. Desperately she tried to warn him, to tell him to run, but all that emerged past her shattered jaw was a moan. She pleaded with her one open eye, but death had arrived.

A hand holding a large commando knife passed around the old man's throat and in one swift movement slit his neck open. With a look of bemused pain across his face, he fell to the side of the car. After a few seconds of gurgled bleeding, he stopped twitching.

Abel bent down and peered into the car. "You appear to be hurt, my dear. I think you've been drinking and driving," he said, reaching in and pulling on her shattered elbow, eliciting a muted moan from Shelly. "You need to be more careful. You could get hurt."

“Fuck you!” she mumbled, barely audible as blood trickled across her lips. “Fuck you. I won’t tell you anything.”

Abel raised an eyebrow. “But we know everything already. There’s nothing we need you to tell us; in fact it’s quite the opposite. The idea is that we don’t want you...or your friend...to tell anything to anyone else. I think you’ve talked enough already.”

Shelly realized that from the license plate they surely knew who she was and it wouldn’t be long until they found out about Jayne. Of course they knew *two* women had dumped Ellis at the KRMC that fateful night. A few inquiries in any of the local bars and they’d be able to get to Jayne. She moaned, wanting to plead for Jayne’s life.

Abel pulled out the shattered remains of the hip flask and shook it. “Well, you know this stuff is bad for your health. Maybe now is as good a time as any to quit drinking. I would also tell you now is a good time to quit smoking but...” Shaking his head, Abel glanced toward the back of the car to where Caine was playing with some small black tubes. “Cut the fuel lines. It’s time for a barbecue.” Abel turned back to Shelly. “I’m so sorry, Mrs Truman, really I am. But I hear that burning alive is a terrible way to go. They say it is one of the worst. I’m not sure if it’s the crackling feeling as your skin shrivels away or the sensation of feeling your own eyes boil.”

Shelly’s body trembled as she tried to move. “Shoot me, you bastard!” she spat. “Fucking shoot me! Don’t burn me! Oh God, please don’t burn me!”

“I’m sorry, but with cost cuts at the agency, we need to conserve bullets. You have no idea how expensive they are,” Abel said with a wry smile. Standing up, he walked away from the car, straightening his tie. “Oh and don’t worry about your friend. We’ll take good care of her.”

Shelly in her worst nightmares in the burning car would never imagine what would happen to Jayne. They would track her down and take her to the base on Frenchman Flats. There they would put her into “The Processor”—a giant industrial stainless steel vessel with a three-foot, high-speed rotating blade at the bottom. In essence, it was a giant industrial blender. The body would be placed in, feet first, and then the machine half filled with a highly caustic alkaline solution. They would blend the whole mixture for twenty-four hours until it contained nothing more than a thick, glue like substance. They would then drain the residue and pour it into the river. No evidence—no trace.

Protocol would be to put the body in dead, but Abel didn’t always follow protocol. Shelly, broken and burning, would still never envisage her friend’s screams

as the alkaline ate into her skin. Then the brief moments of agony as the great blade consumed her, feet first.

Shelly watched as the two agents slowly walked away from the car. She knew they had sealed her fate. She could hear the crackling of flames and with it could feel intense heat coming through the soles of her shoes. She tried to wriggle free, screaming as her body shuddered in utter terror like some wounded animal trying to pull itself free from a trap. The flames traveled quickly through the car, blistering the gold paint and creating a thick, black, choking smoke. As the heat started to blister the bottom of her legs, she prayed for a swift death to save her from the agony. Then, as the fuel tank exploded, Shelly's prayers were answered.

"One down. Let's go find us the other one," Caine said, dusting down his jacket and slipping back into the sedan.

"I need to eat first," Abel said. "This has been a busy morning."

"So where do you prefer, McDonald's or Burger King?"

"After this, I'd like flame grilled," Abel said.

C H A P T E R 35

Elisha burst through the door into Ellis's apartment, her face flushed with rage. "Just where the hell have you been?" she screamed. "We've been worried about you!"

"You lied to me!" Ellis said, pointing a condemning finger at her. "You never told me about the phone calls!"

Elisha stopped, her mouth dropping open. "What phone calls? What...are you talking about?"

Ellis stormed around the apartment and kicked the door shut. "Don't do this! Just...don't make this worse!" he shouted, fixing his eyes on her. "You goddamned well know what phone calls! The ones you've been keeping from me!"

"Part of my job here is to protect you," Elisha said, trying to calm him down. "We get several crank calls a day. You have to understand there is a protocol."

Ellis stopped and stared at her and then slowly shook his head. "Protocol? What protocol? Are you telling me that if my sister tries to contact me then I shouldn't know about it? What the hell kind of protocol is that?"

Elisha folded her arms defensively and swallowed. "You have to understand we checked her out and we knew she wasn't your sister. We've had many calls here for you. We get everything from people claiming to be relatives to people saying they're Elvis. It's normal, and my job, as your doctor, is to protect you from that."

Ellis pressed his face against hers and their noses touched. "I'll decide who I need goddamned protection from! Is that clear?"

Elisha stared back, tears welling in her eyes. "Obviously," she said quietly. "Ellis. I..."

“Just go!” Ellis said, turning away from her. “Just get the hell out of my room and the hell out of my head! You lied to me. You betrayed me.”

She stood behind him, her head hanging. “You have to know I would never betray *you*. Never. I just have...I’m protecting *you*. You have to believe me.” She reached out to his shoulder but he pulled away. “There are some things I just can’t tell you. Things that would make it all clear, but if I tell you...”

“What? What if you tell me?”

“No. I’d never put you at risk. Never. I just want you to remember who you are, and then you’ll understand. More than anyone, I want you to remember who you are, remember what this is about. I’m here to help.” She reached into her pocket. “I’ll leave your pills on the table.”

“I’ve swallowed enough of your pills and enough of your lies! It’s finished!”

“I’m trying to help you. More than you can know.”

Ellis turned. “Then if you want to help me, just let me go. That woman today may not have been my sister, but she has given me something you and all these so called doctors have not.”

Elisha looked at him, waiting for the answer.

“It’s hope, Elisha. Hope,” Ellis said. “I have a starting point now and from there I’m going to discover the truth about myself. I at least know where the accident was and that helps me.” Ellis paused, his mind swimming in confusion over his feelings for Elisha. “Maybe these pills are making me go crazy. For a few minutes I started to think you were on my side. I started to think something was happening between us...But I guess I was wrong. So please, Doctor, just get out of my room.”

Elisha turned to the door and stepped halfway through before looking back. “The truth is not always what we think. It’s just a point of view.” She paused. “And like any view, it depends from where you’re looking. Beware of what they tell you. Things are not what they seem.” She stepped out of the room and the door closed with a click.

Picking up the pills, Ellis threw them onto the floor and stepped over to the small desk in the corner of his room. He had no more time to waste. Knowing where and when they had hit him was a vital piece of the picture. It was like the corner of a jigsaw puzzle. He would now need to find the rest of the pieces and put them in place.

Moving to the far side of the room, he pushed the power button to the PC and it hummed into life. The wireless LAN hooked straight into the MINDS system—a one hundred-meg-per-second pipe to the outside world. He knew using

their ‘net was risky, but he also knew his time was limited—it was a risk worth taking.

In minutes, he was into Google and his search-strings were loaded. His starting point would be Frenchman Flats, air bases or desert, on the night of his accident. From there he would search for any news articles, news threads or groups that would help him understand what was happening on that date. He knew enough to guess that underground anarchistic groups posted a great deal of information about US facilities on the ‘net. His confidence was high.

In less than a second over eight thousand results were returned. He hoped what he needed would be in the top few hundred—he was not disappointed. On the screen before him, something jumped out and he knew he had a lead. It was a press article—*Light show over secret air base—by Max Oberman*. Looking at the name, for some unknown reason he sensed he knew it. He guessed he had found the start of the trail. He clicked on the hyperlink and the article appeared. In the top left corner of the page was a headshot of Max Oberman. He was exactly as Shelly had described the man who had been asking questions—*Huge guy with a big head, thick glasses and a beard...* Ellis had found the right man.

For hours he toiled to learn what he needed to know about Mr Oberman and most importantly how to contact him. Max Oberman was indeed a strange man with what seemed to be many secrets. The strangest thing was, it appeared, he no longer wanted to be found.

C H A P T E R 36

Ellis awoke slumped over the computer keyboard, the last files on Oberman still on the screen. Strange files full of alien technology and Egyptology. He was pleased he had enough information now to contact him and probably entice him into a meeting. The phone number he had discovered was buried so deep in an archive of chat files he suspected it might be long changed. It was his only hope of a contact, however. Closing down the computer, he headed to Elisha's office.

"I need to go out again. Are you going to stop me?" Ellis asked, peering around the door.

Elisha looked at him from behind her desk. "You haven't slept much, have you? Your face is drawn."

"Are you going to stop me?"

"I told you, you're not a prisoner here."

"You said last night that I need to trust you," Ellis said. "Well, you also need to trust me. I think if I can understand the events of the night of my accident, then I can start to unravel my entire memory. It's like pulling a thread from a wool sweater. I have a thread and now I'm asking you to let me start pulling on it."

Elisha stood from her desk and walked to Ellis. "It's not that simple. You need to know you're in real danger. The further you go from me and the more people you contact the greater that danger becomes."

"I already know," Ellis said.

Elisha grabbed his arm. "No, you don't. You think you do, but it runs deeper than you can imagine. There are things transpiring around you that you could never imagine."

Ellis frowned deeply.

“If you leave here, then you go on your own. You lose whatever protection we can afford you. Before I let you out, I need to know you are fully aware of that, and you fully accept your decision. I won’t be able to help you.”

Ellis nodded. “I’ve always known I’ve been on my own.”

“You’re not on your own,” Elisha said, stepping closer to him. Her eyes filled with warmth as she gazed into his. She moved to kiss him. “You’re not alone, you have to know this.”

Ellis pushed back, shaking his head. “No. Don’t do this. I can’t take any more lies. I can’t have any more confusion in my mind. All of this—you—this place, I know it’s a charade.”

Elisha stepped back, her lip trembling. “I wish you could remember, just for a moment, and then you’d understand me. You’d understand how I’m protecting *you*.”

“I have no more time. That’s all I know. So please, if you do care for me, let me leave. Let me find out who I am, then maybe *he* can decide if he trusts you.”

“I know if I say no you’ll leave anyway. I want you to understand I’m not against you.” Turning, she picked up the phone on her desk. “Clarice. Please get a taxi for Mr Landis. It appears he wishes to leave.” She turned back to plead with him, but her office was already empty. She placed down the phone and sat with her head in her arms.

After some minutes her phone rang. “Yes,” she said.

“This is McFee! What the hell is going on there?”

Elisha paused for a second. “I’m sorry, I don’t understand what you mean.”

“For one, you have not delivered any results on this goddamned patient. As far as my report says, his mind is locked down tighter than a sub hatch in an emergency dive. Second, how come I have my men running all over Arizona, following the subject on what I can only describe as daytrips?”

“I…”

“Maybe I haven’t made it clear enough to you, Doctor! So, let me say it in simple words. He is property of the United States Air Force. And he stays locked in that fucking facility like a lab rat until he starts to remember things. Period! Now, have you got that in your head?”

Elisha tried to interject again but McFee was on a roll.

“Now, for your information, this man has also been interacting with civilians. God knows what information he’s leaking to them. So, as I said, it is now ending, Dr Sienna. This is not the fucking YMCA. You have just three more days to get me the results or hand over the prisoner and my team will get what they need

from him. I suggest you and the rest of the headshrinkers there up the dose on whatever drugs you're giving him. If I find him outside once more, I'll bring him back in garbage bags. Have I made myself clear?"

"Patently," Elisha answered. "You can be assured nothing like this will happen again. We are close to..." The phone was dead.

Dropping it, she rushed out into the corridor. The elevator was at ground level—Ellis was gone.

C H A P T E R 37

Sitting in the back of the taxicab, Ellis was sure that, as always, they would follow him from the base. He was almost certain they had bugged the cab and a team of men would be at his destination before he got there. This time he had a surprise for them: he would not be heading to town. “Nearest phone box,” Ellis said.

“What?” the driver asked. “I’m not sure I can do that.”

“Take me to the nearest phone box. Nowhere near town and do it now. Unless you want me to reach into the front and rip your head off. I’m a dangerous mental patient. Didn’t they tell you that?”

“There’s one about two miles up the road. Is that okay?”

“Perfect,” Ellis said. He guessed that even with this piece of knowledge the forces against him would struggle to get a trace on the line. He knew as long as he was fast, he could arrange a secure meeting with Mr Oberman.

As the cab covered the short distance to the payphone, Ellis fought to clear Elisha from his mind. The drugs made his thinking cloudy. *What do I feel for her?*—both trust and suspicion. *What does she mean to me? What is she trying to tell me? Maybe she did know Shelly wasn’t my sister. Maybe she is trying to protect me.*

In a few minutes the cab pulled up next to a lonely phone box. “Here it is,” the cabdriver said, looking around nervously. “Just to be clear though, you made me come here,” he added and then swallowed.

Ellis shook his head and stepped from the car. He looked back at the cabdriver. “Don’t go anywhere. We haven’t finished yet.”

He walked across to the phone and grabbed it. Quickly he dialed the number he had memorized. Ellis had many things in his head he had gleaned from

researching Max Oberman. He knew these would be more than enough to broker a meeting.

C H A P T E R 38

The shrill ring of the 1940's style black Bakelite phone split the silence. A fat hand reached across the cluttered desk and moved a map out of the way. He waited for the third ring and then slowly lifted the handset from the cradle, pushing the round earpiece to his right ear. He didn't speak.

"Mr Oberman?"

The man sat in silence, his eyes narrowing behind his thick, square, bifocals. Years of deceit had educated him to give nothing away.

"Mr Oberman? Is that you?"

Still he sat in silence, waiting for the caller to give some information. A moment passed.

"Mr Oberman, I need to talk to you. It's urgent."

Finally he knew the caller would give nothing away himself and he was not about to admit this little known number belonged to him. "You have the wrong number." He prepared to place the phone back on the cradle.

"Wait! Then I may have some right numbers for you."

The big man pulled the phone back to his ear. "I'm listening."

"One fifteen south forty-seven point thirty west, thirty-seven south sixteen point thirty north. Do you know where that is?"

The man turned from his phone and reached across to his right. Covering the wall above his desk was a huge map of the USA. Different colored pins dotted it, pinpointing top secret military installations. His finger traced the coordinates and ended on a red pin.

"And," the fat man said calmly, "that's common knowledge."

The voice on the phone continued, “One fifteen south fifty-one point thirty west, thirty-seven south oh-seven point thirty north.”

Again the man’s finger traced across the map and reached another red pin. “You’re not giving me anything of importance.”

The voice on the phone spoke slowly again, “Okay. Then how about this? One thirteen point eight west, thirty-five north.”

The man’s finger moved to another portion of the map. It slowly moved over the coordinates, and this time came to rest on the only black pin. His eyes grew wide.

“Do I have your attention now?” the man on the phone asked before pausing. “So, let me ask again—*Is this Max Oberman?*”

Oberman pulled the glasses from his fat face, ran a hand over his bulbous eyes and down into his graying beard. “Are you on a secure line?”

“I’m on a payphone.”

“Never call me again from that number; it’s not secure.” Max paused for effect. “However, a payphone should be hard to trace if we’re quick. What do you want?”

“To meet, as soon as possible.”

“I don’t normally do meetings,” Max said.

“I have something from those coordinates, something that may interest you greatly.” He paused. “Time’s running out; they’ll make the trace. Do we meet or not?”

“Where are you?”

“Near Kingman, Arizona.”

“Kingman, interesting. Meet me in the park, on the benches near the west entrance, at noon today. Come alone and ensure you’re not followed. If I get any sign you work for them, then you’ll never find me again. Is that clear?”

“Which park? There’s more than one.”

“For a man who likes secrets, it should be obvious.” Again Max paused for effect. “The one just up from Secret Pass.”

“Okay.”

“Do you have a name?”

“Ellis. Ellis Landis.”

“Come alone, Mr Landis. No tricks.”

With that, Max hung up the phone and looked up at the map to the three points the man had signaled. All were important, but the black pin was crucial—it was the one near the base on Frenchman Flats.

Does this man possess the missing information I need? Has he possibly found something from the crash?

Pushing back on his chair, he moved to the far side of his desk. Reaching down, he opened the bottom drawer and from among the mass of papers pulled out a small silver Remington handgun. He would meet him, but he would bring along a little insurance.

CHAPTER 39

Abel kept the nondescript sedan some way back from the yellow Oldsmobile taxi they were following. Inside sat their target. His unannounced trip from the institute had put Dickson on edge and they had been told to follow. He was now sure the subject would be looking for outside help from Oberman.

Dickson had clearly ordered them to bring him back and erase any contacts with whom he met. A shot of G6-Serum would ensure he wouldn't remember his little outing. Then he would be safely back on the program—they were now down to three days.

Abel gripped the wheel firmly as Caine viewed the subject through a pair of 10 X zoom Leica field glasses. They turned in on the I-93 and followed the cab to Fourth Street, where it made a sudden right turn.

"Subject moving north," Caine whispered, "and slowing down to turn left onto East Beal Street. Proceed with caution or you're gonna blow this."

"I am proceeding with caution," snarled Abel. "The only thing I'll blow one day are your brains out of the back of your tiny little skull."

"Okay, it's cool," Caine said, raising his hand. "I just don't want him to spot us and blow the whole operation like we did up at the canyon. If he makes us, then we end up having to chase him. And if I end up running in this heavy suit, then I sweat. And this is a new three hundred dollar shirt—sweating is not an option today."

"You get given shirts for free. They come with the job. What the hell do you waste your money on shirts that look exactly the same for?"

Caine sighed, shaking his head. "White dudes. You wouldn't know a Gucci from an Armani and here's me with a handmade Paul Smith original."

“The only Smith that interests me is the one with Wesson.” Abel suddenly noticed the taxi slowing. “Hey, it looks like he’s pulling over. We’re close enough for you to keep a close watch with your gold plated, diamond encrusted binoculars. Are they Gucci, too?”

Caine looked at the regular binoculars. “What the hell are you talking about? These ain’t gold with diamonds.”

“Well I am surprised, Mr Bling. I would have thought standard issue field glasses wouldn’t be hip enough for you.”

“You a grade-A fool,” Caine said, staring into the binoculars. “Dickson could have picked some fine young hard bodied honey straight from the academy. We coulda had romantic evenings, a little Dom Perignon in some fine restaurant. But no, they put in with me Mr Death, who wouldn’t know style if it came and shot him in the ass.”

The cab suddenly pulled to the right curb and a moment later the rear door opened. Ellis emerged from the car looking around cautiously. In his left hand he held a red folder.

He crouched down to the driver’s window and pulled a roll of dollars from the back pocket of his jeans. After handing over the fee, with a healthy tip, to the driver, he watched as the cab pulled away. He looked suspiciously around again; he knew someone was following. His head slowly turned toward the gray sedan—it was too obvious. He stared for a moment.

“Shit! He’s made us,” Caine cursed, staring through the binoculars. “I told you...”

Suddenly the subject turned and fled along East Beale like an Olympic sprinter. In an instant Caine and Abel flew from the car, the doors slamming behind them. They broke into a half run, crossing the street some few hundred feet away from the subject. With the screeching of tires, a car stopped inches from Caine, blaring its horn.

“You asshole!” the driver shouted.

Caine coolly looked at the license plate, waving a finger. “I have your number, mother. I have your number.”

Mounting the far curb, they began to sprint, Caine reaching inside his black jacket to get a grip on his semi-automatic.

“Don’t shoot him!” Abel barked, glancing sideways. “Dickson’s orders are to take him back alive.”

Ellis reached the corner and turned left down a narrow street. He looked back as the two menacing figures closed on him. He dropped his head and ran for a hundred feet, skirting a six-foot chain-link fence. Beyond the fence stretched a

wide-open field and at the far end was a small grove. Turning, he jumped at the fence, grabbing the top and jabbing his sneakers into the wire. Scrambling up, he vaulted over the top to land heavily on the other side. After a moment he scrambled to his feet and broke into a run across the open ground.

Abel and Caine reached the fence and saw the subject fleeing across the field toward the small group of trees. With athletic ease they vaulted the mesh fencing and landed lightly, in a full sprint, on the other side. They continued in pursuit across the open ground, gaining on the subject with every stride.

Ellis finally reached the far side of the field, crashing into the sanctuary of the trees, breathing heavily. He slowed, searching for an escape route and then turned left, traversing the small distance to the perimeter fence. Here the fence was lower and he hurdled it in one stride, hitting the pavement on the far side.

An instant later, Abel and Caine rushed into the woods, for a second losing sight of their prey.

“Where the fuck has he gone?” Caine asked, crouching to look through the trees.

“There!” Abel said, pointing toward the road. “Down there. Move!”

They straddled the fence, back in pursuit of their quarry. Abel could sense they were now gaining on him—he was moving slower.

Ellis staggered out into Spillway Lane, nearly losing his footing as he glanced back to see the agents. He surged forward, reaching halfway down the street before stopping and turning into a narrow alley. He stopped short, his eyes widening as he could see the alley ran for only thirty feet and then ended. He looked back but it was too late to change his mind. Futile as it seemed, he searched for an exit.

Abel grinned as he watched his prey enter the narrow opening. He knew now it was only a matter of time—there was no exit from that street. He pulled on Caine to slow him down, wishing them to take their catch like professionals—calmly and tranquilly. Abel slowed to a walk and straightened his tie before reaching into his jacket pocket and pulling out a small silver case. With his thumb he flicked open the case to reveal a hypodermic syringe filled with a light green liquid—G6. “Time for a sleep, my friend.”

Caine buttoned his jacket and stretched his neck. “This son of a bitch soiled my new shirt with all this runnin’ shit. Will he remember anything after he has the juice?”

“Not a thing.”

“Good,” Caine said. “When I restrain him, I’m gonna give him just a little pain. A small payback for this shirt.”

Menacingly, they stepped around the corner of the alley and then stopped abruptly. Two high brick walled buildings bordered the alleyway, which ended in a tall brick wall. There were no doors and no windows. Litter blew lazily around the alley, encircling the only object—a small beat-up trashcan. Besides that, the alley was deserted.

“But how the hell did he get out?” Caine asked, staring down the alley.

Abel placed the silver case back into his pocket and sighed. “He’s remembering.”

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