



PENTAGON'S
HAMMER

T. RANDALL

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TWELVE DAYS TO ARMAGEDDON

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Fiction

By

T. Randall

PENTAGON'S HAMMER

– Twelve Days to Armageddon –

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DISCLAIMER

PENTAGON'S HAMMER – TWELVE DAYS TO ARMAGEDDON is fictional in nature, using fictitious names for all characters. Locations and events are suggested possibilities based on the current political state of world nations. The flag depicted specifically for this novel is not intended to deface the flag of the United States, nor is it meant to degrade in any way the honor of the nation and its citizens who have fought many battles under the flag of the Stars and Stripes. The flag, as illustrated on the cover page, is only a reflection of the intense storyline of the novel.

Although the author spent twenty-five years working as a government contractor, and, at times, had access to highly sensitive information inherit to the Intelligence community, it is not his intention to disclose any sensitive or classified materials to the public or to the enemies of the free world.

Where the author has intricate knowledge of organizational and governmental structures in the arenas of intelligence, defense, and science and technologies as described in this book, some information was extracted from public encyclopedia sources.

The author hereby thanks and acknowledges the many sources for their efforts in contributing specific information whether willingly or through the liberties of the Freedom of Information Act.

DEDICATION

PENTAGON'S HAMMER – TWELVE DAYS TO ARMAGEDDON, although a work of fiction about the United States defense system, is based on real probabilities. The story could take place at any time, without a moment's notice to the public. To protect the nation and its citizens from the possibilities illustrated in the novel, the strategic nuclear-based defense system was created at the end of WWII. With the de-scaling of the defense system following the Cold War, the nation had become vulnerable to potential foreign attacks. To breach this vulnerability gap in fending off such potential threats, cyber warfare was borne and taken into cyberspace, making the strategic nuclear-based system virtually obsolete.

During the span of the strategic, tactical, and cyberspace defense deployments, an army of dedicated workforce is necessary to design, develop, and implement the complexity of the defense systems. It is this army of experts from government, military, and industry including scientists, engineers, technicians, operations, management, and support personnel that makes the United States a safer place to live. The story was created to acknowledge and thank every one of these experts for their commitment, dedication, and allegiance to the cause of preserving the freedom of a nation. Even though the characters within this book are fictional, every one of us could have played out the role of Alex Bauer and his crew.

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My daughter, Elsa Margaret

– For planting the seed that turned biography into fiction

My daughter, Nova Jennifer

– For being the tolerant sounding board for her dad

My daughter, Crystal Belle

– For Being.

WEBSITE CREDITS:

<http://www.nsa.gov/>

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TERMS/ABBREVIATIONS/ACRONYMS LINK:

<http://www.fas.org/news/reference/terms/s.html>

FOREWORD

PENTAGON'S HAMMER – TWELVE DAYS TO ARMAGEDDON is a comprehensive fiction novel based on the vulnerability of the United States defense system. Extended in volume size over the average novel and, because of the complexity of the plot, many chapters are necessary in the development and subsequently segmented into a number of sub-plots merged into the main story. Making up the chapters are dozens of characters and organizations necessary that are dependant on each other in case of an all out attack on the nation. In addition, a number of segments, traumatizing the lives of American citizens affected by an all-out attack on the nation, are illustrated.

The story is played out during a twelve day global event involving the United States, North Korea, India, Pakistan, the Pacific Rim, and, on a peripheral scale, Cuba, China, and Russia. The stage was set with 9/11 on the New York trade center, when Islamic extremists successfully carried out the worst terrorist attack on U.S. soil. Years later, following the outsourcing of critical and sensitive programs by the defense department, vital information for the NSA's most critical, and highly classified satellite system, the ASATs (attack satellites), falls into the hands of the adversary.

The adversary, HASAN HAMMAD, principal jihad antagonist to the United States and the free world, by manipulating critical satellites is able to puncture the U.S. defense shield. The earliest indication to the breach is detected by TRACY BAUER, NSA Intel strategist, liaison to the Pentagon. In conjunction, ALEX BAUER, father of Tracy, and long time defense analyst and design engineer with DOD and BMO (Ballistics Missiles Office), a branch of SAC, comes across classified information on EMP and its inherited vulnerability to the nation's strategic defense infrastructure, the Minuteman III and Peacekeeper missile systems.

Whereas EMP, electromagnetic pulsing, is a highly sophisticated process generated by an atomic explosion, it can also be set off through a simple and inexpensive trigger device. What makes it even more detrimental, this science and technology has been hidden from the public eyes for more than sixty years. Through vital intelligence leaks and organizational compromises created by current economic conditions, North Korea, Pakistan, Iran, and the Jihad have gained knowledge for this once closely guarded secret.

Initial attempts by BRIAN HARRIS, NSA operative and longtime friend

to Alex Bauer, in fixing the vulnerability in the satellite defense system, fail. It will take days, in collaboration with Tracy and Alex, for Brian to identify the source of the breach. Attempts to resolve the problem for the deliberate intrusion on U.S. airspace prove unsuccessful. The antagonist, manipulating the U.S. defense grid, is setting off a chain of events culminating in a series of confrontations involving North Korea, Pakistan, Cuba, Al Qaeda, and a number of global jihad cells. Due to the complexity of the defense structure, many of our defense and intelligence organizations become intricately involved in the strike, counter strike, retaliation, and reprisal.

In addition to the adventurous nature of Alex Bauer, the novel describes, through realistic means, the workings and interdependencies of the many egocentric and sometimes uncooperative agencies such as the CIA, NRO, DOD, SAC, BMO, DHS, NORAD, DELTA, and SPACECOM, whereas the White House and the Pentagon try to coordinate an effective triad defense for land, sea, and space. Each chapter, within the twelve days of global events is segmented further by describing character, initiative, environment, action, reaction, and resolution with strong character support interdependent of each other presented through the sphere of a global theater.

In the process, the United States comes under direct nuclear attack with the destruction of one major city. Furthermore, the enemy, in the heart of the nation unleashes a series of assaults through chemical and biological means affecting the lives of every citizen across the country. With every defense mechanism rendered ineffective by the initial EMP attack, the nation is brought to its knees resulting in an economic Armageddon effecting commerce, power, utilities, communication, banking, finance, Wall Street, transportation, hospital, emergency operation, law enforcement, national defense, government and the military, not to mention the lives of millions of U.S. citizens.

What heightens the novel's suspense are a number of detailed action packed plots in the wake of the EMP strike involving the potential meltdown of the Tree Mile Island nuclear power plant; the chaotic struggle of cockpit crews and passengers from incoming international flights destined for Chicago's O'Hare airport and unable to land; prison break at Fort Leavenworth, KS, with prisoners staging the takeover at Fort Knox, TN, to gain access to America's gold used to fund the future of the newly emerging nation, The Badlands, played out by gang leader Rusty Norton, and First Lieutenant Duke Wheeler, aka Bad Man, the Enforcer.

In an attempt to defuse the growing threat escalating with each day, the plots lead the reader into hostile territories. What makes the novel unique is the intricate knowledge of the writer in the Intel community, the defense system, and the nation's nuclear strike capability.

LIST OF CHARACTERS

PRINCIPLE CHARACTERS

Alex Bauer – Department of Defense analyst, retired, home base Castle Rock, CO

Brian Harris – NSA Analyst, longtime friend of Alex with romantic attachment to Tracy

Hasan Hammad – Supreme commander, Jihad antagonist and adversary to the free world

Lisa “Liz” Bauer – Specialist, nuclear emergencies, disaster recovery, search & rescue

Scott Brooks – Delta Force Operative, 1st Special Forces Operational Detachment/CIA

Tracy Bauer – Alex’s daughter, NSA defense strategist, assigned liaison to the Pentagon

SUPPORT CAST – U.S. SECTOR

Benjamin “Ben” Jackson – Commanding General, NORAD, Colorado Springs, CO

Brodie Elliott – Command Sergeant Major, 1st Armored Division, Fort Knox, KY

Diego Martinez – Brigadier General, Peterson AFB, NORTHCOM, CO

Doug Olson – Supervisor, Power Station, Three Mile Island, PA

Duke Wheeler, aka Bad Man – Enforcer, Patriots, Badlands, Ex-Penitentiary Inmate

Emmett W. Fletcher – Four-Star General, Flag Officer, U.S. European Command

George Wilmot – U.S. President, the White House, Washington, D.C.

Harry Carter – Chief of Operations, CIA HQ, Langley, VA

Henry “Hank” Foster – Commanding General, Four Star, DOD, the Pentagon

Jack Warner – Chief of Operations, NSA HQ, Fort Meade, MD

Jake Fulton – Chief of Operations, O’Hare International Airport, Chicago, IL

Janet Doe – Passenger, Wife, Ill-fated Intl. Atlantic Flight

Jon Barrister – Director, DHS, Washington, D.C.

John Hanson – Director, NRO HQ, Chantilly, VA

Lewis (Hawk) Hawkins – Chief of Operations, SAC, Omaha, NE

McAllister – Procurement Broker, Offshore Trading Agency, Cayman Islands
Missile Operators – Minuteman III Launch Facility, Cheyenne, WY
Mitchell (Mitch) Kelley – Stunt Pilot, Flight Interceptors, Key West, FL
Nelson Tucker – Commanding General, SOUTHCOM, Miami, FL
Patrick “Pat” Adams – Commander, 15th Air Base Wing, Honolulu, HI
Paul Doe – Passenger, Husband, Ill-fated Intl. Atlantic Flight
Rhonda Hicks – Chief of Operations, NORTHCOM, CO
Russell Wilcox – Unit Leader, Penitentiary, Fort Leavenworth, KS
Rusty Norton – Leader, Patriots, Badlands, Ex-Penitentiary Inmate
Secretary General – United Nations, New York City, NY
Smokey – Gunner, Confederate Air Force, Midland, TX
Sparky – Intelligence Operative, NSA HQ, Fort Meade, MD
Tyler Marshall – Pilot, Aussie, Intl. Atlantic Flight
Wendell Nelson – Commander, Garrison U.S. Army, Fort Knox, KY
Wesley (Wes) Simmons – Pilot, Confederate Air Force, Midland, TX

SUPPORT CAST – FOREIGN SECTOR

Carlos Domingo – Ambassador, Cuban Embassy, Cuba
Cesar Romulus – General, Air Defense Forces, Cuba
Kim Hak Su – Commander, Missile Command, Defense Ministry, North Korea
Miss Lee – South Korean hostess and spy, reporting to the North Korean Ministry
Party Leader – National People’s Congress, Beijing, China
Rajesh Chandra – Subcontractor to NSA, responsible for the defense breach, India
Ron, Mike, and Gary – Tech buddies, Intel network, South Korean region
Vladimir Potempkin – Foreign Minister, Russian Federation, Moscow, Russia

SUPPORT CAST – JIHAD SECTOR

Abdul “Omar One” Baser – Plant Chief, REX Chemicals, Islamabad, Pakistan
Amin Madani – Action Officer, Jihad Mission Command, Islamabad, Pakistan
Antarah Radi – Mission Commander, Al Qaeda, Jihad, Islamabad, Pakistan

Bandar Malik – First Lieutenant, Jihad, U.S. Cell Alpha, New York, NY

Hakim Massoud – First Lieutenant, U.S. Cell Central, Denver, CO

Jamuh Faisal – First Lieutenant, Al Qaeda, Jihad, South Cell, Madras, India

Joseph (Yusuf) Hashim – Commander, Jihad, U.S. Cell Alpha, New York, NY

Kazim Rashid – Tribal Elder, Al Qaeda, Jihad, Mountainous Region, Pakistan

Muhab Sadek – First Lieutenant, U.S. Cell West, Sacramento, CA

Rashid Abu – First Lieutenant, Al Qaeda, Jihad, Base Camp One, Yemen

Shakir Murad – First Lieutenant, Al Qaeda, Jihad, Base Camp Three, Yemen

Tariq Amman – First Lieutenant, U.S. Cell East, Washington, D.C.

The Serpent – Code name for the world's feared adversary, Al Qaeda, Jihad, Dubai, UAE

America will never be destroyed from the outside. If we falter and lose our freedoms, it will be because we destroyed ourselves.

Abraham Lincoln (1809 – 1865)

Forgive your enemies, but never forget their names.

John F. Kennedy (1917 – 1963)

Only the dead have seen the end of war.

Plato (428 BCE – 348 BCE)

PENTAGON'S HAMMER DAY 1

FIELD OPERATIVES

“What am I doing *here*...hellhole of the world,” Scott Brooks whispered in the solitude of the desert, “when I could be home stretched out on my private beach...sipping piña coladas...with my woman?” Colorful visions of his dream place had been cropping up more frequently. Who could blame him? They’d been camped out in the same spot for days, dug into this godforsaken dustbowl. Perched on a yellow-crust hill near the northern fringes of the Yemen desert, their dirty bodies blended in perfectly with the terrain below. They squatted, they crouched—waiting. There was nothing else out here in the wastelands of the Arabian Peninsula but sandy bowls and valleys surrounded by barren hills. The view was the same for hundreds of miles no matter what the direction: searing sun above, burning sand below. Worse, shimmering mirages of sandy beaches and palm trees emerged in the distance. *Are they real*, he’d questioned his own sanity, *or am I going insane?*

“See,” a dry cough almost escaped his throat, “what I see?” The thirst and parchedness was choking. There was no response. The optical illusions created by the immense heat kept drifting across his vision, stationary at times, other times in motion. He dared not make a sound when shifting into a more comfortable position. Brooks shot a quick glance in the direction of his combat buddy. *Asleep.*

Over the past few days, both operatives had been on the brink of hallucination. What was supposed to be a mission of hours had turned into days. Skin parched from dehydration, they were out of rations.

Life for the forward spotter was, for most part, boring. It took patience, a lot of it. Appearing high on the psychological hiring profile, it was a prerequisite for getting the assignment. There were other, more imperative qualities needed, but those required training and practice. Scoring skill was one, as in scoring targets—not girls. Planning was another, as were deprivation, isolation, self-discipline; all vital to covert OPS.

It’d been his ambition, what seemed to be ages ago, to become an engineer. He enrolled in college with that in mind. But destiny had something else in store for Scott Brooks. It sought him out right after graduation, when he was approached one day by a recruiter. Being young and adventurous, seduced by the intrigue of it all, he readily accepted. Following a few days’

indoctrination, and three months of boring policies and procedures, he'd been sent to a training camp in the Arizona desert along with a number of other new recruits. Training had been tough, but, in the end, rewarding. Because of his concentration skills, he'd rapidly advanced to squad leader. His superiors quickly recognized his potential in matters of targeting, analysis, and combat. Tall, closely cropped hair, rugged in appearance, he projected a muscular physique any person could respect. Size mattered for the perfect fighter.

Right away, it put him in the forefront—with pay to match. There had been Columbia, Kosovo, Azerbaijan, and now this. While in Columbia, between assignments, his buddies and he would take trips to San Salvador for some well-deserved R&R. Once there, he fell in love with the place. Where Columbia had been ravaged by drug wars, El Salvador, at the time, was a haven. “Look no further,” he told himself. He'd found his paradise. He bought a lot by the ocean, pristine beachfront property, ocean swells gently washing over the sandy beach; it was all he needed to fulfill his dream. Only twenty miles south of the capital, the purchase had been cheap. One day he'd planned to build a cottage there.

Presently stretched out on the searing desert sand, he could feel the sweltering heat penetrating his senses. Propped on both elbows, a pair of Nikon 10X42 high-powered field glasses clutched between steady hands, Brooks scanned the horizon once more. They took turns—he and his buddy. They kept switching positions between wake and sleep, swapping brief catnaps. They hadn't taken a shower in days. It didn't matter. With intrusions on the body from aches and pain, there was much discomfort in the life of a sniper. Their brains were trained to ignore pain caused by crouching for endless hours in a cramped position with unpleasant sensory input caused by offensive smells emanating from armpits, crotch, and feet—it was all the same. He suddenly felt the unavoidable urge from an under-exercised bladder. He checked the time on the chronometer, his special treat acquired from Switzerland. *Best Omega money could buy.* He elbowed his buddy slumped in sleep next to him. “Take the watch.”

“What?” It was an angry grumble accompanied by a bleary-eyed stare.

“Gotta piss,” was the soft hiss expelled from between tightly clenched teeth. The sun was beating down mercilessly. The body dried up quick. It was a dilemma. Replenishing fluid frequently was necessary. An unavoidable nuisance factor, the cycle repeated from sunup to sundown. Gulp down a few

swallows of liquid...sweat trickling down the face...urge to piss.

His moves were deliberate. Propped on both elbows, he lifted his body off the ground just enough to slide back a few yards. Seconds later he reached the familiar spot. It was dry but the urine stench lingered on. Careful not to make a sound he unzipped and groaned with the relieving pressure. Motion carried in the wastelands of the desert. They'd been watching a camp. Many had sound and motion sensors stuck around the perimeter. One thing they didn't need was attention. Avoiding confrontation was a necessity for survival. The Company didn't appreciate conflicts, especially not from the field. They created political tension, and, not to mention, impeded career advances and caused possible death on the spot.

It all boiled down to one element: "Teamwork—teamwork on the smallest scale." Two bodies, four eyes, four ears, one high-powered sniper rifle, one high-end spotter scope with one to give orders, the other to follow. The two bodies were blended into one human element, an element with only one object in mind—to kill. No mistakes. No regrets. Errors were not permitted. It meant elimination. It led to self-annihilation. Retaliation was swift. It could come by air, by land, or by sea. The result was always the same. Operative lost on mission, a nameless subject reduced to only a number. "Casualty of yet another conflict," the papers would say. Nobody would miss him. The Agency made sure. No kin, no attachment, no connection, all part of the profile for the sniper. It was the profile of a trained killer, legalized by necessity.

"What the hell's that?" he heard his spotter buddy call out.

Immediately, the sound got his attention. Straining upward, Brooks quickly zipped up and edged his way back to the observation spot. It'd come on fast. He caught a glimpse of it. What appeared was a winged torpedo shape racing toward the target they'd been spotting. Dumbfounded, Brooks offered an opinion. "Reaper."

"Reaper?" his buddy asked, "as in death?" It took seconds for the shockwave to reach them. When it did, all hell broke loose. Good thing they were dug in; otherwise they'd been blown away like tumbleweed.

Still breathless from the shockwave, junior surmised, "Hellfire? Took out the whole damned target."

"Air Force held that a secret," Brooks summed up, "even from us." He knew UAVs were used for recon and surveillance. He had no idea about them carrying weapons with the destructive power they'd just witnessed.

“Let’s go,” Brooks gestured at the blast site. He had to be certain there were no survivors. It took close to ten minutes to get there. Both stumbled through the wreckage looking for survivors.

Thirty minutes later, “Nothing.” There seemed to be no life. None was expected after the utter destruction from the bomb carrying drone.

“Call in the damages,” Brooks ordered his junior observer.

“What’ll I tell ‘em?”

“No survivors,” Brooks offered. “Camp destroyed.”

“What now?”

“We wait.” It wasn’t the first time Brooks had been left stranded in the fields. It wouldn’t be the last either. It all depended on the vigilance of the agency.

Soon, the distant pitch of an unmarked helicopter reached their ears. Bored with the wait, “About time,” the spotter muttered to no one in particular. It’d be the end of their mission.

“What took you so long?” Anger showed in Scott’s face when the pilot thumbed them into the craft. “Whose idea to leave us stranded out here?”

“Command had you on satellite.” The pilot was factual, seasoned and callused. “I got my job,” he countered, “you got yours. And yours is done. Enjoy the ride.”

CASTLE ROCK (Colorado)

Poised in front of the panoramic picture window, Alex Bauer was fixated by the beauty of this magnificent country. He was undecided about what to do next. In the distance, he could make out early commuter traffic winding along I-25 against the backdrop of the Rocky Mountain range. From this vantage point he could clearly see the white-tipped mountains jut up high above the central plains. Set within a weathered face, two calculating eyes watchfully scanned the horizon. It was a determined face. A face hardened by a lifetime of challenges. The magnificence of the scene jogged distant memories in his mind. One brow furrowed with concern, he'd remembered the peaks much whiter when he first got here, even this time of year. *Something's happened to the climate*, he calculated, *and not just here*. His sister in Austria had mentioned this during their infrequent but lengthy phone calls. With each passing decade, the winters seemed to grow milder, she'd remarked. An avid skier, he had noticed the receding snowcaps in both worlds: the old country where he grew up and the new world he was living in now.

The hour was early yet. Chilled by the brisk mountain air streaming down from the foothills across the valley, he pulled his robe tighter around his waist. Undecided about the day's agenda, he strode to the kitchen where a freshly brewed pot of coffee awaited him. He poured a measure and leisured to the den, his domain. The warmth between his palms gave him a great sense of presence. Holding it up, he studied the colorful contours permanently edged into the white porcelain. He admired the cup. It was a symbol for his accomplishments. It embraced a generation of legacy. "My trophy," he muttered into the quiet of the morning. It was a retirement gift he'd received after twenty-five years of serving the defense department. Prominently displayed was the glorious Pentagon emblem encircled by the communications insignias of the various agencies he'd served. He felt touched by notions of pride and remorse at the same time. One was pride of great accomplishments for his achievements, the other, the notion of remorse he could never share his missions with others.

He was about to pick up the Federal Weekly he hadn't had time to read when the thought of his daughter crossed the mind. Haven't heard from her in ages...have to give her a call...see if she's still planning to come out for the summer.

He got up and took the few strides across the spacious room. Backed against the far wall was an office desk. There, he unlocked the drawer and

fished for the well-worn black booklet. It was an address book he kept locked up, just to be on the safe side. It contained information he'd rather keep concealed. Aside from proprietary phone contacts it contained more sinister data. The book also contained codes and passwords. At one time, he'd been able to recall every bit from memory, but with age slowly catching up, he needed the backup. He dialed the number. There was a faint click followed by a trained voice. "Pentagon," it said. "Who would you like to reach?"

"Tracy Bauer, please."

"Just a moment," was the formal, almost mechanical reply. It only took a couple of seconds for her to get back to him. "I have no one listed by that name. Could she be with another agency?"

"It's possible. Could you try the NSA branch?"

"I'll check," was her efficient response. He was placed on hold.

Sitting idle, he suddenly felt the morning chill seep into his aging, but well-toned, body. It seemed to take forever for the operator to return. Slightly annoyed by the wait, he reached for the remote. Impatiently, he switched channels, searching for the morning news. The familiar face of the president caught his attention. He turned up the sound and listened to what George Wilmot had to say. Ever since the invasion of Afghanistan initiated by his predecessor, this president had had a tough time winning back international confidence, not to mention the national trust of his people. Alex felt sympathy for him inheriting the can of worms he already knew was a lost cause. He shifted his concentration to the news.

The U.N. Security Council voted unanimously Saturday to slap North Korea with trade, travel, and other sanctions as punishment for its claimed nuclear weapons test. The president described the U.N. action as a swift and tough message that the world was united in its determination to see to it that the Korean Peninsula remained free of nuclear weapons. He went on to say North Korea had an opportunity for a better way forward and promised aid to the impoverished country if it verifiably ended its nuclear weapons program.

The North Korean ambassador to the U.N. cut in, protesting that Pyongyang had totally rejected the unjustifiable resolution. *If the United States persists in increasing pressure on North Korea*, he maintained, *it would continue to take physical countermeasures, considering it a declaration of war*. With that he walked out of the national assembly chamber. That quickly prompted the U.S. ambassador to point to the empty chair and denounce him.

The resolution called on Pyongyang to end all nuclear weapons programs. It forbade U.N. member nations from engaging in North Korean trade involving nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction. The ban appeared to be directed at the North Korean leader, who had a long, documented record of living a life of luxury while his people suffered the deprivations of a national famine.

Across its border, the U.N. ambassador for China—a strong ally of North Korea—said the resolution sent an unbalanced and destructive message. That “rather than mandating stop-and-search operations, the resolution would...” CNN reported.

“That should shake ‘em up,” Alex muttered. He was barely aware of the operator’s voice cutting in to get his attention.

“Sir, we have located Tracy’s office, but there’s no answer. If it’s urgent, I’ll have her paged.”

“Please do. I’ll hold.”

Sitting idle once more, the strong aroma from his favorite roasted beans caught his senses. “Ah, yes,” he savored the moment, “Columbian Supreme.”

Waiting for the operator, he let his mind drift. He liked dwelling on the past. It gave him a great deal of comfort during the lonely days. And there were plenty of those. Ever since the divorce and his daughters having taken on families and careers, he was plagued by a life of isolation. He had no reason to complain. It was self-imposed. Not so much by the present environment, but rather from a life of conditioning and discipline, much of it spent as a lone wolf. His thoughts drifted back to an earlier time.

It seemed not so long ago when his children were the joy of his life. Because of his travel schedule, he was not always around to watch them transition from infancy to childhood, and then into adults. He tried to make up for it when he was at home.

He vividly remembered his wife’s dedication to the family, with the occasional reminder of his priorities between family and job. Whereas her energy was solely directed at raising the girls, his had been demanded by yet another crisis. Many years earlier, while still single, he’d chosen a career with the Agency over becoming a dedicated family man. One turned into a lifelong adventure while the other ended in failure.

Where has the time gone? Look at me now, he thought in the quiet of the den, sitting alone in the chilly morning air. *No family...no friends. If only I*

could turn back time. There was much he'd like to have told his daughters, especially Tracy, his favorite. They'd always shared a special connection.

"Sir," the operator inquired once more in her monotonous voice, "would you like to continue hold?"

"Yes." He was growing annoyed. "Give it another minute."

Remote in his left hand, he switched channels again. His thoughts sifted through an endless stream of information for more bad news. *Whatever happened to the good news?*

The familiar voice finally cut into his thoughts, "Tracy," it announced.

"Hey." Jolted to the present, he called out, "How're things at the Puzzle Palace?"

"Fine, Dad." Her voice sounded pleased but rushed. "Been assigned to the Pentagon," she said.

"Why's that?"

"Needed a liaison with the NSA."

"Aside from that," Alex was genuinely curious, "what's happening in your world?"

"Oh, the usual," she remarked. "Analysis, presentations, swamped with meetings."

"Yeah, I know what that's like—had my share. Anything unusual happening?" he inquired offhandedly. It always interested him to hear about his daughter's accomplishments. In a way, she'd followed his career steps. Steps he'd paved for her, he hoped, would make her career easier. All she had to do was confide in him. He could mentor her without her repeating some of the mistakes he'd made. There were not many, but...

"Not much." She sounded casual. "Got my hands full with some stubborn birds."

"Birds?" His interest piqued. He knew she made reference to satellites. Space, satellites, intelligence was her world.

"Got a problem keeping some in orbit..."

"Wait a minute," he cut in, "satellites stay up there for years."

"Typically yes," she agreed, "but not these. KH¹ series—you know."

"I knew it!" Alex exclaimed, but immediately muffled his voice. *Don't wanna compromise her position.* Silent ears were always listening...and recording.

"What's that?" She sounded strained. Her voice turned cautious.

"Oh nothing," he said. "Just thinking out loud." He'd had his suspicions

ever since satellite manufacturing had been outsourced to third-world countries.

“Dad,” she reigned in his attention, “I’m late for a meeting.”

He knew better than to pry further, especially on a public phone. As far as he knew, *Big Brother’s always listening*. He’d never compromised anybody and had no desire to start now, especially not with his daughter.

“Still coming to Colorado?” he asked. It had been years since their last time together.

“As soon as I get a fix on the problem.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

“Okay then. Let me know if you need anything. I’m always...”

“Gotta go, Dad.” She abruptly hung up.

“Bye...love you...” His parting words trailed into emptiness.

The receiver had gone dead, leaving him to reflect on their relationship. He could not imagine life without his precious Tracy. At times, he felt like he’d fallen victim to an unintentional dilemma. He’d tried not to have favorites between his daughters. But where a dad had his, a mom had hers. *Maybe some day*, he lingered, *she’ll forgive me for not being there*. He felt strangely abandoned. *That’s what I get for being so selfish*. His thought reflected deep regrets. To change his frame of mind, he briskly got up and left the room to get dressed.

Despite feeling sorry, he could not stop thinking about the satellites she’d mentioned. They were programmed to stay up for ten years or more. To prevent orbit degradation, they adjusted automatically via self-correcting GPS. *Why should I be bothered?* He tried to push the thoughts from his mind. It didn’t work. It was a problem...his problem. “Has to be software related,” he finally decided. “Gotta check with Brian.”

YEMEN (Arabian Peninsula)

“That will do,” the Serpent muttered. His words directed at the computer monitor, he spoke to no one in particular. His upper body was stiffly poised over the control panel in air weighted down by layers of hazy blue smoke drifting toward the exit door. The ceiling fan didn’t help much. It only spread the blue-layered haze further through the room. Someone finally shut it off because its grinding noise impaired his concentration. Surrounded by his team, everybody in the room was smoking. The unhealthy practice, largely avoided by the western world, had not yet reached the cultures of the Middle East. Here, for many, smoking was the only recreation.

He could feel their presences. Only an occasional stifled cough was audible. He could see the reflection of faces in the monitor watching over his shoulder. He detected fear. Fear, not of the enormity he’d unleash, but fear of him. And he knew it. Soon, the whole world would share their fears. He’d see to that.

A mean grin cut across his grimly set face. His index finger on the last key, he deliberately paused to let the enormity of his action sink in, before punching down on the Enter button. Satisfied, he expelled a lung full of stale air. His body visibly relaxed. He’d just activated a sequence of events that would change the world as it existed today. The faces still stared at the monitor. Stony faced, they expected some response action, but none followed.

Ready to get up, he briefly paused. His eyes caught a glimpse of his own reflection in the monitor screen. Slightly squinting, he examined the face staring back at him. He hadn’t looked in a mirror for weeks. Immediate contempt welled up from his gut. Having spent most of his time in deserts lately, he’d almost forgotten about the scar. Several attempts to grow a beard to partly cover up his face had failed. Eventually, he’d had to admit he lacked the genetic predisposition to grow enough facial hair to disguise the blemish.

Years before, he had been slashed by a knife that sliced his left cheek leaving him scarred for life. It had been an accident caused by a new recruit during combat training. It left his face permanently etched with a scar that many mistook for a grin, although, there was little humor to be found in the cruel life of the Serpent. Shortly afterwards, the recruit had mysteriously disappeared without a trace.

“That’s it,” he commanded in his usual tone of brutality, “return to your duties.” He stood up, promptly turned, and headed for the exit for a well-

deserved smoke break. He savored the moment. *It's not every day one gets to mess with the despicable, the infidel.* He was gloating at the thought. It gave him an immense feeling of satisfaction.

Once outside, he propped his body against a boulder a few paces from the complex. His gaze fell on the distant hills. They were the customary colorless scenes of his present environment. All gray. Not a single tree or bush filled the sandy void. Tightly pressed between his lips, deep in thoughts of a better time, he puffed on a cigarette. Pakistan, the home of his youth with Kashmir, Nepal across the border, the snow capped Himalayas towering in the horizon seemed so distant now.

With eyes scanning the horizon, the present weighed heavy on his body. *Only temporary*, he reminded himself. *Soon, it'll be paradise.* It was an unconditional promise. Confined to this wasteland, he couldn't help it; his anger quickly returned. His mind was filled with contempt once more.

Suddenly, his senses became aware of something advancing his way. It started as a single spot in the distant horizon, then rapidly increased to a menacing silhouette. It passed directly overhead. His eyes caught its full measure. It'd taken on the shape of a winged torpedo. Being a seasoned warrior, on instinct he ducked. Eyes partly blinded by the sunlight reflected off the bright object, he dove for cover. He landed hard behind a nearby truck. A fraction of a second later he felt the impact. A devastating shockwave picked his body up and wildly threw it through the air. Then some fifty feet of tumbled freefall with a muffled thud landed him on hard ground. Half-conscious, half-buried beneath a layer of sand and debris, he wildly shook his head to clear his senses. Eyes finally cleared from sand, he became aware of the effects of the tremendous explosion emitted from the direction of the command center he'd just left.

Unable to breathe freely, his battered chest desperately struggled for air. Both lungs had temporarily collapsed. The lack of air brought him close to panic. Almost at a point of passing out, he was able to force a labored breath of air into his lungs. It took several minutes for him to recover. He pulled himself up on trembling legs. Staggering, his blurry gaze tried to focus on what lay ahead. He carefully patted himself down. There seemed to be no broken limbs. "Allah," he uttered in disbelief, "I'm still alive."

What used to be a desert outpost, Base Camp Three, now was nothing but rubble. He stared at the heap of incinerated concrete and dust. Aside from a deafening ringing in his ears and superficial nicks and bruises from flying

debris, he had escaped with only scratches. The bleeding had already stopped from the cuts and was quickly drying up with the desert heat.

There was no sign of life where the command center once stood. The inhabitants, if any were left, were now buried beneath tons of rubble. *I am truly blessed by Allah*, he thought jubilantly. In this desolated place, some fifteen hundred miles from his hometown, Islamabad, he'd survived yet another attempt on his life.

Hope the cause's worth the prize, he thought with faint contempt, *paid for with yet another dozen lives*. Setting aside further empathy after counting his blessings, he had one last thought for his comrades. *May they be blessed into the everlasting realm of paradise*. Feeling somewhat detached, he did not share the spiritual beliefs of the innocent recruits filled by indoctrinated promises. His conviction was more down to earth. It had been westernized many years ago. His dreams were set on the future. The future was here on earth and now. Someone had to change it. And that someone was him, the Serpent, future leader of the jihad.

OUTER SPACE

It was well below freezing. The deep blackness of space was punctuated by the brilliant sparkle of uncountable stars. Then, like ghostly shadows, out of the darkness, in periodic intervals of ninety minutes, silent, menacing shapes of spiked disks came slicing through space. Within each structure, a pair of red and green blinking LED indicators was the only indication of life. Miniscule as they were, they, nevertheless, produced two dimly reflecting light beams repeatedly bouncing off the highly polished interior, not unlike a miniature lightshow. Otherwise, within the complexity of this highly sophisticated body drifting in asynchronous orbit, there was total silence.

Suddenly, an almost imperceptible motion broke the blackness. A click would have been perceived had the satellite been within Earth's atmosphere. At this altitude, in the absence of air nothing generated sound. A miniaturized relay had sprung into action. It closed the contact connection between the power source and transmitter circuits. What followed was a rapid stream of electrically charged atoms set in motion by a ground-based command station. Touching tens of thousands of integrated components on the way, the intelligently compressed instruction set arrived at the programmed target points.

A single unit of a highly sophisticated satellite had just received a string of attack orders. Aside from being stealthy, this unit had a multitude of functions. Its primary configuration was set for ground surveillance to spy on neighboring nations. Undisclosed to the public, its ultimate objective was much more sinister. As result of the programmed instructions just received, the satellite immediately reacted. What followed was an ever so slight change in g-forces. The unit bounced out of its predetermined orbit into the path of a similar space object. Monitored by SPACECOM², this motion started a chain of events that would hound every agency and sponsor in the satellite industry for months to come.

YEMEN

Back on his feet, on unsteady legs, the Serpent staggered a few paces in the direction of what, minutes before had been the command center. What was left was a jumble of broken down concrete blocks piled on top of mortar and iron bars, covered in powdered dust. With a wiping motion his hand brushed pieces of debris and splinters from his camouflaged combat garb. His head was still hazy from the explosion, and so was his mind. He needed time to think. Vision blurry from trickles of salty liquid squeezed from damaged tear ducts, he took hold of a jagged iron bar to steady his shaken body.

“Well, they may have tried to stop me, but they’re too late. I’ve already sent the command.” The thought made his deep-seated anger return. Between clenched teeth, cussing out the western world, his mind screamed into the desert silence, “Damned all you Infidels! You will pay for messing with Allah’s creation.” Powerful thoughts of a liberated future entered his mind. It gave him the focus to stay on track. *The only thing that matters is the mission.* And a mission it would be; only he knew its enormity.

After years of planning, now, within reach of his fingertips, he had the means to control an entire constellation of space assets moving in orbit. *What was it again? Well in excess of 10,000 space objects.* But the only ones he was interested in were commercial components such as the TELSTAR, EARLY BIRD, and MARISAT managed by COMSAT and INTELSAT. It would have been extremely difficult to enslave U.S. military assets. The U.S. government had tight control over its own clusters of constellations in Iridium and others, serving covertly as smart and secure switchboards. *Won’t matter,* he thought with contempt. They would be rendered inoperative as result of collateral damages to a ground-based infrastructure he’d cause.

With satellite functions limited to a few years’ operation patiently floating in standby orbits, to extend their capabilities it was necessary to periodically replace a unit. This expensive, but necessary, element became the determined factor of the mission. It was this constant supply of standby satellites that gave him the opportunity to penetrate American defense grid.

The very thought of the space debris made his blood boil once more. He took a deep breath to calm his nerves. His body slowly began to relax. He was in complete control again. He could think clearly once more to take stock of the present situation. Everything, all of his belongings, however measly, had been buried in the explosion. There was no going back.

He’d made the choice to live as a mercenary many years ago, even with

the depravation and hardship he knew beforehand would become his life. There had been small mementos collected over the years to remind him of personal achievements. Souvenirs purchased from bazaars in Athens, Morocco, Afghanistan, and the Philippines, all gone now. Among them were fashionable and expensive items from designers such as Armani, Gucci, and Ralph Lauren. Fashion items could be replaced, he felt, especially when funds were unlimited. *But mementos?* That was another thing. With it all gone, he buried the past, right here and now.

His mind fully functional, he headed for the motor pool—or what was left of it. Most vehicles appeared damaged beyond use, either torn apart by the explosion or flung on top of one other, effectively rendered unusable. Still slightly trembling from the blast on unsteady legs, he tramped through debris of metal and rubber. His eyes darted from wreckage to wreckage searching for radio gear. It did not take long to locate a unit in a partially buried vehicle. He dug up the transmitter and dusted off the controls. Flipping on the power switch, to his surprise, it still functioned. Rotating the dial, he selected a specific frequency. “Shahadah...come in...come in.”

Still numbed from the explosion, he jerked back at the sound of his own voice. In the silence of the desert it sounded metallic. His ears were still stressed from the shockwave. Momentarily, he gave up talking. It was too painful.

Brows furled in concentration, he listened for a comeback. Aside from a steady stream of white noise emanating from the receiver, he could make out no intelligible words. *Keep trying*, he instructed himself. “Shahadah...come in...come in.” Close to an hour went by. About to give up, a faint crackle caught his attention. Hastily, he fumbled with the frequency dial. *That’s it.* The voice came in clear. “Identify.”

“Serpent.”

“Code?”

“Shahadah.”

“Status?”

“Base Camp Three destroyed—no other survivors.”

“Proceed to Base Camp One.”

“Will do...over.” He’d noticed the ignition key stuck in the vehicle he’d leaned against. One hand clenched on the frame, he yanked with the other on the handle with full force. “Come on...come on, you bitch.” The door finally pulled open with a creaking sound. Layers of sand covered the interior. The

dashboard was powdered over with fine dust. He reached for the key. It turned. The overhead lighting came on. "About time!" he muttered into the quiet.

With a firm grip on the steering wheel he forced his solid frame into the driver's seat, then, in anticipation, turned the key. *Allah*, he beckoned. The engine labored a couple of times, then, with a popping sound, the starter kicked in. The crankshaft turned over. A few more turns and the engine jumped to life. "My lucky day."

Oddly pleased, he pushed the shifter into first. The mud-studded tires tore the mass of metal from the rubble. He gunned the accelerator. The jeep, now freed, burst into motion. He caught his reflection in the mirror. His eyes briefly scanned over his face, checking for damages. *Nothing serious aside from the familiar scar*. Fully energized, he pushed the pedal and sped off into the distance, leaving a trail of dust in his wake.

PETERSON AIR FORCE BASE

Alex Bauer was getting restless. He'd spent the idle time on rudimentary projects, nothing significant. He even tried subcontracting for a while, but got bored with endless meetings, micromanagement, and tedious paperwork. He took the time to build out his own intranet wired within the confines of his home he also referred to as The Castle. It had kept him busy, but only for brief periods. Soon, he felt as if he'd been getting stagnant. Professionally, that was. Doubts encroached on his mind more often than not about the retirement. He wasn't happy. He needed a change. He needed a new focus on life.

Almost a lifetime ago, when Alex entered the United States decades ago he'd applied his trained skills from the old country. It soon became apparent that it wasn't befitting him in his new world. Where his training was in industrial engineering, a new age had taken hold. It was the age of computers and electronics. Feeling inadequate, he went back to school. It proved to be a rewarding move. It provided the foundation for a new career. The career turned into thirty-some highly productive years blessed by prosperity, profiting both employer and employee. Although a "childhood dream" comes true, he never allowed himself to ever become stagnant. After getting to know a program in and out, it would be time to move on. Stagnation in the career, he knew from experience, was the source of frustration and discontent. It was time for a chance.

After putting out feelers with a number of defense agencies, it did not take long to get responses back calling for interviews. One response in particular interested him most. It was from the defense agency that controlled and managed satellite communication. The interview was scheduled for this morning. Alex had not allowed enough time to consider the morning commute, ID check, and parking. Arriving late, it made him tardy to meet up with the head of the agency.

His strides were hastened. *Come on...come on.* Having been assigned a personal escort at the entrance, an anxious glance at the security fellow did nothing to speed up the man's pace. Overweight and complacent, the guard took his good old time. "I'm late," Alex urged the puffing sentry. Painted in customary Air Force blue accented within a dark trim line, the brightly lit corridors seemed endless. His mind was on the upcoming meeting. He'd wanted to get on this program for some time, but somehow never managed to get a foot in the door.

Several days earlier he'd gotten a call to come in for an interview. At his stage in his career, it would be more of a formality rather than getting grilled for the job. He'd meet the new commander in person. Slightly irritated, he checked his wristwatch then shook his head with impatience. It was an obvious gesture to show his irritation that went unnoticed. Ahead, one last turn. His eyes were distracted for a moment, and then it happened. "What the...?" Alex called out.

He'd collided with another visitor. In the brightly lit hallway he came face to face with a tall, good-looking male grasping a Styrofoam cup. Alex could feel the sting from spilled coffee on his skin but ignored it. There was something familiar about him. Their eyes met. There was recognition. *I know this guy.* "You!—Here?" Completely unprepared, he'd bumped into a longtime friend.

There was some brief composure on both sides, then the impeccably groomed, grinning face called out, "Alex Bauer!"

Alex wasn't sure whether to shake hands or hug. Instead, he helped him brush off spilled droplets of coffee from a pristinely fitted Armani suit. "Brian Harris!" he shouted in heightened excitement. "What brings you here?" Alex was genuinely surprised. The words reverberated through the hallway. Obviously disinterested, the sentry stood in silence.

"Getting onboard the KE." Brian beamed. They pumped hands.

"What a coincidence," Alex said, "so am I." Planted abreast from each other they practically occupied the entirety of the narrow corridor. They bumped elbows with other passersby rushing to their immediate missions, but ignored the annoyed glances thrown their way.

Whereas Alex had been living in Colorado for ten years already when he was asked to consult on a satellite proposal for Lockheed Martin, Brian had flown in today from Baltimore for similar reasons.

Alex still couldn't believe it—his friend here in town. "Listen," he offered, "I'm late for a meeting. Give me your number and we'll talk in the evening. Got a lotta catching up to do."

"Better believe it," his friend quipped, handing over a business card.

"How about the Lone Star," Alex suggested, "around seven?"

"Steakhouse...North Academy?"

"Right," Alex shot back. Headed in opposite directions, they quickly parted down the hall.

That evening, Alex sat in his favorite restaurant, anxious for Brian to show. While waiting, his eyes darted between the diners and new arrivals in an attempt to locate familiar faces. *Nothing. All strangers.* His gaze moved on. He checked out the establishment. It'd been a while since he ate here last. *Still looks the same.* He gave it a three-star rating for elegance but a five for quality. By Colorado standards, it was a top-notch steakhouse. People in this part of the country placed more value on the quality of the food than on the service. It was a cultural thing dating back to the frontier days. Back then, people were used to roughing it and, after a hard day's work on the prairie; they took pleasure in a plate of wholesome food washed down with a couple of beers. Steak was always first choice. That hadn't changed. Forget about fancy restaurants and stiff-jointed waiters; put a twenty-ounce steak in front of any cowboy and he'd bust his back all day.

"Man, it's good to see you...haven't changed a bit," Brian said. He had pushed his way past busy tables to greet Alex with a heartfelt handshake.

Alex jumped from his seat. "Neither have you." He was envious of his younger buddy. "Still good looking," Alex shot a glance at Brian's left hand and added, "and still unattached."

Besides good looks, Brian displayed two distinct characteristics: all business on the job and all charm once work was finished. Like Alex, Brian was always on the move. He liked travel as well as the challenges it provided. In a way, their character traits were similar and that was probably the reason they had hit it off so well ever since they had met.

Both were seated when the waiter appeared. To kick off the evening Alex ordered a bottle of wine with a buffalo wing appetizer, then studied the menu. Brian did likewise. A couple minutes later they watched the waiter uncork and pour a taste for Alex.

"Fine," Alex approved. He readily accepted the bottle.

Brian inspected the label. "Excellent choice."

The waiter impatiently shifted on his legs. "You ready to order?" He seemed anxious to serve other customers in the now crowded place.

"Think we'll wait." Alex glanced at Brian for approval. "Give us half an hour," he said and waved him off. "So Brian," Alex was getting comfortable in the booth, "what brings you to this part of the world?"

"NSA," Brian replied, "talked me into taking this project. At first," he admitted, "I was reluctant, but when I heard it was Colorado Springs, I agreed." He appeared genuinely sincere. "Thought I might run into you."

Lifting his glass indicating a toast, “Cheers,” he offered.

“You, too,” Brian countered with a smile. “Knew you’d moved here but lost your contact with all the travels.”

“Still travel?” Alex could already feel the effects of the wine on his body. He felt completely at ease.

“Never stopped,” his buddy responded. “They keep me on the run—one week Europe, the next Asia.”

“Reminds me of my days,” Alex reflected with a hint of sadness.

Brian reached for the bottle. He tactfully refilled both glasses. “Remember the times overseas?” That statement was sure to kick off the topic for the evening.

“As clear as yesterday—the Gulf, Bosnia, Kosovo,” Alex joined in excitedly. He was looking forward to the promise to relive an epic of the past, regardless of how chaotic it may have been back then. Living alone most of the time, he’d often dwell on the past. His brain was filled with memories. Unfortunately, he couldn’t share them with anyone other than a close friend, such as Brian, or his daughters. The evening proved to be as he’d envisioned. It was filled with amusement, laughter, delight, hilarity, even sadness and melancholy at times followed by drinks, a hearty meal, and more drinks. *Truly a happy occasion.* Alex savored this special evening, wishing there’d be many more.

Two hours into the evening there was a faint chirp. “Hang on a sec,” Brian interrupted. He fished for his Blackberry, then read the message. The pleasant veil he’d carried all evening fell from his face. He turned all business. “State department,” he sputtered, “live feed.”

“Serious?”

“Could be.” His eyes quickly scanned the live broadcast scrolling across the screen. “Check this out.” He handed Alex the gadget to read for himself.

“...the U.S. State Department cites seven nations—Cuba, Iran, Iraq, Libya, North Korea, Sudan, and Syria—as state sponsors of terrorism...These nations have long been accused of harboring groups that help terrorists in varying degrees by providing sanctuary for suspects wanted elsewhere, supplying weapons, money, and intelligence, or in planning attacks on foreign contractors...The State Department has issued a worldwide travel caution, urging Americans traveling outside the U.S. to maintain a high level of vigilance and to increase their security awareness. Specific warnings were issued for Turkmenistan, Pakistan, and Yemen.”

“There goes travel,” Alex remarked, handing back the Blackberry. He quietly assessed the potential political and economic implications. It usually didn’t stop there. There was always more to come.

“Wait,” Brian said, handing back the gadget, “there’s more.”

Alex scrolled down on the text. He read the report.

“ISLAMABAD, Pakistan (AP)—Police rounded up hundreds of opposition leaders and rights activists Sunday after Pakistan's military ruler suspended the constitution, ousted the top judge, and deployed troops to fight what he called rising Islamic extremism...The former coup leader, who had promised to relinquish his army post and become a civilian president, declared a state of emergency, dashing hopes of a smooth transition to democracy for the nuclear-armed nation.”

“Not good,” Alex expressed with deep concern.

“Not good for anybody,” Brian agreed.

The news had a sobering affect on the evening. Alex took note of the environment. It had turned quiet through the evening. There were things on his mind he wanted to pass by his buddy. Now would be a good time.

“By the way,” Brian also seemed ready to change subjects, “how’s the family?”

“Doing okay,” he said with faint sadness, “considering the circumstances.” He took a brief pause. “Got divorced a few years back.”

“I heard.”

Alex’s expression turned serious. “My fault for not being there for her—you know...work precedence over personal life.”

“You know it,” Brian agreed. He was shifting in his chair.

“Managed to have daughters.” His face brightened at the thought of his precious girls.

“Congratulations.”

“Thanks. Lisa’s out west doing well for herself. Tracy’s with the NSA.”

“Really! Have to look her up when I get back to D.C.”

“Careful,” Alex warned with a fond smile, “I know your reputation.”

“Innocent me?”

“You know—irresistible charm and all.”

“I’ll try not to.” Appearing sincere, Brian grimaced.

“Got her employed after graduating Polytech.”

“Good school. What’s she doing?”

“SPACECOM...liaison to the Pentagon.”

“What’s the project?”

“KH.”

“Interesting...”

“Listen,” Alex interrupted. His voice turned subdued. “Something’s been on my mind the last few days.” He cautiously leaned forward. “Need your opinion.”

Pulling his chair closer to the table, in a subdued voice, his buddy said, “Shoot.”

“Talked with Tracy a couple days ago,” Alex stated. “She made a comment that concerns me.”

“Why’s that?” Brian’s face took on a quizzical look. His interest seemed piqued.

“Without being specific,” Alex continued, “she mentioned some satellites behaving erratically. Apparently, SPACECOM’s got a difficult time keeping them in sync.” He explained further. “Constant need to adjust a cluster from drifting off orbit. Can you think of a reason?”

Brian briefly paused to recollect. “Nothing comes to mind. Birds in orbit have been reliable for years. They’re stable. We’ve had no problems other than occasional maneuvers to adjust for drift, but that’s normal. Why’d you ask?”

“Remember,” Alex cautioned. His gaze swept over their immediate surroundings. “I worked DIN much of my career.”

“You helped build the network.”

“Deployed a number of centers worldwide,” Alex asserted. “Your organization’s one of its subscribers...along with other Intel orgs.” DIN was colloquial for AUTODIN³. It was the most secure network on the globe. Built at the onset of the Cold War, it provided the U.S. government and military with instant and secure communications worldwide. Being closed circuit, it guarded the secrets of the nation. To work it required a highly classified clearance.

Leaning even closer into the table, Brian encouraged him. “I hear you... go on.” “While doing some analysis work...” Alex relayed information he’d come across. It was some disturbing data. It didn’t make much sense at the time, but with additional information freed up through the Freedom of Information Act, it all started to make sense. “Let me just say something’s brewing.”

Brian sat upright. “What do you mean?”

“May not be common knowledge,” he spoke quietly, “but the rumors are disturbing. It’s a mystery to me why the government keeps such important information from the public. After all,” he paused, “these days, people are remarkably informed.”

The waiter arrived to check on drinks. “Anything else?” He collected the empty dishes from the table.

“Everything’s fine.” Alex waved him on.

“Yeah, fine...what are you getting at?” Waiting for the punch line, Brian displayed impatience.

Alex, at times, had an inadvertent way of heightening the suspense. When working in analysis mode, this interruption would break the flow in conversations. “You worked SIOP/ESI,⁴ didn’t you?”

“Sure did.”

“You and I,” Alex hinted, “have similar clearances. Can we talk?”

“Can.”

“SIOP’s been compromised.” To let the information sink in, Alex paused a few seconds. He watched an immediate reaction on Brian’s face. It displayed disbelief, suspicion, and doubt all at once.

“How’d you know?”

“Keep track of things,” was all he confided for the present. His buddy would learn the secrets of The Castle soon enough. Covertly monitoring the skies for his former employees, DCA was the only thing that kept him busy. But it wasn’t enough to compensate for the idle time. And, there was too much of it.

“Go on,” Brian said. He’d taken several seconds to compose himself...and rightly so.

SIOP was a list of highly sensitive issues identifying the nation’s nuclear assets, among other things, used against foreign targets. The plan was designed as a massive strike force to include using the entire U.S. nuclear arsenal against potential threats. Initially, it was directed specifically at the Soviet Union and China, but it was later revised into a counterforce strategy with a “No first use” policy to prevent a MAD condition.

“Mutually Assured Destruction.” If one side launched their nuclear arsenal, the other would counterstrike with equal force, assuring nothing would survive. “Nobody wins.”

“Exactly.”

“Don’t remember that period well,” Brian remarked, “still in school.”

“Wouldn’t have mattered anyway,” Alex assured him, “paradigm’s changed. Superpower’s gone. Smaller nations acquired nuclear strike capabilities.”

“What’s the solution?”

“TACAMO.”

“TACAMO?”

“It’ll have to wait for another time.” Alex finished the remainder of his wine. “Getting late... head’s spinning. Don’t wanna forget my way home,” he joked.

“Okay.” Looking somewhat deprived, Brian seemed puzzled but didn’t press on. Instead, he reached for the check and raised an arm to prompt the waiter for the bill.

“My treat,” Alex insisted, taking the bill from his hand.

Brian conceded. “Thanks. Can we get together during the weekend?” He was already moving towards the exit.

Hasting after him, “We can do better,” Alex said. “Come by tomorrow. I’ll fix us breakfast and show you my place. Afterwards,” he suggested, “we could go to the lake for some windsurfing.”

“Terrific.” Brian sounded enthusiastic. “Miss the days on the lake. I’ll be there.” He briskly broke off and strode to his rental car.

Hoping he’d get to the hotel without incident, Alex watched his buddy drive off. He knew they’d had too much to drink, but reunions don’t happen often. Especially for two war buddies who hadn’t seen each other in years. He left the parking lot for the open highway, carefully watching his speed during the thirty-some miles back to Castle Rock.

NORTHCOM (Colorado)

“Home in on two-two-one-four.” It was obvious to the operators working the computer monitors that Rhonda Hicks, the boss, was agitated. The team of young cadets was hunched over the flat screen monitors anticipating her next decision or rather, command. Two minutes earlier, another red alert had popped up from a low orbital unit generated some 450 miles out in space. The mouse over identified an orbital drift alert. Red, above other colors, needed immediate attention.

Satellites, one of man’s greatest inventions—gift for some, curse to others, depending on their side of the border—drifted in and out of orbit on a daily basis. There was nothing unique about it. Most of the alerts were tagged green and yellow. They were usually cleared through internal self-correcting adjustments and demanded no immediate attention. It was the operator’s responsibility to log and monitor all errors. This one was different. It required special attention.

“KE series,” the action operator said. He seemed eager to please her. A recent recruit, the specific alert was a first for him.

“Pull up the parameters,” Rhonda ordered. It’d take a few seconds. Waiting for the database to search and assemble the record, her gaze touched on the rows of neatly dressed operators performing the monitoring duties. “Space Cadets,” they called themselves, the new breed of electronic technicians (ETs) or technology spies. Well disciplined on the job, wild when off duty: that was them. They knew how to get most out of life. *Unlike me*, Rhonda mulled. Fun, joy, and excitement were part of a distant past; her life had been nothing but career.

Eyes on the big screen, her thoughts were interrupted by the scrolling motion on the monitor. Data had just painted across the display. It was the KE datasheet. She studied it carefully. There was nothing unusual. Just as she started to order an error reset, a new alert popped up.

“Couple others,” the young operator called to get her attention. He pointed at the upper section of the computer screen. Accompanied by an irritating sound, a high-pitched alarm, several slow-moving images rapidly flashed on and off, demanding immediate attention.

“Give me a status report...and turn that damned thing off.”

Slight smirk on his face, the action operator shouted, “Right!” while executing the next keystrokes. *Here it comes*, she silently noted, *the expected wisecrack*. It never failed.

“NSA must be chasing chicks,” he smarted off.

Partially ignoring his feeble attempts at humor, Rhonda muttered into the building tension. “Wiseass. Orbit re-sync,” she corrected, “and,” shooting an annoyed glance at the young operator, “get me a hardcopy.” Regardless of the young cadet’s attitude, he reminded her of her own past. Back then, facing only a few floating space objects compared to today, she’d started out the same way. Space events were taken much more seriously. *Today*, she reminisced, *everybody’s a comedian*. “Keep tracking,” she ordered.

“Whatever,” the young muttered out of her earshot. “Not my problem.”

Angered by the unprofessional remark, “Quit mouthing off” she responded, “or I’ll have you cleaning toilets.”

“Sorry.” He knew better next time than being a wiseass.

“Get that status yet?” she demanded.

“Just a sec...” He hurriedly rushed to the print station, then handed her the report. “What’s that all about?” He shrugged at his grinning buddies nearby.

Rhonda ignored the comments and glanced at the printout. “Give me a global view.” She watched the monitor switch to high altitude. By now, other operators had been alerted. Their watchful eyes shifted to the enormous monitors mounted against the mission wall. The new vantage point showed additional objects on display. Positioned in orbit some 22,000 miles out, most were geostationary satellites. Unlike low orbit satellites whose functions were mostly surveillance, these were to broadcast information around the globe. In spite of the multiple alerts, these still seemed stabilized. *No changes there. After all*, she thought with contempt, *who’d mess with anything that high up?* “I’ll be in the office if there’s a change.” With printout in hand, Rhonda abruptly turned and stormed from the control room.

Waiting for shift change, the operator relaxed once more into the comfort of the computer chair. Hoping to save some face by his peers, “Everybody’s way too serious,” was his final comment.

In the quiet of the office, Rhonda sat at her desk and carefully studied the report. It revealed nothing unusual. Alarms were triggered daily. Some were from residual debris floating in and out of satellite paths others from passing meteors slicing through Earth’s atmosphere. Most objects followed a predetermined path today, but some well-established orbits seemed to be changing. Studying the printed report held firmly in her hands, a slight deviation to the general pattern of floating objects caught her scrutinizing

eyes. On the surface it looked like a self-adjusted orbital change, but a closer look revealed something else. The software had detected a flaw. An object had broken its calculated path.

Rhonda reached for the optical mouse resting on the desk pad. She used it to scroll across the computer screen. A click on the navigation brought up the Intel portal page. Hesitating, she moved the cursor across the rows of navigation bars. Each was a hot link connecting to a secure Intranet site labeled SPACECOM, NSA, MILNET, NORAD, in addition to others. Some were primary links necessary to the national defense; others were secondary level connections to military organizations. To effectively do her job she'd been given access to all defense related assets. This, however, required the highest security access above Top Secret.

Her software searches on current satellite activities, as well as scheduled space launches, revealed nothing unusual. Nothing new registered from any of the organizational commands. Nor was there a scheduled orbital decay registered from any possibly descending satellites.

Massaging both temples to clear her focus, she worried, "Hmmm." Nothing obvious jumped out at her. Dissatisfied with herself, she glanced at the printout one final time, then tossed it into the HOLD bin. Yet, try as she may, she could not eliminate an uneasy *why do I feel this way?* Her eyes sought out the many service rewards stuck on her office mantel. She should be proud of her achievements. *Why's my confidence faltering after all these years?*

After many years of dedicated service, to this day, Rhonda Hicks was still puzzled about why she was handed the responsibility of managing SPACECOM. It came as a complete surprise. It happened years ago after the last RIF. The change was part of a major reduction in force brought on by severe budget cuts. Jobs of this nature usually fell to a senior level commander or seasoned officer—male, that was. Although huge career strides had been made in recent decades, women still had to struggle to ascend the executive ladder. Even now, she could not entirely shake the sense of inferiority she felt when seated among high-ranking organizational heads during special conferences. At first, it'd taken some time for her to feel acceptance among those equal to her echelon. Now, after having gained recognition not only by making the right decisions, but also demonstrating superior management qualities, she was often called on to do much of the

organizational planning and decision making.

The job itself had been created with the inception of the supercomputer. If it were not for these fairly recent technological changes, there would be no space asset tracking. It would be almost impossible for a human being to effectively manage the minute-by-minute changes of all the space objects tracked in orbit. This especially held true with GPS assets. What followed in rapid succession was the creation of the many defense organizations, with SPACECOM being a newcomer. Whereas SPACECOM was a joint space surveillance and monitoring agency, the USAF maintained its own intelligence functions (as did the Army and Navy), tasked with space surveillance, nuclear detection monitoring, and, to a lesser extent, weather reconnaissance.

Amid her reflective thoughts, Rhonda became aware of her own breathing within the otherwise quiet in the office. *Maybe the satellites have settled back into their orbits.* So she hoped, but she knew it was only wishful thinking. *Problems never go away by themselves.*

Her eyes fell on the report stacked in the HOLD basket. Her hand subconsciously reached for it before she reread the printed pages. Again, there was nothing out of the ordinary, only the usual objects floating in space. Categorized, they included active and inactive satellites—spent rocket bodies amid thousands of fragmented debris. The report also predicted when and where a decaying space object would re-enter Earth's atmosphere to trigger the appropriate alert. Her thoughts kept drifting between the present and a successful career of the past.

In that she devoted most of her time to her career, there was little time left for personal life. It was the one aspect she'd always regretted. Routinely, over the course of years, she'd meet people but never anyone special. Most passed through for short assignments with eyes on a long-term field command. For an ambitious officer, that's where the opportunities were, but she lost out by having been born before equal gender opportunity.

In retrospect, Rhonda had always hoped to have a family and children. A dejected feeling came over her as she realized she'd been passed over—socially, that was. Past her prime to start a family, the most she could hope for at this stage in life was a meaningful relationship. *Getting sentimental again,* she cautioned herself.

Her mind had drifted from the duties at hand, but all things considered, she had no reason to complain. *What more could one want from life?* she

thought. Her eyes caught her own reflection in the desktop monitor. From her vantage point she looked as attractive as she did in her twenties. Lines in her face did not show unless she stood directly in front of the brightened bathroom mirror. For that, she worked hard to hold onto her shape. Gyms, cycling, skiing, and hiking made sure of that. Sometimes, when on walks, she even prayed she'd meet a man. She missed the touch of a man...the right man...one with pride and integrity, romance and passion. A heartfelt sigh escaped her lips. *Is wishful thinking all I have left?*

PENTAGON'S HAMMER DAY 2

CASTLE ROCK

Brian got up early. He looked forward to the visit with Alex. He was anxious to get going. On the way out he stopped by the hotel breakfast buffet to grab a bagel and a cup of coffee. It wasn't much of a breakfast, just enough to keep his stomach from growling. The drive took him north on I-25 toward Denver. Along the way he passed Garden of the Gods⁵ on his left. Telltale silhouettes jutting up vertically from an age-old ground, it was the region's landmark. He was struck by the magnificent beauty of the purple rock formation with names like Kissing Camels, Balancing Rock, and Tower of Babel.

Twenty minutes into the drive, a sign announced the next turnoff, "Castle Rock." It was his exit. Brian slowed the rental car on the off-ramp. In the distance to the left he could make out the contours of the Rockies. To his right was nothing but offshoots of the foothills.

Slightly puzzled, he shook the head. "Must have missed the place." He drove ahead at a crawl to find a turnoff. Almost a mile later, mounted within a cluster of railroad ties, he spotted an obscure mailbox. Stylishly encased by pine trees and sagebrush, the design perfectly blended in with the otherwise rocky terrain. Slowly driving on, he made out a construction planted amid smartly-designed landscaping. Not uncommon to this part of the country, he'd been informed, he finally understood what Alex meant by "earth shelter."

Living on the perimeter of the wilderness, inhabitants were not subjected to rigid building codes, and this one was definitely unique. To the surprise of the visitor, the earth shelter completely blended in with the terrain.

Brian took a minute to absorb the surrounding scenery, then parked. Shifting left in the driver seat, he could see the ground below drop off into the valley. Sprawled in the distance ahead were the pristine grounds of the Air Force Academy. To the right, if he craned his neck, he could follow up the steep slope supposedly housing the shelter.

Then his eyes caught a sparkling reflection. "There it is." A huge picture window, fronted by a wooden deck built on top of a heavy entrance door, caught his attention. He suspected it was the garage entrance.

"This," he muttered in the silence of the surrounding, "I've got to see." Stretching his legs on solid ground felt good. Nearby, he became aware of the

shuffled sound of footsteps.

Seconds later, a familiar voice sounded off. It was Alex. “Spotted you come up the valley. Thought I’d meet you,” he greeted, “otherwise you may have driven right by the place.”

Approaching the host, “You’d never suspect a home built into these hills,” Brian replied.

Beamed with pride Alex acknowledged the remark. “Purposely designed it this way.”

“Why, it’s a fortress,” Brian said, not without admiration.

“Safety reasons,” Alex explained, “in case of natural,” he gestured to the sky, “or unnatural disasters.”

“Tell me about it.” Brian lingered outdoors to absorb the surrounding hills.

“When I built,” Alex went on, “everybody from the permit registrar to the county assessor was bitching.” He, back then, shared a less than popular reputation. “I’m known around here,” he paused to lead his buddy up the driveway, “as the Mad German.”

“How appropriate.” Brian acknowledged a somewhat eccentric Alex, the German he was. It went unnoticed.

“They couldn’t get a handle on my design and construction plans, but finally gave me the permits I needed.” Brian was let into the domain of his longtime buddy. “Join me for breakfast?” Alex graciously invited the visitor into what he called The Castle. “I’ll show you the place after we eat.” He held the gate open. “In the meantime,” he suggested, “we talk.”

The steel door clanged shut. Brian found himself inside a fortress. He marveled at the interior. “How’d you come up with the idea?”

“Always wanted to build my own place,” Alex explained, “but the right way. Leaving it up to somebody else always caused me frustration. My biggest gripe was the shortcuts builders used to squeeze additional profits from the client.”

“I hear you.” Brian had never owned a home and could only appreciate the effort Alex had put into the place. He was somewhat awestruck by the size of the domicile. “Remarkable,” he muttered.

“They think,” Alex went on, “people are too stupid to notice, but they do. Problem is, most people are too polite to raise an objection or don’t have the knowledge to criticize the ‘so called experts.’ I, on the other hand,” he boasted, “notice any detail deviating from the specs.”

“I remember,” Brian recalled, “trained in industrial engineering.” Alex’s education, Brian remembered, included training in manufacturing, construction, and processing materials of every kind, make, and shape. “Knew you grew up in Germany but don’t remember where. The south,” he offered, “wasn’t it?”

“Bavarian Alps,” Alex replied. “It’s why I like it here so much.” He steered his guest into a spacious kitchen, offered him a chair by the table, and then set out to make breakfast. Brian watched while Alex prepared the breakfast.

While waiting, he walked the few paces to the picture window. He could feel the freshness of mountain air flowed into his lungs. He marveled the spectacular view, “Truly magnificent.”

“How’d you like your eggs?”

“Scrambled.”

Alex was a gracious host. There was nothing sloppy about the man. Efficient, well organized, but sometimes a little pragmatic. In between tending to the stove, he slid a plate of hash browns, German sausages, and scrambled eggs in front of his guest. The smell was enticing.

“Give me a minute to fix the pancakes.”

Brian was ready for a hearty breakfast, and homemade to boot. “Smells terrific.”

Minutes later, Alex, with an encouraging sigh, joined him at the table. “Help yourself.”

Brian, savoring a hearty meal, prepared a stack topped with real butter and dark maple syrup on the side. “Ah, yes,” he groaned, “the pleasures of a homemade breakfast.” Then he added, “Nothing like the real thing. Where’d you pick up fresh produce?” He hadn’t tasted farm fresh butter and syrup in ages.

“Plenty of farms around here,” he was told and offered a dish of delicious looking strawberries from across the table. “Gotta get up early to catch the produce before it hits the markets.” Alex took a bite from his triple stack, then, between chewing the food, said, “Building the place had been on my mind for years. Self-contained shelter provides tremendous cost savings, and what’s more,” he emphasized, “protection.”

“Protection?” The term cut a puzzled look across Brian’s face. Apparently, he hadn’t thought on those terms. “Getting paranoid in your old age?” Brian was joking but immediately realized Alex could be offended. He shot a

glance at his host seated across the table; it appeared he hadn't taken notice. What'd always amazed Brian was his buddy's calm demeanor. Nothing seemed to anger the man.

"Not at all," Alex continued. "Had it in mind ever since I came across some info." He looked up. "You know," he briefly stopped chewing the sausage, "guarded intelligence."

"How's that?"

"Remember SIOP?" Alex picked up on the previous night's conversation.

"Go on."

"People in the '50s," he elaborated, "had the idea of building earth shelters to protect them from nuclear attacks. Not that it would have made much difference. Nuclear fallout would have killed everybody within weeks." Unofficially, the act was to pacify a population ignorant of the dangers from radiation. "Only few scientists knew the true effects."

"I remember," Brian recalled, "the government conducting tests out in the Pacific after WWII." He hoped Alex didn't consider him completely uninformed. Although his scope of interest was broad, it did not quite compare to Alex's knowledge base.

Used to interruptions, Alex continued. "Right. My intention was adoptive for the long term."

"Enlighten me."

"Take famine for instance," he explained further. "It's not out of the question if you believe in global warming or, for that matter, a new ice age. Could go either way. We don't know enough." He encouraged Brian to have more pancakes. "How about a regional catastrophe? What happened with Katrina could happen anywhere."

"Flood in the Rockies," Brian joked.

"Funny, ha...ha—no." Alex paused with a smile. "Starving people will fight to the death for food and survival. I'm more concerned with terrorism."

"How could terrorism affect this place?" Brian turned curious. "Place's surrounded by a wall of defenses." Unknown to the general population or outsiders to the area, Colorado Springs was built on defense. With the Air Force to the north, infantry to the east, NORAD to the south, and the Rockies protecting the west, one would think no force on Earth could break into the area. The only vulnerable spot was from above, but the nation's defense grid had that covered.

"Lateral harm," Alex rationalized. "Threat from terrorism is growing."

With worldwide access to dirty weapons, chemical compounds, and biological agents, it's only a matter of time before any of them will be deployed." Control over nuclear matter, in recent years, may have been tightly enforced by IAEA, but that wasn't necessarily the case with unregulated supporting elements just as lethal.

"I see your point," Brian agreed.

"Wanted a place isolated and completely self-contained." The place was directly built into the hillside leaving only the shaded windows exposed. "Could just as easily have enclosed the entire place but couldn't imagine living without sunlight. Besides," he paused with a gesture at the picture window, "who'd deny the spectacular view?"

"Totally," Brian consented. "Must have cost a fortune."

"Didn't come cheap—reinforced composites specially treated against shock waves."

Brian was genuinely impressed. "How long did it take to build?"

"Couple of years." There was a hint of pride in Alex's voice. "Designed the infrastructure using solid I-beams and steel frames. Did a lot of digging and carting dirt with a couple of workers I'd hired."

"What about utilities?"

"There's no electrical hookup. I get power from solar panels. With mobile and satellite for entertainment, don't need phone lines either. Come on," he gestured, "I'll show you around." Receiving barely visitors he didn't get much chance to show off the place. "Place's got three levels," he explained on the way down the hall. "You came in on the first level, the garage. Same floor are utilities for heat, water, power, and waste. Second level holds guest rooms, living room, bathrooms, and kitchen. Top, as you can see, is my domain. Next door's the master bedroom."

"Remarkable."

"Here." He led the way. "My den. Sound system's built into all rooms, as well as central air and heat. Let me show you my favorite spot."

Brian stepped into a huge room. "Jacuzzi!" he exclaimed. One side held the spa, and, elevated off the floor, the other was occupied by a California king size bed. It provided full view into the mountains. He grew more envious by the minute. "Some people sure know how to live," he remarked with envy, noticing to the built-in wine cellar.

"That's not all." Alex gestured for him to follow. At the end of the hall they took the stairway to a basement. Inside, Brian noticed the utility room

stacked with latest state-of-the-art equipment. At the far end of the corridor a sign blocked the steel door, “Keep Out.”

“Keep out what?”

“Derelicts, misfits, oddballs, and other intruders.” With his dry sense of humor, Alex chuckled, then pushed a button. A door slid quietly open.

At the far end of the hall he noticed a steel ladder mounted into the wall. He stepped up to inspect. It led up a darkened shaft sealed by an escape hatch. “Impressive,” he readily admitted, “but why the escape?”

“Remember SIOP?”

“How could I forget?” Brian, as well as Alex had worked on the policies for their respective agencies. Where the two differed were organizational procedures. Where one was strategic defenses, the other was surveillance.

“Just recently,” Alex explained, “came across information quite disturbing.”

“Go on.”

“Been monitoring the ether waves...”

“Hey,” Brian cut in, “that’s my turf.”

Alex knew very well the covert organization his buddy worked for. “Yeah,” he agreed, “but does your agency share information.” There was a halting silence. “Thought so,” then continued with his findings. “As I said,” his face had taken on that of real concern, “our defense system has been compromised.”

Brian was keenly aware of current world events. What he did not expect was anybody outside the Agency to be knowledgeable, especially not a retired contractor. But in fairness, he did not know all of his buddy’s activities during the past years and present. He had to feel him out. “Could you be more specific?”

“We’re about to be invaded.”

What he just heard was an information bombshell he had not expected. He had to somehow defuse it. Aside his organization’s echelon members, the president with immediate military commanders all services, the JCS, the information was classified above Top Secret. The nation and its citizens had been shielded form any form of attack threat whether rumored or true, pending or imminent. Releasing this kind of sensitive information could prove extremely chaotic.

“Where’d you get your info?”

“Not important. What’s important is the nature and that it’s happening.”

“Think we’re a bit paranoid. Aren’t we?” Even though they were war buddies with similar access clearances, he could not allow an outsider to interfere. He had to protect the integrity of his organization. Being an insider, perhaps he was getting pumped for information. To steer the conversation away from all sensitive issues he changed the subject. “What’s your next step?”

Alex must have realized he was treading on foreign boundaries. He probably did not want to compromise their friendship. With a dismissive gesture he remarked, “Doesn’t look like wind’s gonna pick up for windsurf. If you want,” he offered, “we could hang out in the spa with a couple of beers.”

“Fine with me,” Brian heartily agreed. “Amazing what you did with the place.”

“As I said,” Alex motioned around, “I wanted to build my own place at least once. With all that’s going on in the world, it seemed the right time. Besides, I took an early retirement to dedicate myself full-time to the construction.”

“What about the job?”

“Formed my own consulting firm. Got the independence I needed. Twenty-five years on defense contracts is enough career for one lifetime.” They’d arrived back upstairs. Alex gestured at the bathroom door. “There’s an extra pair of trunks in there.”

“Thanks.”

“I’ll get the beer.” Alex headed for the fridge. “Meet you in the Jacuzzi.”

Ten minutes later, when he arrived at the hot top, Alex had the beer waiting. “Thanks.” Brian exhaled deeply as he slowed his tense body into the heated water. “Man,” he mused, “this is living.” He was content to let the Jacuzzi jets massage his back. “What else have you been up to?”

He was getting comfortably seated in the tub, “Last project,” Alex replied, “five years with BeeMoh.”

“Ballistic’ Missiles Office?”

“Yeah,” he remarked, “contracted to work on the Rail Garrison.”

“MX Missiles?” Brian shot Alex a surprised glance. “Wasn’t that terminated by Reagan?”

“Right,” Alex agreed. “Instead, I was given a project with REACT.”

“Missiles?”

“Yeah,” was his diminutive answer, “quite a challenge.”

From what Brian knew Alex had no prior experience in nuclear technology when handed the responsibility of hardening communications and power feeds to the underground Minuteman and Peacekeeper launch facilities.

Adjusting the water temperature, he stated, “Fortunately, I’d been given access to the necessary material.”

“Classified...I presume.”

“Some. Remember the tests conducted during the ‘50s at places like Eniwetok, Bikini, and Johnston Island?”

“Vaguely.” He was still a youngster when it came to that history.

“At the time,” Alex continued, “TRW had the contract to record the test results. If you’re interested, I’ll enlighten you.”

“Yeah...but,” Brian beckoned, “sure could use another beer.” He wasn’t going anywhere. This place suited him just fine. His face said it all: *what more could a man want than soaking in a Jacuzzi with a buddy and view to die for?* “Just like old times,” he said, tossing over the empty can.

ISLAMABAD (Rawalpindi, Pakistan)

To the outside world, REX Chemicals seemed like just another processing plant. This one, however, unknown to the uninformed, was for converting chemicals and refining soluble substances. To gain access to the grounds, yellow hardhats were mandatory and worn by employees and visitors alike. The policy was strictly enforced. Through that, visitors could be spotted easily. With them, the hardhats ranged from a cover prominently propped atop a bushy hairdo to a bobbing shell ill-fitted on a balding head. On any given day, a group of visitors was hurriedly rushed in and out without anybody taking the time to properly size the adjusting bands. At times, to the humor of plant employees, it'd only take a slight gust of wind to catch a hardhat and tumble it wildly across the steel-enforced structures and concrete pavements with the visitor giving chase.

Today, one such visitor was a tall, muscular, and deeply-tanned guest. He had quite a few inches of height on the rest of the crowd. He, unlike the others, firmly held onto his hardhat while gazing upwards at the gigantic, neatly stacked forest of silos spanning the immensity of this modern day chemical processing plant.

“...here we have the toxic waste filtration facilities, and over there is...” Eagerly gesturing in the direction of the distant structures, the plant manager informed the group that was the colossal manufacturing plant. By now, as stated prominently on the nametag fastened on his white lab coat, most had identified the host as Abdul Baser. The tall visitor, aside from watching the others tightly clustered around the spokesperson, had been intently listening and watching. This specific visitor made a mental note of their faces. It was a practice he used to record everything in his passage. It'd saved his life on more than one occasion.

To gain access to the plant he'd registered as a member of the foreign trade commission. For that, he could have easily sent one of his lieutenants, but, because of its importance, he needed to check out the facility firsthand. He wouldn't entrust the task to anyone else. The information was too paramount for the mission. Today, his nametag identified him as Aasim Karim, an arbitrary name he'd picked. The next time and place it'd be some other name. Forgers were only too eager to produce permits and visas whenever generous compensation was involved.

The scheduled tour was almost over. There was only one more stop, “The Underground.” For that, he'd have to break away from the crowd.

While everybody in the group seemed preoccupied with the tour host, the tall visitor was momentarily distracted. The gadget in his back pocket began to vibrate. He'd been waiting for the call. He fished for it, moving off to the side. A swift flip opened the cover of the sleek iPhone. Squinting against the bright sun he read the text message. "Contact is Omar One," it said. Relaxing once more, he tugged the mobile back into his trousers.

Seconds later he felt a slight tug on the sleeve of his jacket. Speaking in a muffled tone, a voice announced, "Omar One."

He turned to face the tall visitor. Giving him a quick assessment, he responded, "Shahadah." A nod from the darkened face confirmed the contact. He tugged on Aasim Karim's sleeve to pull him away from the crowd. "This way."

With rapid strides he led the visitor toward the nearby service elevator. Once inside, the door shut with a noisy clang. The platform began its rapid descent, dropping several levels below the ground. After a jerky stop, the visitor was led into a completely different world, a world of secrets contained within 25,000 square feet of steel and concrete. They'd arrived at the underground sector for BIO Safety Level 4.

The tall one demanded, "What's this?"

"Research containment ward," Abdul explained, "medical care for patients who may have been accidentally exposed to hazardous agents, or have acquired a highly infectious disease." While handing off further information, the visitor was led along a spacious and lengthy hallway.

The current floor housed a 12-bed research ward in which clinical trials of vaccines and drugs were conducted. In general, the institute was a mix of military and civilian staff including physicians, microbiologists, pathologists, chemists, molecular biologists, physiologists, and pharmacologists. It also included technical and administrative staff to support the research.

Farther down the corridor, a number of patients occupied beds completely isolated from each other through synthetically sealed off insulated chambers. The hurried visitor momentarily paused. He was taking a special interest.

The scene was pathetic to watch; the patients' faces strained in agony. With twitching bodies and jerky limbs, they were attended by what seemed a calloused medical staff. "Casualties of recent bio wars and lab accidents," the visitor was told. "Please follow." Abdul gestured ahead. The tall one was led to an isolation crosswalk leading to the next level. He was steered towards a prominently mounted red and yellow caution sign. "Radiation Hazard," it

read. It was the entrance to BL-3.

Level 3 housed an elaborate laboratory complex. It contained an array of isolation chambers occupied by a staff of busy chemists stooped over high-powered micron instruments among endless rows of caged animals bounding energetically within the soundproof glass enclosures. Sandwiched between neatly arranged plates projected onto the micron scope, he was invited to view a variety of deadly bacterial strains. Under the naked eye the plates appeared immaculately clean, if not sterile. Viewed through the microscope, they were, in fact, Hell's Kitchen.

To the visitor, the world of deadly microbes was meaningless. He was indifference and impatience and said so, "Move on."

He was hastened to BL-2, the chemical lab. Immediately, his interest perked. He was attracted to the delivery mechanism. It was here where the lethal bacteria were mixed with a delivery agent. An array of safely contained colorful glass-enclosed cylinders was waiting to be deployed. "What's the status of the agents?" Steel hardened eyes drilled into the host, who was shifting uneasily on his feet.

"We are making progress," Abdul reported. He'd sensed the visitor's mounting frustration. Suddenly he felt threatened. *This man may appear affable but, he surmised, surely doesn't act accordingly.* He'd incorrectly assessed the visitor's personality before he'd noticed the circular scar edged into the left side of his jaw.

"How long before I can expect the quantity we need delivered?"

"We are," he was assured, "working around the clock." Omar refused to commit to a specific schedule. "We will let you know."

"Not good enough." The response was unfaltering. It was a direct threat. "I will hold you responsible."

Omar began to sweat profusely. His breath became labored. He almost fainted. He steadied his body against the doorframe before speaking. "There are many factors you must consider."

"No further excuses," was the threatening command. The stranger abruptly turned towards the exit. It was an indication to end the tour.

"Not to worry," was the host's final reply. With a sigh of relief he hastened the unwelcome caller to the exit. He was anxious to put as much distance between him and the threatening visitor as possible.

CASTLE ROCK

In the relaxed atmosphere of the Castle, Brian and Alex were enjoying the day. “You worked missile design?” Brian picked up their earlier conversation.

Alex slid into the Jacuzzi, handing over a fresh can of beer. “Sure did.”

“Ah,” Brian graciously accepted the iced crusted can, “this is grand.” Seeping into his heated body, the liquid felt great. “What project?”

“Missile defense.” With the end of the Cold War, missile production was halted by both superpowers. Following the SALT⁶ treaty, the U.S. missile system had been scaled down to a minimum, as was the other side’s. Although a sizable forces, it still remained active at places like Minot, Grand Forks, and Warren.

“Thought the silos had been dismantled.”

“Not at all,” Alex insisted. He was emphatic about it. “It’s our only assurance to keep abreast of hostile nations. Russia’s doing the same, and the Chinese.”

“Chinese?”

“Yeah, but,” Alex proclaimed. “They keep a pretty low profile. Don’t exactly know what they’re up to.” Years earlier, he’d been put in charge of engineering the last upgrade. It was to become the last major budget spending by the U.S. government on strategic silos. Since then, the missile arsenal had been pretty much held in a dormant, idle state. Officially, to the public’s eyes, it had been shut down but could be scaled up for rapid deployment on a minute’s notice. Operations and maintenance crews were busy around the clock to maintain and keep the arsenal at a ready state.

“Who’s running the show?”

“SAC has watch teams on alert. Variety of communication systems provides the national command authority with virtually instantaneous contact to the Triad.”

“Space, sea, and ground-based defenses?”

To meet warhead levels set by START II⁷ treaty, the government decided to permanently de-scale the remaining missiles. Where they used to hold multiple reentry vehicles, the new configuration called for a single system. To counter increased accuracy in the Soviet missile system, SAC needed a new missile fitted with the most advanced technology. That led to the commission of the Peacekeeper design. Alex made a motion to exit the tub.

“What about the Peacekeeper?” Brian’s curiosity peaked. *This is getting interesting.*

“I’ll get to that.” Alex panted, getting out of the tub. He quickly towed off his steaming legs and torso. “I’ll make us a couple sandwiches.” He headed for the pantry.

“Great.” Brian reclined in the soaking liquid with streams of water jets massaging his body. He was completely relaxed.

Minutes later, Alex returned with a stack of smoked ham on German rye sandwiches. Stepping back into the tub, he placed the plate near his buddy.

“Go on,” Brian insisted.

“One day,” Alex picked up the conversation, “a load of totally antiquated equipment arrived.” They were huge cabinets painted in customary Air Force blue. “My job was to strip out and rebuild the guts with retrofitted components.” After removing the covers Alex had not been able to believe his eyes. “My God,” he’d prompted the delivery guys, “where’d this come from? This belongs in the junkyard!”

“Junkyard?” Brian was equally astounded, hearing about the supposed antiquated systems.

Alex soon learned the purpose for the outdated technology. To survive a nuclear strike, the equipment could not be built with modern day electronics. “We ever get clobbered on U.S. soil the explosion would destroy everything at ground zero. Ensuing blasts would immobilize every piece of electronics in the region. Only parts surviving would be discrete components.”

“We’re talking,” Brian asked, “transistors, diodes, and capacitors mounted on printed circuit boards?”

“Right — anything newer like present day ICs would get burned up by beta and gamma rays.” X-rays were lethal to humans but other types of rays did severe damages to hardware. “And that’s where our current dilemma lies.”

“Dilemma?”

“Hold that thought,” Alex begged off. His eyes had picked up a slight motion nearby. His mobile was vibrating. He strained for it but let it drop from his slippery fingers. It landed on the wooden floor with a clang. “Dammit.” He had to jump from the Jacuzzi to retrieve it. Brows furrowed at the caller ID, he said, “Gotta take this one.” He turned and disappeared into his private quarters.

Almost ten minutes passed before he returned neatly dressed.

“What...?”

“Wanna take a ride?” Alex urged. He was already headed for the stairway.

“Where...?”

“I’ll be in the garage.” His fleeting words sounded urgent.

Brian had been caught off guard. He hastened to the guest room to catch up. Five minutes later, speculating what was up, he slid into the passenger seat of a sleek coupe.

WARREN AIR FORCE BASE (LCC)

Right hand gripping the handle bar, Brian exclaimed, “Wow! This is a magnet for cops.” He couldn’t help but admire his buddy’s wheels. He had barely had time to jump in and slam the door shut before Alex stepped on it. The deep red BMW was already on its way, fishtailing wildly towards the valley. “Ever get ticketed?”

“Every time,” Alex beamed, “but Gov takes care of it.”

“Privileged?” He shot an envious look at him. “Must be nice.”

“Comes with the territory.” Alex had a heavy foot on the road, especially in an emergency call.

“By the way,” Brian turned curious, “what’s the emergency?”

Alex had immediately recognized the caller. It was his SAC contact. A “Code Red” had gone out to all mission critical personnel. He’d been informed that there’d been a malfunction with some missiles. An exercise scheduled for an early morning test firing had to be scrapped. When the crew on alert was unable to provide a fix, the call was elevated to Tier II, when that failed to Tier III, Alex. He was the last resort. There was no higher level above Alex’s skills. Calls of this urgency were rare and required immediate attention.

This morning, Alex was pushing it. The Beemer was speeding north on I-25. “Ever been to a silo?”

“Heck no!” Brian exclaimed. The revelation came as a complete surprise. “That’s where...?”

“Today’s your lucky day.”

“What’s the deal?”

Alex outlined his status as support contractor. Since he’d been responsible for the last design upgrade to the system, he was called in to resolve issues the onsite staff couldn’t handle.

It’d take a couple of hours to drive the 180 miles to the silo farm. At times, he’d get flagged by radar, but always got out of getting ticketed by flashing his credentials, with a brief explanation about the emergency.

“What can I expect once we get there?”

“Resistance, intimidation, hostility.”

“I meant the system.” He eyed his buddy with a hint of suspicion.

“Oh that,” Alex countered. “Nothing!”

“Nothing?”

Alex saw the confused look on Brian’s face. He felt the need to explain, at

least the fundamentals. “All right,” he offered. “...command and control is exercised from several independent Launch Control Centers.”

“What? Missiles?”

“Minuteman and Peacekeeper. Silos,” Alex explained, “are staged twenty to a hundred fifty miles from the central support base. Missiles are clustered in wings according to ballistic missiles flight policy. LCCs⁸ are buried by forty feet of dirt and concrete extending down a hundred plus feet to protect the capsule....self-sufficient to sustain life for several weeks...small crew operated the system on a twenty-four hour shift...flight of ten missiles remotely monitored with backup of ten more.”

“What about inside?”

“Launch console, computers, comm equipment, lavatory, and sleeping quarters. Alerts are scheduled periodically to maintain proficiency. Pretty noisy during those times. Missile Crews,” he explained further, “although seated only twelve feet apart, communicate by shouting or headphones.”

Alex shifted his attention to the terrain up ahead. “That’s it in a nutshell.”

“What’re we looking for?”

“Small barn.”

“Something like that?” Brian gestured at the distance ahead.

“Like that.” Alex gave a nod. He’d had the building in sight for some distance already. They drove up to what looked like an old farm. Despite its obvious age, on closer inspection, it was well kept up. What made it unusual was the tight perimeter fence, topped by an array of antennas.

“What’s with the receivers?” Brian had noticed a forest of transmitters and receivers protruding above ground. “VLF and UHF,” he guessed. “Whole damned gamut.”

“Spectrum coverage,” Alex agreed, “backup for backup with more backup.” A command signal could be received from any known transmission equipment in the military’s radio and microwave arsenal.

Leaving two tire tracks on the dusty ground, the Beemer slid to a halt. Two sentries popped up out of nowhere demanding ID checks. “Looks like we’ve been expected.” Brian was impressed at the organizational efficiency. Security had been alerted of their arrival miles ahead. Alex flashed his ID. He didn’t have to say much. Badge said it all, “SAC,” *showcase for the world’s elite*.

An escort jeep dropped them off by the service entrance. An access elevator took them below. Seconds later, they faced a blast proof, glass-

encased steel door. Two faces from the inside were staring back. The heavy steel retracted with a clang. Six thousand pounds of solid steel slowly widened to allow entrance.

“Bauer,” Alex announced, “this is Harris.”

Despite his reputation with SAC he had to identify himself. Every visit there’d be new faces. Rotation schedules were frequent at this isolated place.

Thumbing at Brian, “He can’t come in,” the sentry gestured after checking IDs. Brian did not have proper credentials for the underground LCC.

Alex promptly turned to leave, “If he goes,” Alex insisted, “I go.”

“Wait up,” the sentry called after him. “I can resolve it.” He then picked up a phone cradled to the wall to make the call. Seconds later he Okayed both visitors.

“What’s up?” Alex questioned the crew commander.

The crew chief came directly to the point. They had a problem. And the problem had to be resolved, *immediately*. He gave Alex a short briefing on the way to the command console.

“Status alarms,” Alex was informed, “when initiating the launch sequence.” He then led the visitors to an array of flashing indicators blinking away on the master control panel.

“May I?” Alex gestured and eased his frame into the vacated commander’s seat. He was given ready access to manage the system, then took a few seconds to reacquaint himself with the switches, indicators, and pushbuttons. It’d been some time since his last visit. Reassured once more, he was in total control of the operation.

His prominent fingers glided expertly over the various test buttons, activating switches, knobs, and keys. To the observer he appeared much like a piano player. The alarms persisted. The command chair was mounted on highly polished rails. Using an extended leg, he shot his body back and forth between computer keyboards and launch module. Each simulation ended with more brightly lit indicators flashing in red and yellow followed by a software-generated alarm painted across the display screen:

“S Y S T E M . . . A B O R T . . . S Y S T E M . . . A B O R T . . . !!!”

Brian was stooped over Alex’s shoulders. He seemed entranced by Alex’s every move playing the keyboard. With a few keystrokes, the software executed a series of internal commands, testing connections and electronics, drilling into the various levels of the system. It only took seconds for the software to respond with: “No Error Found.”

“Not a damned thing.” Alex shrugged. Slightly troubled, he turned to face the launch commander. “What’s the chance for a launch?”

“Impossible!” was the venomous response. Uttered with finality, it denied all options.

“Gotta do it,” Alex insisted.

The flight commander seemed to squirm by the very thought. “Can’t do it.”

Alex knew from past experience it’d be almost impossible to get that authorization. Not only would it impact the defense status, but the action would directly reflect on the crew’s career performance. The commander’s track record would be on the line, but it couldn’t be helped.

“I’ll take the consequences.” He always did. After all, he was getting paid well to do the work. This was not the usual error condition. It called for extreme measures. It meant a test launch. A launch as close to the real thing as could be measurably possible.

“Can’t do it.” The commander stood his ground. His demeanor indicated the request was ridiculous. “Not a chance.”

“As I see it,” Alex insisted, “you’ve got no choice.” *Must been a first*, he thought, and worse yet, *orders from a civilian?*

Alex tried to keep his cool. He insisted it was absolutely necessary. “Software doesn’t show anything...controls work perfectly...problem’s intermittent...probably triggered by life action sequence.” He went on, “Could be the vibration. Live launch’s the only way. What’s your decision? I’ll take full responsibility.”

The launch officer was fuming. He was in a bind. It showed in his face. Either way he was screwed. “Gotta check with NORAD.”

Brian had a chance to watch Alex in action. He seemed highly impressed and marveled at his buddy’s knowledge. A pat on the shoulder got Alex’s attention. Brian gestured at the rows of racks lined against the back wall. “What’s with the equipment?”

Head turned, Alex briefly paused. His gaze followed the direction Brian had indicated. “What equipment?”

“Over there.” Brian gestured. Along the perimeter of the capsule was a series of tall, square shaped cabinets, neatly aligned against the back wall. They were painted in standard Air Force blue.

“That’s,” Alex said with a grin, “the junkyard equipment I was tellin you about earlier.”

The commander returned. Alex studied the man's approach. He could tell a lot from body language. *Not a happy man.* The man's face was red with anger. Alex didn't care. He was here to fix a problem. *Big problem. If looks could kill,* he thought facing the man, *I'd be a dead man.* He challenged the approaching officer with a smirk.

"Your ballgame." It was a deliberate and vicious response.

He sidestepped to allow the unwelcome intruders to get to the launch console. A hateful look followed his every move. It bordered on rage. The man's career would be over with a failed launch. With forced reluctance the commander slammed his body into the captain's seat to initiate the launch sequence. Alex, aware of the commander's every move, at a ready for the launch, was seated twelve feet away in the secondary command seat.

NORAD COMMAND

Benjamin “Ben” Jackson should have been a happy man. But he wasn’t. Not today. Not after receiving an urgent call from the mountain. He had just sunk a birdie on the fifth when his mobile chirped. To be on the course was his favorite pastime. He spent a lot of time here. As a matter of fact, he spent more time on the course than at the station. Aside from the customary conflicts somewhere on the globe, things had been relatively quiet since 9/11. Conflicts were overseas. And he, Air Force General, NORAD, wasn’t directly involved. His job was to protect the nation. Air and space was his forte. “Defense,” that was. It’d take an act of sheer ignorance for any foreign nation to breach his space. “Let them try,” he’d advised his peers on more than one occasion.

He’d achieved what others in the Air Force could only dream of: Brigadier general, the top grade officer in charge of the nation’s most prominent authority, the North American Defense Command. He was a tough, no-nonsense man. *The Smoker*, he mused. That’s what they called him. Rarely was he seen without a cigar clamped tightly between his lips, unlit, of course. It was an old habit, hard to break, even in the No Smoking zone. To him, it symbolized a reflection of much happier days. The days when smoking was still fashionable. Today, it had become a stigma. A stigma not unlike the position he held.

Ever since 9/11, there had been grumblings about closing the Mountain—*His Mountain*. In recent years, much pressure was exerted from congressional members who viewed the facility as obsolete. *Short sighted bastards*, he’d grumble to himself when reading another negative editorial. It wasn’t his fault they’d dropped the ball. He also knew there were much more capable defense commands around the nation’s perimeters to handle the ever-growing threat, the threat of terrorism. *Granted*, both of brows furrowed with contempt at Congress, *dated yes, but closing? Idiots!*

The call taking him from the course was priority, initiated by Warren. It didn’t indicate an emergency. He was glad about that. Nevertheless, priority was urgent enough to report to the station, the Mountain. He tried to watch his speed, but on this road one hardly ever encountered a radar trap. Emergency calls were common. The police, most times, turned the other cheek for speeders. *What’s higher than protecting the nation’s safety?* He couldn’t think of any other reason. Fourteen hundred feet up in the distance, the antenna farm slowly crept into view. It was hard to imagine the

complexity from his current vantage point. Below, the only thing visible was the gaping hole at the base of the mountain. For a visitor, it could just have been another coal mining entrance.

A few miles later, the guard shack came into view. He slowed the vehicle to a stop. As always, he was immediately recognized. The sentries on duty threw him a smart salute. He handed over his ID. With him it was mostly formality but still enforced. Rules are rules, and regulation demanded an ID check for everybody. Seconds later, he was waved on. A short ride through the tunnel brought him to the parking zone. It fronted a set of massive blast doors. Today, as most days, they were open. "Thank God," he muttered. Lightly short winded by the altitude, he briskly headed for a set of stairs leading up the most prominent of a dozen buildings. "Must not be an emergency," he puffed, but wouldn't know for sure until he entered the War Room.

As soon as he entered, he became aware he'd been expected. The place was busier than usual. It appeared his staff was waiting for a decision.

Jackson shot a glance at the array of flat screen monitors neatly segmented into one enormous display. He was about to seek out the heads of his staff to get briefed when he was handed the phone by a staff member. It was the yellow phone. His heart rate shot up. Reserved only for national emergencies, in recent years, it rarely rang.

"Sir." Smartly dressed in a duty uniform, his assistant handed him the phone.

"NORAD⁹," Jackson answered.

"Warren," the caller identified himself, "Missile command." It was a call nobody wanted, especially not him. Not this close to retirement. It was *The Call*, a call always associated with trouble.

"Go." He wished he'd taken the day off. His lower ranking deputy would have been in command. But it was his day off as commands were handed off frequently during quiet times.

"Defense Sector Delta," the voice demanded. "Need launch permission."

Jackson's blood pressure immediately shot up. He knew the sector well. He'd been there several times. But only to host visiting dignitaries interested in seeing the missile system. Just up the road on the Colorado/Wyoming border, it used to be the showcase for MAD. There was a time, just after the SALT II treaty, when Soviet dignitaries demanded access to this, and similar facilities in Montana and the Dakotas. "USSR here?" he'd raged, "The

United States? Enemy at his door steps, the world's most critical defense system?" *Unheard off*. But that was twenty years ago. He'd calmed down since quite a bit, until just now, "What's the emergency?" Immediately, visions of gloomy days long past returned.

"Need authorization for test launch."

Jackson exhaled the breath of air he'd held for close to a minute. *Thank God*, he prayed in silence. He was immensely relieved. *Only an exercise*. His heart had almost leaped from his chest. *Pressure's off*. "Whatcha need?"

"Full launch activation."

Again, his heart rate shut up enough causing the face to redden. A simulation launch was almost as bad as full activation. "Let Vandenberg handle it." It meant alerting a number of commands. And he'd be the focus. *Not good. Not good for any career*.

"Can't," the missile commander insisted, "problem's local."

"Listen here," Jackson fumed, "if you can't get somebody confident to fix your missiles, I'll get your ass replaced." *That'll shake them up*. Threatening worked. It always did.

"Sorry, sir," the field commander begged off, "we've tried."

"Then get somebody out there," he ordered, "who knows the system."

"Already did...Bauer's onsite."

"Alex Bauer?"

"Yes, sir."

This takes some serious evaluation. He contemplated a few seconds. Only one person could authorize a Minuteman missile launch: the President.

"Standby," he held off Warren, "will call back." He handed the receiver back to the assistant. "Get me the White House." Minutes later, the president was on the line. "Mr. President," Jackson began, "we have a situation." He briefly explained the urgency of the missile test.

The president advised him of political implication if things went wrong. "How critical?" he wanted to know. This was a first since he'd been in office.

"No other options available." Jackson had other concerns. "What about the press?"

"I'll handle that," was the reply. "Just make sure nothing goes wrong." It ended the call.

Jackson was relieved. Stalling the distant command, he ordered, "Standby," then pulled the SIOP folder from the shelf. It listed the latest points of contact information. He yanked the cradle from the base and pushed

the primary button on the hot line. Immediately, he was connected with several major commands to give the clearance. Last call went to the LCC commander, Warren Missile Command. “You’ve got it.”

Jackson could already envision the steps and action that followed next. Within seconds, the missile crew received the authorization, a coded message. After verifying the message's authenticity, the mission commander would relay the order to launch. For that, he would unlock a small, red “Emergency War Order” safe located above the deputy commander's control panel. Within the box were two launch keys. Each officer would take one key and insert it into the control console, one at each end. The missile operators, “Missileers,” then strapped themselves into the rail-guided console chairs to start the final countdown. As the commanding officer called out the alphanumeric codes, the deputy commander would verify and repeat the message: “Bravo...Bravo...Alpha...Alpha...Lima...Lima...Indigo...Indigo.” At the end of the countdown sequence, the officers simultaneously turned their launch keys.

To prevent unauthorized missile launches or test failures, the Air Force employed several fail-safes. For example, both officers had to turn their spring-loaded launch keys in unison. Because the launch switches were 12 feet apart, it was impossible for one person to turn both keys at once. The final command to launch also required a vote from outside of Minuteman—another LCC, or airborne command.

Fractions after the second vote was received, the “LAUNCH IN PROCESS” would commence. In seconds, the silos were hot. Next, explosive gas generators would force the eighty-ton launch doors covering the silos open, the nuclear-tipped missile would lift and begin streaming toward a target half a world away. As each missile blasted from its silo, its upper umbilical cable severed, triggering the “MISSILE AWAY” indicator on the commander's control panel. In seconds, the Missileers would complete their mission. It'd be an awesome spectacle for anyone witnessing the launch. The missiles would take less than half an hour to reach a target on any point on the globe.

WARREN AIR FORCE BASE (LCC)

“Missile Alert...Missile Alert...” The automated klaxon reverberated wildly through the LCC. A fierce sound, it tore on the nerve edges even of the seasoned. For the non-combatant, the untrained, the visitor, it created confusion, even chaos. On top of it, the hellish sound reporting, “Incoming missiles...forty minutes to impact,” didn’t help dampen the nightmare. Sirens had gone off at the same instant accompanied by half a dozen strobe lights. The pulsating red and yellow radiance shook the underground nerve center into action. Crews scrambled for their assigned duty stations. It did not matter how much experience one had at this outpost, the effects of a warning were always the same; it rattled the nerves.

“Report to stations,” the crew commander was yelling at the top of his voice. “DM,” he shouted. The deputy missile commander, second in charge, his first live mission, tripped on a trouser leg. It sent him hop-skipping along the narrow corridor.

“On the way,” he yelled into the chaos. Running along in haste, he had trouble zipping up his pants. “Come on...come on,” he urged himself on, making it to the armored safe mounted into the wall. One hand fumbled with the zipper while the other went for the dial. He needed the codes. In his rush he misdialed the first time. Already he’d wasted thirty seconds. Time was critical, regardless of mission, whether real or an exercise. The crew never knew. It took two more fumbled attempts to finally open the safe. His hand was quivering from nerves stretched to the breaking point. “The codes,” he barked. His fingers rifled through the neatly stacked folders. *Calm down*, he instructed himself.

“Top one,” the commander yelled over his shoulder.

The DM tore the seal to get to the plastic plates. One he broke himself; the commander palmed the second. It took both hands to break the plastics. From here on, it was up to the commander who initiated the next action call:

“Bravo...Bravo...Alpha...Alpha...Lima...Lima...Indigo...Indigo...” The sequence kicked off a string of letters. “Ballistic Missile Launch...” followed by the alphanumeric coded sequence for current date and target coordinates.

Both commanders verified the mission authenticity against the EAM¹⁰ message urgently flashing across the digital alert screen. It was this flashing alert message initiated by the president that authenticated and authorized the final launch order.

Where normally two missile operators would rush to the launch control

console, today, Alex, with the permission of the crew commander, occupied the primary seat waiting for instructions.

“Target acquisition?” the commander yelled at the deputy, seated in the secondary chair poised over the control console.

“Three, five, seven,” he spat back, eyes fixed on the code.

With almost rehearsed precision, Alex flipped the respective toggles into the ON position. It turned the action stations “Hot.” It activated the missile causing today’s problem. Next move was up to the crew. Alex had no authorization to initiate the launch.

“Standby for keys!” The commander and deputy both poised directly behind Alex leaned into their respective consoles. Fingers tightly gripped on the spring-loaded safety locks they were synchronized for the next action command.

Alex was ready. His mind had already calculated the correct sequence. Tensed in anticipation, his focus was on the status board.

“Three...two...one...” the commander bellowed. “Commit Launch Key.” The order was prompted by “Verify count sequence.” Every pair of eyes shifted to the computer monitor mounted overhead, tense, waiting.

In rapid sequence, a series of computer-generated text scrolled across the screen. The commander called out each command sequence on display. The deputy repeated each step.

LAUNCH ENABLED — Check...BATTERIES ACTIVE — Check...APS POWER — Hot...SILO READY — Check...GUIDANCE SYSTEMS — Check...FIRING SEQUENCE — Check!

Alex, tensely waiting for the last call to scroll across the screen, was mentally recording the sequence. It would determine the outcome of the test. The suspense was nerve wrecking. Despite his usual coolness, beads of sweat had formed across his forehead. The last call could trigger WWII. There it was...final command:

LIFT OFF...CANCELLED!

Brian, posed a few feet in back, watched in awe.

Ears tuned in on the calls, Alex’s focus had been on the status indicators. With the last command executed, his gaze shot at the station printer pumping out paper. Right away, he didn’t like the results. Face taut, subconsciously his fingers repeatedly rubbed across his stubbed chin. His face, normally expressionless, now appeared stressed. He vaguely shook his head.

“What’s the verdict?” an anxious commander wanted to know.

“Not gonna like it,” Alex responded, “nothin’ wrong this end.”

“What’ya mean?” the commander sputtered, “nothing wrong!”

“Launch sequence’s normal,” Alex explained. “System’s sound... interface’s solid...software as expected. What’d want from me?” He ignored the commander’s verbal onslaught that followed. His eyes shifted back to the printout. *There’s got to be some anomaly*, he thought, and pulled up the status log. Several minutes went by in silence, then Alex looked up. “Think we got something.” His eyes sought out a still-ranting commander. “Problem’s,” he indicated, “distant end.” He knew what was coming but kept his cool.

“That’s just great!” It was a vicious response. The commander punched his own palm, then gave the console a kick, growled, “@#%\$,” and stormed off. It appeared he couldn’t restrain himself. He sought out time to calm his rage.

The center had turned silent. Brian shot Alex a quizzical look who only shrugged his shoulders. They waited in anticipation until the commander returned minutes later. It appeared he’d composed himself. In a calculated move, planting his body in front of his civilian opponent, he stared at Alex for the next action. “What’s your call?”

Alex braced himself for another onslaught. “Silo.” *And there it is.*

A barrage of insults let loose again. “You...@#%\$.”

Alex didn’t like it either but saw no alternatives. He had to get to the root of the problem. The log status pointed to a problem with the silo. There had been an unexpected data entry from the selected launch tube. Apparently, an error registered just after igniting the rocket engine.

“Which means...?”

“Do it again?”

On hearing that, once more, the fuming commander spat out vehemently.

“I’ll be gentle.” Alex sounded serious but couldn’t suppress a sly grin. Even he had a mean streak, but he was smart enough to avoid the piercing stare, or even a punch, from an irate commander. Alex gestured at his buddy anxious to get out of there.

“Thought he’s gonna deck you,” Brian grinned on the way out while being escorted to the elevator.

“Notify the crew,” they heard the commander bark the order.

“Next?” Brian asked.

“Hell’s Kitchen!”

“Huh?” Brian seemed puzzled. He mull over the odd response. His face

had taken on a bewildered look.

Alex came to the rescue. “Log status isolated the problem to Oscar flight, Silo One.”

MINUTEMAN III (Missile Silo)

Both were strapped in the BMW heading east. “Not a happy camper,” Brian gestured at the center they just left, “back there.” He was still trying to digest the verbal exchange between Alex and the crew chief. As far as he could tell, the system was still in critical state.

Keeping his eyes directed on the road ahead, Alex explained, “Generally, a squadron’s responsible is for five flights with ten missiles each, total of fifty missile silos. They’re spread over a wide area identified by labels of doom and gloom picked by the mission personnel. Oscar One’s east of Cheyenne, WY, near I-80.”

After the brief silo illustration, Alex had retreated into his personal shell. His mind appeared in analysis mode, trying to come up with a fix for the issue ahead. To Brian, hanging on to the handrail, it became obvious that this was no ordinary problem his buddy was dealt. The BMW was clawing its way east, cutting corners on the narrow road as it weaved past wheat fields and farming meadows. He finally tapped his buddy on the shoulder to get his attention.

“What?” Alex edged his view to the passenger seat but still kept the fields ahead, checking for landmarks.

Hair tussled by the rushing air, snapshots of his facial profile were exposed across a high forehead. *Still looks well for his age*, Brian envied. “Slow down.” Speeding recklessly on the two-lane country road, he was concerned for their safety.

“Not to worry.” Alex’s face took on a broad grin. “No traffic here.”

“Guess not.” Brian relaxed. “It’s your ticket.” About the only traffic on the road were periodic supply trucks and vans bringing supplies to replenish the flight crews.

“Back there?” Brian picked up on the verbal exchange at the launch center.

“Got their attention,” Alex mocked through tightly clenched teeth, “didn’t I?”

“Sure did—made your point.”

It became apparent that Alex set out to prove that the system was flawed. Regardless of periodic simulation test and diagnostic runs, component compositions did change. The test routine remained unchanged. Alex helped push a system to its limits. It was called stress testing.

“What about the silo?”

“Reverse testing.” Most test plans never considered that option. He’d been working this concept for most of his career. “It’s a model used in mathematics. Why not use it in infrastructures?”

“Clever.” Brian had renewed admiration for his buddy. *It’s why he’s been so successful.*

“How far out?”

Alex motioned at the dashboard. “GPS.”

“Right.” Brian held his focus on the panel. *Technology, can’t live without it.* He kept quiet for the remainder of the trip. He tried to envision the complexity of a missile defense system. Questions popped into his mind about how silos were connected with the launch center. How much shielding was necessary to protect a capsule from a direct hit? How deep did the cables have to be buried to keep tilling plows from slicing through? Where were the weak points? One single fanatic could unleash the destructive powers of a nuclear device.

He tried to imagine the nation with all communication capabilities wiped out. Computers, databanks, electronics, all burned up. Nothing functional. Not even a wristwatch. Banks shut down, along with Wall Street and other exchanges. Cell phones, ATMs, and credit cards would be useless. Air traffic, shipping, ground transportation all would come to a halt not to mention the chaos that would ensue in hospitals, law enforcement, workplaces, and homes. Not even a microwave would work. Life as everyone knew it would come to a halt, at least until equipment could be repaired and rebuilt. But repaired with what? Manufacturing would be out along with commuting. There’d be no transportation other than bike or buggy.

He was slightly winded just from thinking about the ultimate disaster. “Your last project,” he finally broke the silence, “with SAC, what was that?”

“Tactical launch console...nuclear hardened...packaged into a suitcase for both Minuteman and Peacekeeper. In other words,” Alex boasted, “I built a portable missile launch case.”

“Whoa!” Brian exclaimed, totally impressed about the ultimate engineering. “Isn’t that the case the president’s aid carries around?”

“That’s the Football,” Alex clarified. “That one contains only the launch codes.”

“Right,” Brian answered. He tried not to appear more ignorant. He was still overwhelmed by the performance back at the launch center.

“Had a small team of techs,” Alex went on, “to lend a hand with blueprints

and assemblies.” He’d been chosen for his German language skills. The project had required interfacing with Siemens in Germany. At the time, it was the only company that manufactured nuclear hardened components. “Had to persuade management to manufacture new components,” he explained. “Radiation suppressors, spark arrestors, power filters...you know. You see,” he stated, “up till then we had nothing large enough to filter out EMP¹¹ pulsing from a direct hit.”

“I had no idea,” Brian replied, “that Germans were into nuclear technology.” It was difficult for him to imagine a foreign nation building such critical components. After all, it involved national security to the highest level.

“Remember,” Alex posed the question, “operation Paper Clip? Nuclear scientists recruited during the ’40s?”

“Sure do... the Von Brauns, Tellers, and Oppenheimers.”

“Right,” Alex settled with a grin, “you could say we capitalized on technology by osmosis.”

“Funny.” He eyed his buddy with suspicion. “It’s a side of you I haven’t seen much.”

“What? I can be funny,” Alex insisted. “It’s living alone; I lose touch with people. My focus is usually on issues you see and hear on newscasts... political mostly.”

“You always focused?”

“Like to get the facts straight before making a decision.”

Wish I had his analytical skills. Brian watched Alex slow into a tight turn away from the main road. “We’re here?”

“Yep.”

“Where...?” Brian could not detect anything remotely resembling a missile silo. He’d expected something like a launch pad or support structure above ground but only recognized a slab of concrete halfway buried in the middle of a field. The only gadgets visible were security sensors. Yet, closer up, he became aware of the huge circular blast cover made up of solid steel and concrete, overgrown with sagebrush and weeds. Alongside were a couple air vents with an entry hatch leading down into the silo.

“Follow me.” Alex had already jumped out. With quick strides he led the way to the silo hatch.

“That it?”

“That’s it.” Alex, for a moment, stood indecisive. Seconds later, the

decision was taken from his hands. Like a ghostly aberration, two armed sentries appeared out of nowhere, rigidly poised across the path blocking the entrance. Both wore sidearm in addition to automatics—M-16s, safety off, ready to fire.

“Stop,” was the imminent warning.

Alex reacted quickly. He lifted both arms into a defensive posture indicating they were unarmed.

“IDs.” It was not a request. It was an order.

Alex handed him his credentials. Apparently, they’d not been notified of their arrival. “Damn him,” Alex muttered. He should have expected something like this. “Guy at the command center,” he grumbled, “giving us a hard time.”

“What?” The sentry gave him a warning stare, unsure if the cussing was directed at him.

“Nothing,” Alex said. “Command’s supposed to notify you guys.”

Calls should have been initiated, authorizations granted to avoid unnecessary delays. “Not our problem,” Alex assured Brian who’d patiently followed the verbal exchange.

The hatch cover finally opened up. A missile operator stuck his head out. He motioned them over. The sentries backed away then silently disappeared into the hilly terrain.

“Been waiting for you guys,” the Missileer said. He apparently recognized Alex from earlier encounters but suspiciously eyes his companion, “You Harris?”

“Brian Harris,” Alex gestured at his buddy. “Check with Jackson.”

“You’re cleared,” the Missileer replied. “Got temporary permission from NORAD.” He then gestured below, “Follow me.” It appeared allowing the extra visitor below was worth the risk. It was not unusual for the silo to receive an occasional dignitary interested in the underground based defense system.

“Awesome.” Brian could not contain his surprise. He was overwhelmed by the immediate sight. There, in all its glory, was the most destructive device mankind had ever built, the towering giant of nothing less than a Minuteman III, intercontinental ballistic missile—ICBM¹². The shimmering giant sat majestically in its silo eight levels deep. Super-cooled steam escaped from its colossal bowels. It’d been sitting there for fifty some years awaiting action. The only action it had seen, aside from routine maintenance,

was the occasional technology upgrade.

Brian cautiously followed Alex and the missile man down the lofty staircase. *Looks like Hell's kitchen.*

The silo was a self-contained capsule. The only direct connection it had was through miles of buried cables extending out from the LCC. Missile status was continuously checked for readiness by computers running sophisticated mission software with functions to test the interface along with updating launch and flight trajectory. Thousands of parts were patiently sitting at idle waiting for a trigger command. One such command had been issued an hour earlier but failed to ignite.

They were ushered to the command room. Too much time had already been wasted. Again, Alex, seemingly in his natural element, took over the controls. All business—no distraction...last line of defense. With expert motions he set up controls and trigger logs to trap potential errors during the next simulation. It took fewer than ten minutes to set up the necessary system parameters. "Ready," he informed the missile chief. The test could be initiated. The alert was sounded. Brian watched in fascination the many steps with which each Missileer was tasked.

There was some brief commotion. It appeared one crew member was caught at the bottom of the silo when the alarm went off. His combat boots resonated through the silo tube in the midst of the escaping steam as he clambered up the ladder to safety. He barely made it to the safety vault.

The silo chief had already initiated the launch sequence. He'd executed each step as received from the LCC. The only difference from a real launch was the manual steps he and the crew had to perform. It was a built-in safety backup in case the launch center went out of commission.

"Missile away..." was the final call just carried out.

The first visible action for the launch again was close to chaotic. First, there was a grinding sound directly above. Brian jerked his head up just in time to see the blast door fly off. Next, the firing sequence ignited the first stage of the rocket. The ensuing force traversed through the length of the missile body. Vibration filled the entire silo, reverberating up and down the concrete walls. The missile was seconds away from liftoff. It was the critical point for "Go—No go."

This being a test, at the last second the crew commander gave the signal for shutdown. Moments later, the silo was doused in silence. The launch had been scrubbed. This time, it was a planned abort. Brian's ears were ringing.

He was poised behind Alex watching over his buddy's shoulders. His senses were bewildered but his eyes followed Alex's every move. Inches away, the diagnostic software returned gobs of coded data. Alex analyzed the continuous streams as quickly as it scrolled across the screen. *Must be genius reading that speed.*

"Ah yes." Alex gestured at the streams of data. His tensed body relaxed into the softness of the chair. "What I expected," he muttered. "There it is." Reading the log's firing sequence, he found a rocket igniter relay had stuck. It did not close the path to one of the rocket engines. "Easy fix," he proclaimed. "Launch could have been catastrophic."

The launch could have resulted in the missile exploding within the silo, a target acquisition failure, or a nuclear detonation someplace within range of the nation's population. "Test results should be enough to save the commander's career," Alex justified, "back at the LCC...Let's get outta here."

Aside from a speeding Alex shaking up the countryside, the drive back to the Castle went uneventfully. The sky over the Rockies had already darkened. After a day of extraordinary events, nighttime had set in. On the way, both enjoyed a deserving dinner at a local restaurant. The iced-down glass of beer felt great. It was getting late. "Listen," Brian barely suppressed a yawn, "Gotta get some sleep...early flight out...director wants me back for a briefing."

Back at the Castle he immediately sought out the guestroom. Alex was still too tense to retire for the day. He poured himself a Jaegermeister, neat, his favorite brandy import from Germany. It always helped settle the mind. Next morning he would be alone again. He felt the loneliness of the place take hold once more. *Have to call Lisa.*

Lisa, or 'Liz' as she was known to her friends, was his eldest daughter. She was his sounding board. *Wish she'd live closer.* He picked up the phone and dialed. There was no answer. Her voice mail took the call. He left a brief message for her to call back. He'd invited her earlier in the year to spend time here, or at least bring her kids during summer break. She hadn't responded yet. Drained and disappointed, he suddenly felt tired. He turned off the lights and made his way down the hall towards the bedroom, hoping for a peaceful rest. Completely satisfied with the day's events, he wished there were more such challenges. After all, it was his life.

Troubleshooting...Analysis...Adventure... His last thoughts gradually made

way to a world of dreams and nightmares.

PENTAGON'S HAMMER DAY 3

LISA BAUER

“APB...all units...11-80, Silverado & Lincoln...10-78 needed...dispatch 11-85...Code 54.” She’d been listening to the static of the short wave as usual when on standby duty. *That’s my call*, her brain registered. Her emergency-tuned body went into immediate reaction. She dropped the dishes into the sink and hastened from the counter, wiping her hands dry on her tightly fitted jeans. *Keys, wallet, ID...what else?* A fleeting glance at the hallway mirror reflected a body ready for action. *Something’s missing. Shoes!*

Liz grabbed the set of keys from the kitchen counter just before jumping in the vehicle.

“10-4...Unit nine,” she was quick to respond. Crouched in the seat, one hand clutching the steering wheel, Liz kicked the shifter into gear and reached for the talk button. “What’s the condition?”

“Code 54—Possible 10-54d.” What may have sounded as gibberish to another listener, to her was a routine emergency call. The code identified an overturned tanker leaking combustible material with possible dead bodies. Most of her calls were brush fire related that required air support, but in this case, the middle of the city required ground support. Traffic was already backing up. She flipped a switch. The siren cleared the way. Traffic lights were synchronized to allow her passage. Most drivers moved out of the way to allow her passage, but, as usual, there was that resistive driver disregarding the emergency. It forced her to weave in and out around the obstructions while the blaring air horn cleared the rest of the way. *Was it all worth it? The struggle...the aggravation...the frustration?* she asked herself, speeding towards the crash. *It’s my calling* was the usual response. It gave her great satisfaction to help others, and to feel in charge. She’d rather give than take orders.

She could feel a buzzing in her jeans pocket. Ready to take the call, she checked the caller ID. “Not now, Dad.” *You’ll have to wait.*

Up ahead, the person that called the emergency gave her directions to the scene. *There it is.* The overturned tanker was easy to spot. It blocked four lanes of traffic. Commuting drivers and passing pedestrians were already on the scene speculating, as usual, about the cause of the accident. Sliding to a stop, she made three quick calls. The first was to the local police station. “Already on the way,” she was told. The second went for an ambulance. Standard call for most accidents; someone always got hurt. The last went out

to the Hazmat team. Hazmat, being a federal issue, would take longer to respond. There was generally nobody on immediate standby. Agents and members of that team had to be notified at wherever they held jobs. It was a mix of duty and volunteer assignments.

It took hours to sort things out and clean up the mess. With the help of a crane, the overturned tanker was eventually removed. Street and sidewalks were scrubbed with anti agents, but not before thousands of gallons of biochemical materials had washed into the city's drainage system. "More irreversible damage to the eco system," she muttered ruefully, "flooding the delta." *As if we need more pollution.* As was usual for a call of this nature, Liz was disturbed by the ensuing contamination. It would take years for nature to cleanse the waste. End result was always the same: damage, cancer, and even death to land, human, and animal life alike. But those were statistics not readily collected. Life went on.

With the emergency taken care of Liz could relax once more. She remembered her dad's message. Reaching for the mobile, she dialed his number.

NSA HEADQUARTERS (Ft. Meade, MD)

The place was bustling with activity. Recent political tensions had intensified in the Far East, Asia, to be precise. Jack Warner, Head of Operations, was comfortably planted in his executive chair. The contours of the seat perfectly fit his body. Presently he was leafing through the morning's briefs. The report would be late. Something must have held it up. It should have been on the president's desk an hour ago. The president was adamant about getting the daily brief on time. It would direct his demanding schedule for the day. Warner's hand reached for the remote. He'd have to check the newscasts. They usually carried events from the previous night. It'd give him a clue.

His eyes were absorbed in the report with ears tuned in to the flat screen TV mounted on the opposite wall. It seemed the remote in his hand had its own mind. It was busy switching channels. Impatient and edgy as usual, he'd been toggling between AP, World News, CNN, Fox, and Reuters for the latest developments. Most of the data was fed by his Intel satellites sweeping across Iran, North Korea, and other global hot zones. Suddenly, his mind registered something. *That's it.* He paused to listen to the report.

"Today, tensions between North and South Korea have boiled over. Shots were fired by both sides, leaving at least two marines dead and wounding more than 13 others. The conflict came to a head when the North fired artillery at an island belonging to the South in the Yellow Sea," the report stated, according to military officials. It was the hot news item for the day on Headline News. There was more...the regime in Pyongyang effectively affirmed that Kim's son Kim Jong-Un would succeed his father as the next ruler of North Korea...The North continues to upgrade its ability to make nuclear weapons... the spokesman for CNN reported.

"This'll definitely strengthen the agency's position," Warner muttered. He was in the habit of expressing his sound verbal skills whether he was alone or had an audience. Everybody on his staff was aware. It set precedence. It was a dominance that had helped him achieve the position he'd obtained with the organization. *Leave the details to the subordinate,* was his motto, *as long as I have control.* He didn't have much of a philosophy on world events. He just processed the news. Politicians and diplomats did the rest.

Warner was still marveling about how the "'net" had developed in just a few years. His focus had finally settled on Fox News, his favorite channel. In the past, he used to have to sift through daily stacks of wire printouts to get the news. It had to be filtered, analyzed, and categorized to compile reports.

Despite the effort it used to take, it gave him a nostalgic notion. Life used to be “paced, organized, and structured.” Today, the world had turned impatient. Everybody wanted instant updates, especially consumers and newsmongers. He wasn’t sure what was driving what anymore—media feeding the consumer or consumers demanding instant news. Lacking visual perception by the individual, the news business morphed into a whole new industry, with management focus on ratings and the bottom line. “Free enterprise,” he reminded himself. He wasn’t complaining. As long as conflicts endured, so did his job.

The phone buzzed. “Yeah,” Warner answered in his callused, impatient demeanor.

“Priority call.” It was his secretary. Warner switched to secure and picked up.

“Sir,” an impersonal voice announced, “we have a situation.”

It jerked his body upright. A “situation” was never good news. It disturbed the harmony. His adrenalin surged. “What?”

“Pentagon office,” the voice reported, “problem with KH.”

“Who do we have there?” His mind acted fast. He wasn’t about to get sucked into interagency issues. He delegated. Hand off responsibility. It was a gambit he’d learned back in college taking business management. It worked every time. It cleared the way to a scapegoat, if necessary.

“Tracy Bauer.”

“Get in touch with her. Tell her to get back to me immediately. Also,” he collected his thoughts, “get me Brian Harris on the phone.” He slammed the receiver back in its cradle. His blood pressure was on the rise. He could feel it surge through his veins. He knew the symptoms well. He used to get alarmed at the dizziness and shortness of breath. It mostly happened during a developing crisis. But then, over the course of several visits to the doctor, he was assured there wasn’t anything wrong with the heart. It was simply hypertension. Relieved, he was able to control it with the help of medication. *Thank God for the miracle of modern science.* Kept in the desk drawer, he popped a couple beta-blockers. It gave him instant relieve. He quickly felt the anxiety fade. Distant images of Tracy took hold.

He reached for the remote and turned down the sound. He’d gotten the news he needed for the day. He could sit back and wait for the call. Relaxed once more, he thought back to when he hired Tracy. Several years had gone by but he could still remember.

It was this same office late one morning that she'd walked in for a scheduled interview. Taken somewhat by surprise, he found himself confronted by a stunning young woman with extraordinarily exotic facial features. Immediately, pheromones took hold of his senses.

"Hi," she'd said, reaching out, "Tracy Bauer." Oblivious to her firmly extended hand, he watched her approach the desk. She was about five-foot-six and shapely, very shapely. *Must spend hours at the gym*, he'd speculated. She was dressed smartly, looking very professional. His gaze lingered on her face. *Exotic*, he recalled, *and body and legs to match*. Reminded of social etiquettes, he jumped up from the comfort of the chair, reached for her hand, and invited her to be seated. Much like a statuette, she sat there by the desk, beauty, intelligence, and self-assurance emanating from her presence. Introduction and formality out of the way, their conversation touched on personal anecdotes and a brief summary on her past and how she'd gotten here. He then proceeded to give her a recorded lecture on the agency, the mission, and position she might fit in.

There was a persistent ring. It took seconds for him to realize it was from the present. *Too bad*, he thought. He'd liked dwelling on their first meeting. It stirred up pleasant memories. It was times like these that he wished he were single.

He reached for the phone. It wasn't the voice he'd hoped.

"What's up?" It was Brian Harris on the line.

"I want you back," he informed the caller. "Immediately! Got a potential crisis on my hands. Need your expertise on this one. And," he emphasized, "I'm assigning one of our strategists to you. Let me know when you get in." He briskly terminated the call. The call waiting line was flashing red. He toggled to connect.

"Tracy," the caller stated. Her voice sounded just as he remembered, pleasant, but direct and professional.

"Understand you're assigned to the Pentagon."

"I am," she responded, "SPACECOM."

"Give me the current status on the KH," he demanded. He immediately regretted his harsh tone. Somebody would catch the blame, but not her. Who, was yet to be decided.

"Critical state," she said. "Better alert NORAD to elevate DEFCON¹³."

Mellowed by her assertive tone, he relaxed. *Must be on top of things*, he

decided. "I'll handle that. And one more thing," he insisted, "I'll have you work with an analyst...our best. He'll be here in a couple of days. In the meantime," he paused to take a breath of air, "I want you to gather telemetry data for the last three months on the troubled birds. You'll be assigned to him until the issue's resolved."

"Agreed," she promised. "We'll keep you in the loop."

PENTAGON (NSA Liaison Office)

He showed up in her office the following day. “Brian Harris and...you are?”

It was a pleasant sounding voice. Her face shifted from the huge flat-panel wall-mounted monitor to face the man in the doorway. *Must be the expert Warner mentioned.* Extending a hand in welcome, she jumped to her feet. “Tracy.” She already liked what she saw as he closed the distance—well-dressed, well-groomed, bristling with self-confidence, and, to her delight, a touch of class. Yet he projected a subtle arrogance.

“Bauer, by any chance?” he inquired.

“Why, yes,” she responded. “How’d you know?”

“Psychic ability,” he said with a smug grin.

“Really?” She was pleasantly enlightened. She took him seriously. “Clairvoyant?”

“I wish,” he reluctantly gave in. “Just saw your dad at his Castle a couple days ago.”

What a surprise. “Where do you know him from?” She was genuinely elated. “How is he?”

“Says hello and...” he took a deliberate pause to assess her beauty, “you owe him a visit.”

“I know...I know,” she replied with a hint of apology, “been busy.”

She allowed herself a closer inspection. Her eyes gauged the full extent of this man. There was something familiar about him. *I know.* It suddenly came to her. *Dad.* He emanated traits similar to those of her father, whose qualities she’d always adored. Who wouldn’t? She idolized her dad. He’d say, “Always act professional,” and went on to explain that, “without decent qualities, you might as well forget a successful career.” According to him, there were too many bums in the business already, stepping on one another with little regard for individual integrity.

She met him head on. “I’ve been expecting you. Warner forewarned me.”

“Forewarn is a strong tag,” he responded as he approached her. With a firm grip he shook her hand.

“Didn’t mean it like that.” She was quick to correct. “It’s just...your reputation precedes your presence.”

“Don’t believe everything you hear. Know why I’m here?” His cordial voice suddenly shifted. It turned all businesslike.

“To help solve the KH crisis.” She gestured at the visitor chair. “Have a seat.”

“Okay...what’ve you got for me?” She watched his gaze shift around the office. *He’s assessing my space.* It was obvious. He seemed pleased. He made himself comfortable.

“Here’s the thing,” she said, matching his professional demeanor. “A couple of months ago,” she reported, “I noticed a drift in a satellite group from Iridium Grid Six. By the way,” she wanted to make sure, “are you familiar with Iridium?”

“Yes.” The response was abrupt. He shot a quick glance at her. He sounded annoyed to even have to address the issue.

“Didn’t mean to question your integrity,” she corrected herself. Slightly embarrassed for having doubted his expertise she went on. “Since then, we’ve made a number of adjustments, but none have fixed the problem.” They both knew, at this rate, the fuel source would not support the energy drain on the satellites in question for long. A failure could put the entire grid in jeopardy. “To make things worse,” she took a quick pause, “for the past few days we haven’t been able to upload new software to override the persistent drifts. It seems we’ve been locked out of the system.”

Iridium was the code name for a constellation of 108 satellites put into orbit in the ‘80s. Iridium had an element count of one hundred eight on the periodic table, thus the name. It provided global communications coverage for military and Intel applications. Initially, it was a highly classified system, but with the end of the Cold War and the onset of cellular phones, the system was transitioned to commercial usage. The typical lifespan for satellites of this type was five years, after which its orbit degraded and it eventually burned up in reentry into the atmosphere. To replace and replenish the spent units to continue uninterrupted communication coverage, periodic rocket launches were necessary.

He seemed deep in thought. “You with me,” she asked. It prodded him to attention. She had become slightly annoyed while explaining the problem. He appeared to just be sitting there preoccupied.

“Why—yes.” His response was deliberate. “Just thinking.”

“You seem disinterested,” she charged. “Please talk to me. It’s important you follow me.”

He seemed irritated at the sudden patronage. He shot an annoyed glance at her then fired back, “Unlike your other peers,” he sneered, “did it occur to you some of us have the ability to multi-task?”

“Honestly, no.” She immediately regretted her abrasiveness. *What am I*

saying; I don't even know the guy. “Sorry.”

“Accepted.” Appeased once more, he relaxed but held her gaze. “Go on.”

“It’s important you understand the issue.”

“You already said that.” His face turned serious. “Is there a problem?”

“No problem.”

“Look, lady,” he countered, “you may not be aware of certain facts, but I designed the damned grid.”

“Iridium?” She hesitated. “I had no idea.” Her tension gradually melted. Her initial doubts had disappeared. She got up from the chair and advanced towards him. Poised directly in front, she extended her hand. With a hint of smile, she begged, “Forgive me?”

“Forgiven.” Unintentionally, he’d won the first round. “Tried to reset the password through the backend?”

“Using Code Breaker?”

“Apparently you did.”

“Tried every tool in the arsenal.” She shrugged. “But nothing seems to work. It’s almost as if,” she returned to her chair, “someone’s shut the ports down. So far, every attempt to get into the software’s failed. Consensus’s to wait for reentry and let them burn up, but that could take months, even years. Besides the potential security risk, public safety is at stake. Another solution’s to shoot them out of the sky.”

“Not an option.” He was adamant. There were ASATs¹⁴ in orbit, but they were not supposed to exist. Any foreign agency getting wind of it could create major political tensions. “Can’t afford any more visibility than we already have. You know...public outcry, privacy intrusion, and all that.”

“You’re right.” She reached for a stack of folders from the desk. “Here.” They contained up-to-date telemetry data from the satellites in question.

“Let’s see what we’ve got.” He sounded reassuring. It eased her fears.

They spent hours going over reams of data. Nothing obvious jumped out at them. He seemed familiar not only with the rows and rows of printed information but also the software that generated the data. Back in the early ’80s, he explained, he’d been part of the software development team for the first group of stealth satellites put into orbit. Then, as now, it was still a closely kept secret, even within the general employees at NSA. Only a few individuals had access to programs such as Misty. “Misty” was a new breed of birds designated for stealth in space, similar to what the F-111 and B-2

bombers were to the skies. Virtually undetectable to radar, they were found only in the U.S. satellite arsenal.

“Need to get in touch with NRO¹⁵,” he said, finally breaking the silence. “Gotta get a list of current ASAT assets.”

“Should I make the call?” She was eager to please him. Working alongside him for hours, she’d gained new respect. He’d made an occasional comment, but mostly to himself. *Seems to know what he’s doing.*

“Better let me handle this,” he suggested. “Sensitive issue. Won’t get anything over the phone. You know...plausible deniability. I know the deputy secretary. He’ll get us the information. I’ll be sure to include you in the visit.”

She stood up to stretch her legs. A few paces later, she said, “Okay. What’s next?”

“That’s it.” It was more than a suggestion. Apparently, he had had enough reading figures and numbers. His face looked spent. It was not apparent to her but he was exceedingly disheartened. He seemed displeased with himself for not having gotten a fix on the problem. “We both need a break.” Thus the first of possibly many exhaustive working days together ended.

“Where’re you staying?” She threw a quick glance at his handsome features then collected her personal things, getting ready to leave. He briskly followed her to the exit.

“Arlington Marriott,” was a weary reply. “If it wasn’t so late,” he suggested, “I’d ask you out for a drink.”

“Kind of tired myself,” she replied. “Take a rain check?”

“Hold you to it,” he grinned, “even if it rains.” He turned and walked off.

Her eyes followed him as he headed to the carport. “See you tomorrow,” she called after him. He briefly turned. There was a hint of promise in his smile. Lighthearted, she slid behind the wheel of her own car and drove off with a quick glance at the rearview mirror to see him getting into his rental.

Back at the hotel, Brian reflected on the day’s events. He realized they had accomplished little other than confirming the problem. It was clear he had a tough situation on his hands. This was a critical event. The telemetry had unveiled nothing. The software seemed to perform precisely as it was designed. It seemed absurd, not being able to access the most critical satellites in NSA’s inventory. Years ago, when he designed the system, he saw to it that it had a failsafe against any unauthorized intrusion. It held true

for the front end. It held true for the backend. It was the firewall's job, whether local or foreign, to automatically reject an intrusion attempt such as a denial of service attack. There had been no indication of any such kind. This was more serious. *Must be network related.* It was an assumption he didn't like at all.

On most trouble calls, he'd walk in and out in a couple of hours having solved the problem. *Any problem.* In fact, he'd solved most satellite issues remotely from his laptop. He preferred it that way. He'd rather work in the comfort of his den than commute to the office. There may be no choice this time. For now, he was looking forward to spending more time with Tracy. *I'll have to get to know this woman.* It was the last thought as he drifted off into an exhaustive sleep.

NRO HEADQUARTERS (Chantilly, VA)

“What son of a bitch’s responsible for this?” John Hanson, deputy director for the National Reconnaissance Office, yelled into the receiver. The ensuing silence at the other end did little to calm his rage. “I want your ass in here ASAP,” he barked at his subordinate. “Somebody’s gonna hang. Supposed to be the nation’s super-secret agency, and,” he bellowed, “can’t even keep the simplest task under the lid.”

“Sit,” he ordered his Chief Information Officer as soon as he entered. The man appeared bewildered. “What do you know about this?” The boss was shouting now. Completely out of control, he tossed the morning’s *Washington Post* across the desk. It landed in the man’s lap.

“Just read it myself.”

“I want you to investigate the leak. Get somebody on it immediately. I’m going to hang whoever’s responsible.”

“Right away,” the CIO stammered. He seemed to take the accusation personally. Slightly disheveled, in a hurry, he left his boss’s office. Without having a clue of what he’d just heard, he rushed by the reception desk. “Get me a copy of today’s *Post* right away,” he ordered the department secretary, then hurried back to his office. He felt like a beaten dog. His nerves were still shaken when the secretary walked in.

“Here.” She planted a copy of the *Washington Post* on his desk, shooting a sympathetic look at him. She must have overheard the executive’s outbursts.

“Thanks.” Despite the unpleasantness he’d just been subjected to, he caught a glimpse of her shapely legs. *Wonder if she’s married.* He couldn’t help it. The distraction had calmed him. He unfolded the stack of paper in front of him. He did not have to read far. In disbelief, he stared at the front page.

NRO launches new stealth satellite! Unidentified sources confirmed that yesterday’s Titan IV launch put a next generation spy satellite in orbit. The new KE series is replacing the current keyhole surveillance technology which has been in operation since the eighties. The mission will enhance the United States’ space defense in as much as it is a kinetic energy anti-satellite system identified as an ASAT.

The article went on to describe some supposedly “highly classified” design details. *Bad news*, he thought. Unsure what steps to take next, he noticed Brian Harris walking down the hallway accompanied by a young woman. They were headed for the boss’s office. *Wonder what he’s doing*

here?

“Brian.” Muffled, the call seemed to come from inside the DD’s office. Hanson waved them both in. “We’ve a bit of a crisis on our hands,” Hanson charmed, “but I’m glad to see you. And...who’s this lovely lady?” His face instantly changed to a winning smile. One hand fumbled with his earpiece. The other gestured to the chairs. “Take a seat.” He was busy with a call. “Be with you in a minute.”

Tracy had a chance to inspect the environment. One would not have guessed that this somewhat insignificant looking place was the epitome of secrecy. Stealth, gloom, and obscurity all at once emanated from a place way above Top Secret. Taking the headset off and addressing Brian, Hanson said, “What brings you to this abode?” His eyes, nevertheless, were focused on Tracy.

“Tracy Bauer,” Brian announced, “working the KH problem.”

“May not have to worry about that much longer,” he said, turning to face Brian. “You read the paper?”

“Wondered about that,” Brian said with a gesture. “Saw the article this morning.”

Taking a deep breath, Hanson proclaimed, “Somebody’s going to jail.” Settling into the plush office chair, his posture shifted into social mode. Focus still on Tracy, he queried, “So Brian, how can I help you?”

Slightly irritated, Brian took notice of the DD testing the social waters. “Got a problem,” he stated, “with some of your satellites that doesn’t make sense. I was going to ask about the latest hardware in orbit, but,” he emphasized with a facetious grin, “I have a pretty good idea after reading this morning’s paper.” He couldn’t help but rub in the leak.

“Yeah...I’m already dealing with that!”

“New generation,” Brian wanted to know, “replacing what’s in orbit now? And if so, how soon?”

“It’ll take a few years,” he was assured. “We still have to maintain what’s already there.”

“Was afraid of that,” Brian stressed. “We’ve been bogged down with some problem birds,” he explained. “I need your support to shut them down.” There was an immediate reaction. Hanson’s face reflected extreme resistance. “It’s only temporarily,” Brian was quick to calm him, “just to run some tests until I get a handle on things.”

“In that case,” Hanson said, “no problem. Just let me know when. We can

do some maneuvering with other, less critical birds. Can you stick around for lunch?"

"Think so," Brian replied. He shot a quick glance at Tracy. "You up for it?" She nodded in return.

"There's a new sushi place nearby I wanna take you to." Hanson made an urgent gesture at the phone. "Use my conference room," he said, handing each a printed folder from the table, then buzzed the secretary to direct the visitors.

He was anxious to take a call on his private mobile. While he was talking with Brian and Tracy, it'd been buzzing silently in his pocket. Checking the caller ID did not ease the tension. He pressed the return call button and waited for the other end to come alive.

"NSC." It was a brisk male voice. "We secure?"

He was anxious to get the call over with. "Secure. What've you got?"

"Special meeting," the mysterious voice demanded. "Sunday—noon."

"Yes?"

"Annapolis, Rotary Club."

"I'll be there." An ominous feeling crept into the pit of his stomach. *Don't like this one.* He quickly pocketed the mobile and headed for the reception room.

Minutes earlier, the department secretary gestured to Brian and Tracy. "Follow me please." She briskly strode down the hallway with Tracy and Brian in tow. They were led to a brightly-lit reception room. Tracy took note of the environment. In the olden days, a hat stand would have been planted by the entrance door with commemorative picture frames selectively planted around the walls. Today, the room was impersonal with only a wastebasket aside from a table and chairs filling the spacious room. The room was void of windows. Most rooms lacked windows in the building. The reasons were obvious. The NRO being the nation's most secure organization, Intel security was always an agenda.

Tracy took comfort in one of the chairs neatly arranged around a conference table. Brian planted his body adjacent. When the secretary left, Tracy was already leafing through the contents of the folder. Brian was reluctant to pick up his. He knew most of the contents from previous visits. He'd rather study her. And he did. Tactfully, not to distract or attract her attention, his eyes lingered on the contours of her well-toned body. He felt a

magnetic attraction towards her. He was looking forward to working with her. He cleared his throat to get her attention. She did not stir. Her focus was on the material. *Well*, he thought, dismayed, *I'll wait 'til later*, and consoled himself with the material.

Rifling through the pages brought back sentiments. He remembered the day, back in the early '80s, when his boss had volunteered him for the KH program. Back then, even the NRO name of this super-secret agency was classified. He wasn't too thrilled by the prospect of sitting in front of a computer monitor, writing software day in and day out. He preferred field assignments--where the action was--but reluctantly accepted. In the end, it worked out to his advantage. As a result, he was rapidly promoted up the ranks, with salary boosts to match. After that, he could name his mission and location of preference. *Not a bad deal*, he recalled with satisfaction.

Shifting his focus to the folder, he found it contained information on the latest in satellite technology and programs. It gave him the information he needed. He made a couple more unsuccessful attempts to get Tracy's attention. One time she looked up to return his smile, but as quickly turned back to the material. He checked his wristwatch again. He became bored waiting for the director to show. He would have rather talked to pass time.

He studied her some more. Her high forehead was almost obscured by full-bodied auburn hair flowing gingerly over her shoulders. *How feminine*. Aside from their brief verbal joust yesterday, her voice was pleasing. *The rest of her? Let's just say it's what men dream about*. His gaze lingered on. He was about to interrupt her concentration again when the door abruptly swung open. It was Hanson. "Let's go," he said hastily, "got reservations for noon."

With brisk paces, he led them to the elevator. Once inside, he pushed the button for the garage level. He seemed anxious to beat the lunch crowd. "It's a twenty-minute ride to Tyson's Corner."

Reaching for her arm, Hanson helped Tracy into the staff car. "Watch your head." Planting his body behind the wheel, he adjusted the rear view mirror. It reflected the beauty of her face. "So, Tracy," he encouraged, "tell me a little about yourself."

TRACY BAUER

Tracy sat in the back of the plush company car. Up front, John Hanson was chatting with Brian. Their voices were muted by the steady hum of the engine. “Traffic’s slow today,” remarked Hanson casually. He was trying to make headway in the stop and go traffic. “Some days I should just skip lunch,” she heard him comment.

“Some have the luxury of telecommuting,” she wanted to cut in but thought otherwise. Not being part of the conversation, she quietly pursued her own thoughts. They were trouble thoughts. Her thoughts were focused on the satellite issues. What puzzled her most was the sudden deflection from their predictable orbits. In space for decades, the birds in question had been the most reliable of them all. Given utmost attention by operations, although most obscure to the general public, the KH had taken over the agency’s backbone of operations. It was that of stealth and surveillance over the globe, used to be performed by the CIA.

“You like sushi?” It was the deputy director. She didn’t seem to hear him. “Tracy,” a voice demanded, “you with the program?” The voice was probing her deeply focused thoughts back to the presence.

She caught his intently staring eyes in the rearview mirror. Shifting her body upright, she caught the full view of his face. “Sorry. Just thinking on the reason I’m here today.”

“Why don’t you share that with us?” he prodded. “What about it, Brian? You don’t mind, do you?”

“Not at all,” Brian encouraged, hoping to get to know her better. He’d rather be seated in back next to her. The last couple of days in the office had been filled with work only. This might be a chance to get to know her personally. “Go ahead, Tracy. I’d be very interested in hearing your story.”

“Dad had a lot to do with it.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Got enrolled in the Air Force Academy high school.” Both she and her sister received their appointments based on stellar grades, great physical fitness, and the best of references—a father in the Department of Defense. District 20 was the Air Force’s showpiece of living and learning. Developed for the Air Force back in the ’60s, it was their first organized settlement. Situated just north of town, it sprawled across the foothills of the Rockies, making up the western sector of Colorado Springs.

“One day at Polytech,” she recalled, “I received a lunch invitation from

the dean.”

With a hint of doubt in the statement, Hanson remarked, “Strange request from a dean.”

“That’s what I thought,” she agreed, “but I went anyway.” It felt a bit strange getting invited out by the head of the school. She contributed it to the connection with her dad. After all, Polytech was a ready source of young academics sought out by the government. From the quiet of the backseat she illustrated the highlights of her scholastic days. She was briefly interrupted by the occasional comment and question from both Hanson and Brian.

“Compelling story,” Hanson muttered. His voice was laced with admiration for her. “I’d sure like to meet your dad.” *There’s more to this young woman than just a pretty face. I’ll have to keep my eye on her. She’s got potential.* He’d already formulated a tentative plan for a possible political career for her. *There’s always room for someone with both feet solidly planted on the ground.*

“I’ll tell him to look you up next time he’s in town.”

“Sure do.”

“I’m impressed,” Hanson admitted, “with your progress with the agency.”

“Why’d is that?” she asked. “I paid my dues.”

“That’s right,” he recalled, “you were on the frontlines tracking jihad elements. Philippines, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah,” she confirmed, “among other places.”

“Squeamish about raw fish?”

“Could eat it every day.”

“You’ll get your treat as soon as we’re out of this traffic.”

CIA HEADQUARTERS (Langley, VA)

Like clockwork, Harry Carter arrived 7:30 a.m. sharp at the Langley complex. The silver-gray Mercedes 500 rolled to a halt in his dedicated space, as it did every morning. He checked the immediate environment, then the mirrors, and stepped from his car. It was a habit. Security and safety were always on his mind. He did not like surprises. His six-foot-three-inch frame impeccably dressed, with a well-groomed self-assuring aura preceding his path, he briskly proceeded to the elevators. There was no wait to get to the office this early in the morning. His staff and the bulk of the employees wouldn't arrive until close to 9:00 am. He punched the button. The door to the vertical lift slid close. He arrived seconds later at his level and stepped out. Immediately, he was greeted by the huge skylight illuminating the hallway to its fullest splendor. The four-story glass-enclosed atrium allowed him to enjoy the outdoors in good weather and in bad. It was a place in which the old met the new, and where the original building, constructed in the '60s, merged with the new complex added in the '90s.

As usual, his gaze struck a number of replicas idly suspended from the ceiling, reminding him of his organization's achievements. Visitors couldn't possibly miss the array of formidable model planes decorating the loft. Spanning sixty years on display were the agency's operations and missions beginning with the *U-2*, the first espionage plane, the *A-12 Blackbird* for its unheralded speed and altitude records, and lately, the *D-21 Drone*, first unmanned recon craft, all donated by Lockheed Martin.

Walking the hallways, one could not help but notice the many sculptures and plaques dedicated to the cause of the CIA, with Kryptos prominently towering over the visitor at the entrance to the new building. This immense S-shaped scroll created by Jim Sanborn remained a puzzle to even the most gifted cryptologists. Although some of the encrypted text had been deciphered by scientists and hackers, the remaining enigmatic messages may never be solved.

Twenty-five paces later he arrived in his office—a modern office, a high-tech office, but not without a nostalgic feeling that crept up the pit of the stomach. It left a yearning taste in his mouth. He knew the reason and didn't like it. He'd become a product of the changing times. "Can't turn back time," he muttered into the impeccably kept hallways, consoling himself.

Carter leaned back in the posh chair, grunting in anticipation of facing another day of world events. From the desktop screen, the prominent splash

page reached out at him, “Central Intelligence Agency.” The agency’s homepage brought him back to reality. As with most mornings, there was no shortage of messages needing immediate attention. The pulsating email icon made sure of that.

As usually, he pulled up high priority messages first then skimmed the headlines for global burning points. North Korea...Pakistan...Yemen...the prominent entries of trouble spots lunged out at him. He had agents everywhere reporting to him and his deputies who, in turn, compiled daily reports summarized and formatted specifically for him. It was these reports he presented to the president and his advisors each morning. Today was no exception. He sighed with relief. *No crisis today*. The remaining low-priority mail reported only routine correspondences between embassies and field agents. There was one thing gnawing at him, nevertheless. Yemen in the forefront of wire and news services had become almost a daily occurrence. Over just a short time it had become the world’s current hot zone. *Something’s brewing*, he contemplated, apprehensive that his agents had not yet identified the source of his concern.

“Need to give Warner a call.” He made a mental note.

NSA HEADQUARTERS

“Come in for a second,” Jack Warner called out, “will you?” He then released the intercom receiver button on the office base phone. While waiting, he sifted through the daily stack of briefs in the In-Basket awaiting his decisions. He could remember a time arriving at the office when the basket would be practically empty. In those days, he used to savor the rich taste of Columbian Lite while reading highlights in *the Washington Post*. *A different time and epoch*, he reminisced, *days long since passed*. It was a time he dearly missed.

Today, like any other workday, it had been a quick stop at Starbucks for the daily fix, hurrying from one meeting to another, spending hours by the phone, and commuting through impossible traffic only to be repeated the next day. He hated it. Not so much the job. That part was okay. It was prestigious, loaded with prominence, and had its rewards. What he didn't like was the harried lifestyle the nation's capital had turned into.

“Yes, sir,” a young face, seemingly nervous and slightly out of breath, announced a couple of seconds later. Appearing flushed, the kid lingered by the opened doorway, shifting uneasily from one foot to the other. He stood there waiting to be invited in. He seemed uneasy but also eager to please his new boss and closed the distance to the desk with a few halting paces after Warner waved him in.

Warner, prepared for another hectic day, handed over a page ripped off a yellow note pad, urging, “Get a search on the name.” The kid leaned in to take the hastily scribbled note. Warner added, “And get me Harry Carter on the line.”

The kid was halfway to the door then abruptly halted in his steps. He turned with a blank faced look on his face. “Harry Carter?”

“CIA.”

“Right away, sir.”

Sparky couldn't get back to his workstation fast enough. It was the place he felt safe. It was the place where he excelled. *It happened*, he cheered in silence while wiping a few beads of sweat from his forehead. *First task directed by the boss himself*. Even though he'd been working with the agency for several weeks, he'd only been given minor tasks, usually handed down by some coworker with more seniority. *Today was the day*. He looked at the scribbled note just handed him. His face took on a puzzled stare. There was only one word written on the piece of paper. *That's it?* Regardless, his jittery

fingers went to work on the keyboard reserved only for top-secret entries. With heightened anticipation, eyes staring at the monitor, he'd been dying to get his hands on the system. One keystroke brought up the search window reserved for authenticated and approved entries. With another few keystrokes he carefully entered the alphanumeric characters: s e r p e n t.

He was prepared to take a break for a lengthy search and hadn't expected the immediate action initiated by the computer. Bewildered, he followed the software taking control over the terminal. He'd just entered a portal into the world of intrigue, secrecy, and conspiracy. What he experienced reminded him of a time when he was a kid reading spy novels.

Back then, he'd dreamed one day to become part of the intrigue and secrecy. It had taken him many years of hard-earned grades to get him to this point. His labored breathing reflected his anticipation as he watched the screen. With the stroke of a few keys he had initiated the world's most sophisticated application software ever designed by man. He had just awakened the sleeping dragon. CARNIVORE!¹⁶

Fascinated, he stared straight ahead at the screen. He couldn't help it. It captured his imagination. He almost forgot to place the call. Nervously he dialed CIA headquarters.

At the distant end, Warner switched to secure mode on the second ring then picked up the receiver. He was expecting the call. "Warner."

"Hey...what's up?" It was the gruff voice of Harry Carter bellowing in his usual indiscreet manner. "Heard some bird droppings landed in your lap." The words, arrogant as usual, were followed by an offending chuckle.

"I'm dealing with it," Warner hammered back.

"What did you guys do?" Harry continued harassing, "Talk in your sleep?"

"Not funny." Warner tried hard to keep his cool but had to admit, "Looks like the cat's out of the bag."

"ASATs, eh, and kinetics to boost?"

"Don't remind me." He tried to steer the conversation from the news leak.

"So," the head of the CIA wanted to know, "what can I do for you?"

"Ever come across a Serpent?"

"Not that I know. Why?"

"Name keeps popping up in connection with Al Qaeda. Don't have anything in our database. Wondered if you did. We believe it may be a new

leader or task force planning an assault.”

“On *us*?”

“Could well be.”

“I’ll pass it along and get back to you.”

“Thanks.” Leaving a hint of lingering insolence, the call ended as abruptly as it began. Harry already had hung up. “Tactless bastard,” Warner grumbled, watching the young assistant approach. “Got anything?”

“Nothing.” The kid seemed nervous, like it was his fault the search had turned up empty.

“Relax.” Warner offered with a slight smile when he realized his analyst’s nervousness. “Keep searching. Try Jihad, Taliban, splinter organizations... get in touch with DIA and Armed Services Intel. They might have something.”

“Will do,” Sparky said as he stormed off with a new mission. “This is getting exciting.” His heart almost leaped from his chest as he hastened back to the software dragon with visions of spooks, spies, and conspiracies.

BALTIMORE (Maryland)

He had overslept this morning. It was probably due to jetlag from the return flight from Colorado. It used to never bother him when he was on constant travel status. Presently getting comfortable, he was sitting in a lotus fashion, his favorite position. It limbered up his body and gave him easy access to work from bed. Momentarily, with hands clasped behind his back, he leaned forward to stretch his well-toned body. He then cracked his knuckles, causing a popping sound. *I'm ready*, he decided.

Leaned over the edge of the bed he groped for the laptop where he'd left it the night before. It was sitting idle on top of the nightstand. While he was asleep, the background software had been busy with updates, security scans, and receiving urgent mail. He popped the lid. *It'll take a few minutes*, he thought. *Coffee time!* He jumped from the bed and lumbered to the kitchen. With a few quick moves he prepared the maker, turned it to Brew, and headed for the bathroom. By the time he finished with bathroom errands, the coffee was ready, and so was the computer. He could already smell the refreshing aroma permeating the apartment.

He was about to settle back in bed, then thought otherwise. Cup gripped in one hand with laptop clutched under the other arm, he strode toward the den and planted his body on the desk chair. With Laptop connected, in a swift motion, he selected the secure homepage then punched the "Enter" button. The screen sprang alive in work mode but the software took a few seconds to crank up. He took the time to visit the bathroom.

Laptop should be ready. He took the few strides back to the den, reflecting on his visit at the Castle. He still felt envious when he thought about the place Alex had built, respecting the effort the man put into the construction and design. *Remarkable place, the Castle.* He, in contrast, preferred modern living. That's why he chose a residence in the high-rise. It was the ideal bachelor pad. He could come and go as he pleased without the worries of gardening, upkeep, or maintenance. He'd let others more qualified take care of those. He wasn't a tinkerer. His time was too valuable for diminutive tasks.

Settled in for another day surrounded by computers, network switches, hubs, and routers, he leaned back in the comfort of his chair, facing the immediate task at hand. He plugged the laptop into the internal network then tuned in on the array of servers staged along one edge of the den, patiently humming away. From habit, his eyes automatically scanned the rows of green

LEDs to check for red alerts. It would mean another server or workstation needed attention. Not that he needed all the computing power staged and configured on an internal net. They were remnants of his software development years that he'd acquired when testing out new computer applications as they hit the marketplace. Back then, he was especially fond of Microsoft's technology. *Gates did something right*, he reflected, and so had Apple, Macromedia, Norton, and other well known software entities that had worked themselves out of garages into the mainstream of high-tech IT.

He fingered the keyboard connected to the KVM switch, preparing to check mail. That's about all he used it for when at home. For work, he preferred the much faster servers. It gave him instant access to all resources, but when on the road, he could live with the shortfalls of the portable. Generally connected through a secure high-speed satellite VPN, it'd provide a portal for the sophisticated software he needed to access. Not that he was oblivious to newly created gadget like iPads, iPhones, or tablets hitting the marketplace; he could not quite get used to all the pop-ups and app offerings intruded into his daily life.

At the moment, his eyes caught a High-Pri blinking at him. A one-word text message was waiting. "Help." He knew who'd sent it. Sparky was new to the agency. Brian happened to be in Warner's office when the newly hired junior analyst had reported in. He took an immediate liking to the kid and had promised to show him "the ropes." In return, he'd get Intel without getting bogged down waiting for search results himself. In short, they'd become dependent on each other. In a short time, Sparky did his name proud. He was swift and efficient but had a lot to learn about the complexity of the agency's operation, but that took time.

"What?" His response was just as brief.

"Need access to DOD Intel databanks."

"How deep?"

"Ultra."

"Be a minute." Brian had ready access to most security levels but this one. This level required special authorization from the Top, the Echelon panel that decided on what, when, why, and who deserved access to the nation's most treasured secrets. It had taken Brian years to achieve the level of trust he needed to perform his work as a top analyst. Warner had been patient and lenient with him. Warner knew he used a lot of shortcuts to gain access to information. He didn't condone it, but tolerated it the same. Brian would

never compromise this trust. And Warner knew it.

Brian grew with the agency. Periodically published by the organization, he kept up with policies, changes, and new guidelines. Seared into the minds of members working and living within this super prestigious intelligence community, “Safeguard information,” was always at the forefront.

A few seconds passed before the proprietary portal page popped up on the screen. “CARNIVORE—CLASSIFICATION ULTRA.” Brian was aware of the sensitivity and possible implications of compromising this highly protected and sophisticated application. He was very familiar with the intricate workings of Carnivore. But Carnivore wasn’t always enough for his needs. Sometimes it was required to go outside the agency. He was also familiar with applications other Intel organizations were using. Following 9/11, a new paradigm was created that allowed the many Intel organizations to work together, the DHS. “Interoperability” was the new buzzword—along with “Continuity of Operations.”

Along with others who shared his development skills, Brain had been tasked with creating a program that would share sensitive data over the public Internet, “The Wire.”

“Challenging,” was his initial assessment, “but feasible.” It had been no easy task to satisfy the inherited paranoia of the many Intel communities. There had been much resistance—political mostly. Regardless, his team went ahead and developed PowerOne. It’d solved the highly secure aspects of Intel for access, authorization, authentication, and delivery over the unsecured public wire.

“You got four hours,” he informed Sparky.

“Thanks. I’ll get back to you.”

PowerOne was a specially designed application acting as secure portal switch. It allowed foreign and local authorization over the rapidly growing Internet wire. The agency still cursed DARPA¹⁷ for turning the once classified Internet over to the public. But it was the public sector that shaped the Internet as it existed today.

Unknown to anyone, he’d given himself admin access rights on a hidden port using the management portal. This solved two needs. One, it gave him access to all system elements; the other was an ability to create additional accounts. Today, he needed an account for Sparky. He gave him a four-hour access lease—approximately how long he’d need to get back data without attracting too much attention by the in-house auditing spooks. It wouldn’t be

the first time he'd been caught. But his philosophy was such that "It'd be easier to beg for forgiveness than ask for permission up front." The philosophy worked every time. Where others may have put their job in jeopardy by this philosophy, Brian, due to his indispensable position with the agency, seemed to get away with it unscathed.

ALEX BAUER

It was the early morning hours. His body, stiffened from the comfort of six hours sound sleep, inhaled the briskness of clean mountain air. It felt great. He stretched arms and legs to get the circulation going. These days it was rare for him to get this many hours of rest. He allowed himself to dwell. *Just a few more moments of luxury.* Then it was up and off to the bathroom, the usual first stop. He was about to pick up the shaver but changed his mind. *Later,* he decided on the way out. There was no hurry. He had nothing pressing for the day.

The hallway was still chilled from the night's coolness. It would stay that way until past sunup. He kept the thermostat low during nighttime. It kept the air brisk while his body was warmed by the quilt. Dressed in his morning robe, he headed for the front gate to retrieve the *Daily Gazette*. Pausing for a moment, he could feel the breeze in its full force drifting down the foothills. He tightened the garment around his body. Back inside, his eyes caught today's headlines: *National Security Leak! Today,* the editorial claimed, *the Washington Post announced a breach in the nation's defense posture that could have dire political implications with the international community. The NRO...* the front page went on. It immediately perked his interest. As he read the editorial his keen mind was triggered into action by a faint sound.

He tossed the unread paper onto the coffee table and made his way to the equipment room. A pair of strong legs, kept in shape by several flights of stairs, promptly carried him to the ground level. It was the place he spent the most time in when not in the den upstairs. It was the heart pulse of the Castle. The basement was stacked with latest state-of-the-art electronics connected to the den via remote sensors. The place would be the envy to any software developer and network guru. Poised in front of the array of equipment, his eyes quickly scanned the panels neatly stacked up within the confines of the rack mount. In an electronics age of computer blades and databanks, he'd spent some hard-earned cash on a corporate-like data center. It was an expensive investment but efficient and cost effective in the long run. In reality, he didn't need all this computing power. Working with high-end gear was more of a habit dating back to his development days. Nevertheless, he was proud being able to afford this technological luxury. At the moment, his eyes were focused on the faint blinking. What caught his attention was the red alert indicator from a sensor in the auxiliary rack. The rack housed the

front-end equipment interconnecting his castle with the outside world, containing mostly firewalls, isolators, and sensors fed by wireless receivers relayed from the Mountain, as well as space borne surveillance equipment.

Alarms had gone off more frequently lately. As of today, he had not been able to pinpoint the source. Running tests and diagnostics so far had not revealed the source of the problem. As usual, he'd shrug it off to cosmic interference. Today was no different. Irritated more than concerned, he reset the alarms and returned to the den. Back upstairs he noted the morning sun had gradually risen over the eastern edge of the Kansas plains. The welcomed rays cast a warming spell on the room. The warmth felt comfortable on his body.

Adventurer by heart, where the world used to be his home, aside from the occasional emergency assist with the defense system, he felt like a recluse entrapped within the sanctity of the Castle. He dearly missed the days of travel, schedules, conflicts, and escapades, but that was another time, in other places.

In retrospect, it seemed much time had slipped by in a once adventurous life. Lounging in his den, recounting the years, it became clear it really wasn't that long ago. *What's thirty years?*

He picked up the paper to finish reading the rest of today's news, but noticed the call waiting winking at him. He recognized the number. It was his eldest daughter. He pushed the autodial and waited for her to pick up. Four rings later she was on the line.

"Dad." Her cheerful voice chirped from the distance, "you all right?"

"Missed you." She always seemed concerned for his wellbeing. Ever since the divorce from her Mom, the family fell apart. Most times he felt like a stranger to the family. With his daughters pursuing fulltime careers, raising children and tending to husbands, there never seemed to be time for get-togethers. He had to change that.

"That's why I'm calling about." She went on, "I thought, if you're gonna be home I could bring the kids out. They're on school break and bored with me working. Besides, they could use some of the mountain air."

"That'd be terrific. When?"

"Next week."

"Let me know the day."

"Will do. Bye Dad. Love you." She'd hung up.

Alex was overjoyed. *Company at last.*

Another call was waiting. He checked the number. The caller ID announced a familiar area code. He recognized it as D.C. but could not place the number.

With piqued curiosity, he pushed the caller return button.

Brian picked up at the other end. "You saw the news?"

"NRO leak? Just read it. What do you make of it?"

"All hell broke loose around here. Someone's gonna get axed."

"Don't blame them. This is serious stuff," Alex agreed. "Leak like this causes all kinds of tensions, political and otherwise. We'll hear from the Russians and Chinese, that's for sure. How's it affecting you?"

"Saw the director this morning...downplayed the incident."

"What's his take?"

"Trying to save his ass."

"Don't blame him. He's got nowhere else to go."

"By the way," Brian remarked, "was good to see you again. Envy your lifestyle."

"Too quiet most times. Enjoyed the action working together. Like old times."

"Right. Coming this way soon?"

"Haven't planned on it, but owe the daughter a visit."

"Oh yeah," Brian remarked. "Before I forget...Tracy says 'Hi.'"

"You met up?"

"Already work together," he cheered. "Great girl."

"How's she?"

"Find out for yourself," he hinted. "Good reason for a visit."

"I'll consider. Give her my regards." Alex hung up. He felt guilty for having neglected the family, *especially her*. His thoughts briefly touched on his fondness for this daughter. She'd always been his favorite.

In reflective thought, he slowly paced towards the warmth seeping in from the deck. The sun had risen some degrees since he'd left to check the alarm and taken the call. He could feel the heavy wood warm up beneath his bare feet. The deck felt solid beneath his weight. It should. It was redwood he'd shipped in from the coast. *Will last forever. Probably outlive me*, he thought with dismay.

Time had become an important factor in the life of Alex Bauer. He thought often on how much, or how little, there was left. Gauging from the career he'd had and the success he'd achieved, nevertheless, he had no reason

to complain. He had lived a dream others would never experience. He was grateful for that. But there was a hint of sadness in his eyes. *Will I live this way for the rest of my life?* A sense of loneliness crept back into his presence as it always did after talking with a distant friend or family member. It was at times like these when he dearly missed company.

ANNAPOLIS (Maryland)

Wonder who'll be there? It was Sunday. Hanson was speculating. He was on the way to a meeting, clandestine as it was. The car slowly edged up the paved parkway. He'd arrived at the Rotary Club. The place wasn't new to him. He'd been here a number of times. It was always in conjunction with a special event or after a political crisis. Today would probably not be different. *Why would it?* He usually looked forward to this, the gathering of eagles. Think tank on the highest order—power brokers of the first degree, that's what it was.

It was no ordinary think tank. This one was aimed at something much greater. It created world policies, solved crises, and shaped the future of society. It was created to manipulate nations on a global scale. Kept super-secret for many years, rumors eventually leaked out. Not everybody could keep a sworn secret. He would know; he had fired a number of employees for this very reason.

Today's meeting, he calculated, would be different. An ill feeling emanated from the depths of his stomach pit. He suddenly felt uneasy. He should have cancelled, pretending to be sick. But that wouldn't fly very well. Today, he feared, his head was on the chopping block.

"Might as well get it over with." He could only hope that more pressing issues would supersede this week's events. Leaks from the government were common, even expected. It was how the game was played, especially when the need for more funding was the issue, but a direct breach by the Agency? That was different. Especially from an agency *that should not exist*.

He let the vehicle roll to a stop in an open parking stall. Stiff-legged, he got out, stretching. The circulation began to flow again. Although he drove in comfort—a silver-colored Chrysler-300—he'd noticed his legs needed limbering up after sitting behind the wheel. He raised his head to check on the sky. *Clear, and blue for a change*, he thought as his eyes caught an airliner streak overhead, leaving burnt exhaust in its wake. It had just taken off from National. With a jerk of his body, he pushed the driver side door shut then briskly walked up the short driveway toward the solid wood-framed entrance portal.

A few paces past the threshold of the posh hallway, he was immediately ushered into a private banquet hall, always reserved for this occasion. Already he could hear muffled conversation coming from inside. Despite his uneasiness, he held his head up high. As always, he was customarily late for

the meeting. He did it on purpose. It gave him a sense of authority. His entrance was casually acknowledged by the other members. They expected him to be late.

“Glad you made it,” the secretary-elect called out. He briskly invited him over to the only empty chair, right beside him. “How’re things at the Palace?”

Ready to acknowledge the panel, Hanson replied, “Hectic as usual,” in his typical non-committal manner. His throat felt parched. He reached for a fine crystal carafe filled with clear water. Pouring some water to take a cooling sip, he was unceremoniously interrupted by an angry voice. “You owe us an explanation.”

Deliberately, Hanson turned towards the caller a few seats away. There was an angry face staring in his direction, and the face demanded an explanation. “And,” he added, following a calculated pause, “better make it good.”

“I know...I know,” Hanson yielded in defeat. *They have a right to let me sweat*, he thought. The dining hall had turned silent. All eyes were piercing into him. He pulled together all the mental strength he could muster up and stood up to face the unavoidable. With an unsteady hand he reached for a spoon neatly placed next to an untouched appetizer, then tapped on the half-empty glass resting on the placemat. The sound of the clear crystal silenced the room. “I suppose you saw this week’s *Post*?”

“Who didn’t?” were some angry responses. There were heated grumblings. Accusations were tossed back and forth between members from the various agencies. Pent-up frustrations were being voiced. Everybody wanted to have their say. The session was prone to speculations. The host sat quietly by the table, allowing members to voice their personal opinions. It would serve its purpose. The outburst reminded him of the parliamentary debates on BBC television he frequently watched. Face depicting a somewhat forced patience, he decided, *Agenda can wait*.

“What’re you gonna do about it?” Someone finally yelled a demand. It was a member from the Department of Defense. The face staring Hanson down was a familiar one. It was the head of DCA¹⁸, DOD’s intelligence group.

“Already taken care.” After the last outburst the conference room returned to its usual atmosphere. Hanson regained his composure once more. “Wasn’t as bad as I thought,” he muttered into the outbursts. *Must be more pressing issues on the agenda*.

“It’d better,” was the caller’s reminder of the personal onslaught. “Can’t afford any more publicity.” He was referring to the periodic meetings usually causing leaks to the public. An unavoidable dilemma as it was to the agency, a clandestine meeting always caught the public’s eyes.

“Yeah,” some members chimed in. “Already too much scrutiny by the paparazzi.”

“Won’t happen again,” Hanson promised. He had played it low keyed. *After all, you don’t mess with the DOD. You want to be in bed with the nation’s most powerful defense organization.* For the rest of the session he was spared from any further charges. Lunch was being served by impeccably dressed waiters.

Having been reprimanded in front of the echelon panel did not sit easy with him. He’d lost his appetite. He sat back in the chair and barely listened to the rest of the agenda. From his vantage point, he was able to absorb some of the powerful presences. He knew most from the annual meetings held at various places. Among prominent politicians, bankers, and industrialists, seated at the table were the nation’s biggest powerbrokers.

Recollecting getting appointed to manage the NRO years ago, Hanson thought, Wonder where my career would be if it wasn’t for this institution, and here I am, whether I like it or not.

He didn’t agree with some of the policies he’d helped establish, but didn’t have much choice, getting outvoted most times. His purpose for being here was mostly for the space assets he provided, without which none of this would be possible. It had taken decades for this panel to gain solid footing. The reason they’d managed to keep the gatherings a secret for so long was still a mystery. Where most programs had taken a public flogging, his had been spared for decades. Unfortunately, the paradigm had changed. The cat was out of the bag, so to speak. Now, with the flourishing of instant media coverage, along with the ever-probing eyes of conspirators, the cloak had been lifted. Highly alarmed at first, now, accustomed to the visibility, it did not matter anymore. He had to deal with it. The public demanded justification. They had a right to know where their money went.

Soon, he thought, prompting a self-imposed reluctance, *it won’t matter.* The next phase of super weapons had already been set in motion, awaiting imminent deployment. *Today*, he suspected, *is the day for the announcement.*

Impatiently tapping his glass to get everybody’s attention, the secretary finally interrupted. “Today’s session is to activate Cosmic Sentry.” There was

an immediate silence. He allowed several seconds for the news to sink in then demanded silence.

“Order...order in the room...” The secretary hammered the gavel repeatedly to silence the hall. “To accomplish this objective,” he went on, “we’re here to divert unnecessary public attention. However,” he added, “there’ll be harsh consequences,” he further urged, “if someone decides to compromise the program.” After a brief pause he finished, “Overt or covert.”

“What’s the plan?” the representative from CINCPAC¹⁹ wanted to know. The other commands were just as demanding for details.

“Cosmic Sentry,” the secretary expounded, “will thwart our adversaries with everything we’ve got.” The revelation was a radical move but a necessary one. In recent years, undeclared wars had been initiated on too many fronts. Europe, Asia, and South America were all affected by the escalated surge of terrorist-inspired fronts and demanded justification. Whereas, in the past, the nation had been geared towards a defensive posture, today the tide must turn. A resolution must be called. And that was to take the initiative. The budget for the new weapons had already been approved. The time had come to implement the system.

“Such as?” someone shouted into the confusion.

“We’ll throw everything at them,” he insisted, “lasers, plasma weapons, pulsed energy, particle beams, you name it.” The statement was followed with hollers and outbursts such as, “Why not the kitchen sink?”

He let them have their day. After all, it was the start of a new chapter in the nation’s defense. DARPA had been experimenting with new weaponry since the sixties. Results had been slow, but promising in all sectors. For those who remembered Reagan’s Star Wars program, the stated technologies back then had been way too premature. “It’ll never work,” was the general consensus voiced even from the mega-corporations involved in the development, but, in the end, it had proven effective. It’d forced the Soviet Union to its knees. It had ended the Cold War. Fortunately, for many years there had only been one battlefield. Today, battlefronts were everywhere. The paradigm had changed. Al Qaeda, Jihad, the Taliban, and terrorism from other radical factions saw to that. Their rearing heads popped up everywhere on the globe. Cyber warfare was created. It would be here to stay for many decades to come, perhaps for the entire remaining time of humanity. Only time would tell.

“What about the budget?” In the past few years, budget restraints had been

a large burden on the nation, and the taxpayers. There were rumblings among the population, and rightly so. The recent acts of aggressions demanded action. The security of the nation was at stake. And so was the safety of the citizens.

“Approved,” the secretary affirmed. With a final motion, the meeting was adjourned.

CAYMAN ISLANDS (Offshore)

The man seated in first class isle seat had not made a move since boarding the craft in Dubai. To prevent passersby from making eye contact, he wore dark shades, tinted sunglasses. Even the flight crew could not read the man's facial expressions. Shortly after the takeoff, one specifically had made attempts to get his attention for refreshments and snacks. With a reluctant shrug, she finally gave up. "No, thank you," had been a casual, but firm response. He didn't want to be bothered. He knew what was coming. Superfluous chitchat and he hated it.

The passenger was good looking. Well fitted in an Armani suit, with Tommy Hilfiger shirt and Gucci tie to complement, people often mistook him for a business tycoon. They were dead wrong. He wasn't here on a social outing, or a vacation. He came here on business, serious business, business that would soon shake the world at its foundation.

Two hours into the flight he could feel his ears pop. It was an indication the craft had begun its descent. *Twenty more minutes*, he thought with relief. It took that long for most commercial flights to descend to low altitude, then down and against cross wind for a final approach to the tarmac. The customary "ping" sound got the attention of passengers occupying toilets and sleeping. The overhead No-Smoking and Seatbelt signs had just been turned on. Some kept on dozing in the comfort of the Cayman flight.

The perky stewardess made one final pass up and down the aisle to gather up the yellow landing cards. Haltingly, she leaned over the silent passenger to collect his. *One final move*, he thought, *to get my attention*. His card was blank. Her face took on a quizzical look, but then she shrugged her shoulders and moved on. Passengers around him were getting energized. They craned over armrests trying to catch a peek out the windows. Some were taking pictures. It was mostly tourists this time of year. You could spot them easily. They were the ones garbed in the colorful Tommy Bahamas, Dockers shorts, and Crocs sandals. Some youngsters already wore flip-flops, squirming impatiently in their seats, eager to get to the beach.

Again, he could hear the engines change pitch. Through the shades his glimpse caught the shadow of the jumbo jet skimming across the white-crusted waves breaking against the shoreline. He was gauging the distance closing between craft and ground. The ground effect had taken over his senses. Seconds later, the craft touched ground. It came to a final stop. He quickly jumped from his seat to collect his light luggage from overhead. With

long strides, he headed for the exit ramp. He'd beaten the crowd. Customs inspection was short. He'd already slipped a hundred dollar bill in between his passport pages before handing over the document. With a slight nod, the official slipped the bill into his pocket. He didn't even bother to open the passport belonging to a Hasan Hammad. He failed to check the computer. *Another executive in a hurry* may have been his thoughts. They were the routine customers in and out the island, the business elite. Rich, wealthy, and affluent, most had similar traits in common: greed, fraud, and corruption, the products of free enterprise. The island was built on it. Tourists were second-class citizens, a necessary nuisance to appease the local shop owners.

He was first to exit the airport. His strides were aimed in the direction of the row of waiting taxicabs. "Where to?" The driver was polite.

"Hilton."

"First time in the islands?"

"I'm not a tourist." That usually shut them up. Hammad reclined in the comfort of the air-conditioned cab. He barely noticed the view of the serene shoreline. His focus was on the mission. He tried to remember what he knew of this place.

The Caymans were a British-dependent territory located about 500 miles west of Jamaica. This offshore set of islands was outside U.S. borders, which made it ideal for legitimate tourist trade as well as the concealment of less-than-legal activities. As a result, for years, business and tourism had been prolific. To him, it was just another quick trip to check on business. He wasn't interested in the island's beaches or resorts. For that, he had his own place in Dubai, his private sanctuary removed from chatter and noise. Outside of that, and with good reasons, he preferred staying away from crowds.

Ten minutes later they arrived at the hotel. He liked staying there. Akin to an unbiased international atmosphere, people generally spoke multiple languages. He could converse in English, French, Farsi, and Hindi. It didn't matter to him. He was fluent in all. Within five minutes he'd been processed into a hotel suite.

He'd taken a shower, towed dry, poured a ginger ale, and taken a seat in the comfort of the modern suite. He asked for an outside line.

"Trans-World Global," the operator announced in perfect English.

"McAllister, please."

"McAllister," a suave male voice announced a few seconds later.

"Shahadah," the caller identified himself. "When can we meet?"

“Thirty minutes,” came the polite reply. “I’ll send transportation.”

CIA HEADQUARTERS

Harry Carter hadn't decided whether to call to apologize or to just let it ride. *Screw him*, he finally decided on yesterday's promise to Warner. *Always meddling in my affairs...let him deal with his. Got too much on my plate as it is.* Jack Warner was his counterpart at the NSA. Where the two organizational policies demanded collaboration between each other, the policy was not always upheld, especially in recent years. With similar careers, both rose up through the ranks. During the early days of their careers, they used to socialize with each other at whatever pub was popular among chief executives from the political arena. The places were still there, unchanged. Only the faces kept changing. D.C. had a high turnover in the job department. Every four years, six, or eight, the political climate changed and, with it, the faces.

Carter may have appeared gruff and impatient to the outside world, but he had his reasons. It hadn't always been like that. Working one assignment after another, he used to be friends with many from the organization. He'd enjoyed taking on projects no matter what the conditions, always prepared for yet another quest. Starting out, it'd been a matter of taking what was assigned. Everybody started at the bottom. He'd been no exception. He'd seen the world as it was, at its worst—bare and exposed. Some places he'd preferred over others. That was to be expected. Chasing criminals and villains had taken him to the worst places imaginable. He'd been there: the Bay of Pigs to oust Castro, Watergate and the Democratic National Committee, Lumumba and the Congo, Cambodia and Vietnam, the Soviet Union and its defectors, and Panama and Noriega among others. But that was years ago.

His break into the executive circles came with the end of the Cold War and the subsequent technological shift to remote surveillance. With it, there was no need for “cloak and dagger” anymore. Criminals and spies were chased through the Net using computers. Shortly after, his former job was replaced by Echelon. “IT” and “CIO” were the new buzzwords. He'd jumped at the opportunity. Years later, elected into office, he further developed the CIA's, by insiders mostly referred as “The Company” programs. It became his mission. He'd attained visibility. It'd been fun calling the shots in and around the Beltway. But then, eventually, politics took over. With rank came responsibility. Responsibilities opened up to vulnerability. Vulnerability gave ground to casualties. He almost succumbed to it but caught the trap just in time. Ever since, Harry Carter came first. Protecting his career, he'd

developed a personal barrier not many could breach. Nor did they attempt or even desire to do so. Nobody wanted to deal with him. He liked it that way.

Wonder what that was all about, he thought, regarding yesterday's call. *Ought to put a trace on the Snake—or was it Serpent?* He reached for the phone to call the head of his data center. "Put a trace on a 'Serpent,'" he ordered, "with possible connections to subversive factions. And," he cautioned, "keep it in the agency. Don't want NSA to get wind. Same goes for everybody else."

Mutual exclusivity was his mode of operandi. Contrast, resistance, and insulation were assurances to protect his position. *Let them look out for themselves, the DHS, the DIA, and the rest of them.* His life was dedicated to the CIA. He wanted to keep it that way, no matter what conservatives and liberals were saying. Collaboration? *Maybe.* Interoperability? *Screw that.* Consolidation? *Never!*

Getting that off his chest made him feel immensely better. It's good to talk things out occasionally, if only with yourself.

THE PENTAGON

Henry “Hank” Foster, general in charge of the United States Armed Forces, was fuming. He slammed the phone back in its cradle. He’d just had a disturbing call. It was from the head of the Trade Commission. “Never stops,” he grumbled. He forced a couple of deep breaths, then ordered his deputy into the office. Between the slamming of the cradle and a chest filled with air, he somewhat calmed down. His gaze swept the room while he waited. His eyes lingered briefly on the plaque hanging on the opposite wall. It always reminded him of his responsibilities. “The Buck Stops Here,” it said. It was a phrase first coined by then President Truman. In practice, it didn’t have to stop with him. He could just as well pass major issues up the chain, along with the axe. But that wouldn’t be him. The reason he was sitting in a Pentagon executive office was for his dependable qualities. It was a privilege not many ranking officers could achieve. It had to be earned. And that took a lifetime. For some, it involved fighting on the frontlines if, by chance, timing was right for a conflict or a war. Occasionally, others got lucky when the fronts were quiet by kissing the right butts.

There was a knock on the door. “Come in, Bart.” Hank gestured for his trusted liaison to take a seat. He handed him a folder stamped SECRET. “Check into this right away.”

“Sure. What’s up?”

“Seems,” he expounded, “we’ve had another breach in contracting policy.” His forehead was carved by two vertical lines, giving weight to the issue. “This one looks pretty grim.”

“Go on.”

“Appears,” he motioned at the folder, “contractor’s outsourced some super-sensitive project without our approval.”

“Not the first time this has happened.”

“Yeah,” Foster agreed, “but this involves the highest order of defense intelligence. It’s affecting national security directly.”

“Who’s the culprit?”

“One of those ‘bandits,’ you know,” he spat in disgust, “sprouting up all over the Beltway.” He made reference to technology firms growing like weeds in and around D.C., all scrambling for their rightful budget scraps.

“What’ve we got?”

“Get in touch with the Trade Commissioner for details then work with the FBI.”

“Sure thing,” he acknowledged then briskly stormed from the office.

The general was distraught. *This could get nasty with the news media.* Contemplating the next move, the frown across his forehead deepened. He flipped through the Rolodex sitting prominently on the desk. He was well aware the item was dated technology but kept it on the desk anyway, mostly for sentimental reasons. He just as well could have pulled the address up from the desktop computer, but out of habit always reached for the index cards first. He flipped through the cards to locate a specific address. *That’s it.* He punched the numbers into the phone pad.

“Bauer.” The voice at the other end was brisk.

“Alex,” he announced, “it’s Foster. What’ve you been up to lately?”

“Hello, Hank.” There was a hint of joy in the voice. “You still with the Pentagon?”

“Still here,” he answered with a fond chuckle. “Not ready for the scrap iron heap yet.”

“Haven’t lost your sense of humor, eh?” Alex replied. “Happy to hear.”

“It’s what keeps us young. Right?”

“Isn’t that the truth?”

“Listen, Alex.” Foster’s voice took on an urgent tone. “Could you fly down here to meet? Need you to check into something. I remember,” he inferred, “you were involved with this. Unless we keep it under tight wraps, we may have a problem that might get out of hand.”

“What can I do?”

“Tell you when you get here. Can you manage the next flight?”

“Just like old times, eh? I’ll be there tomorrow.”

“Thanks.” The general was relieved. “I’ll have a badge waiting at the front desk.”

Same evening, Alex caught a redeye flight out of Denver. Three hours later he landed at Dulles. The flight had been uneventful. The cabin was sparsely occupied. It gave him a chance to doze for most of the flight. Transfer from luggage hold to ground transportation was swift. Night porters and rental agents greeted him sleepy eyed. The world was cloaked in a state of semi-dormancy. It reminded him on his early on-the-fly career days.

The parking lots were almost empty when he showed up at the Pentagon’s doorsteps. It was still early. The morning sun had just broken over the horizon across the Potomac River. Quietly seated in the rental car, he

decided, *No use getting inside*. No matter how many times he'd visited here, a feel of grandeur overcame his senses just looking at the sheer size of the complex.

He'd always been impressed by this bustling city within a city. It housed not only the head of every military force, but also every agency and national laboratory one could imagine, from Lawrence Livermore Laboratory to White Sands and DARPA, employing the best scientists and mathematicians in the world, with all branches tied to this place.

The morning silence was broken up by the slamming of car doors. His eyes sought out the disturbance. Commuters started to arrive. He checked his watch for the time. *Should go in*, he decided. With determined strides he made his way to the entrance. Western Sector, the sign announced. A visitor's badge was waiting as promised. In the pre-9/11 days, he would have been directed to the proper office, but today he was assigned an escort. Security had been tightened on all visitors, calling for rigorous in-processing. An escort was assigned and waiting. He followed but paid little attention to the route they took. *Walking the corridors*, Alex reflected on his twenty-five-year career with the DOD, *many famous commanders have walked these halls before me*. He was proud to be among them.

Not much has changed, he took note, in this "no-salute, no-cover" area. Official visitors still showed up dressed as smartly as ever. One last turn and they had arrived at the general's office. There, the escort handed off his responsibility to a receptionist.

"Bauer," he announced to the secretary.

"He's expecting you. Please follow me." She led him to the back office.

Bounding from his chair to greet him, the general bellowed, "Alex! Been ages. How's retirement treating you?" He was beaming at his longtime friend.

"Not retired yet. Still do consulting work for you guys."

"So I hear. Take a seat," he patted his old friend on the shoulder, "so I can fill you in." The friendliness he displayed was a rare occasion. "I'll get right to the point." His face had turned serious once more. "Remember the contractor...the one that developed the Prowler satellites?"

"Sure do." Alex recalled, "I was liaison on the project. What's the problem?"

"Let me fill you in," Foster said, thumbing at the service counter.

“Coffee?”

“Thanks. Could use some.”

“Cream? Sugar?”

“Black.”

Foster handed him a freshly brewed cup. “Looks like someone’s compromised the software,” he said, picking up the conversation. “Need you to trace the contracting steps from start to delivery. Get me the names, places, and activities from all parties involved, but please,” he emphasized, “be discrete about it. We can’t let the press get wind. Treat it as a sensitive issue.”

“You know me; middle name’s ‘anonymous.’”

“Never would have guessed.” Foster chuckled. “Everybody in this business knows your accomplishments,” he boasted with a grin. A phone ring ended the meeting. Foster made a gesture to take the call. “Keep me posted... daily.”

“Will do.” Unceremoniously, Alex had been dismissed. Foster had already picked up a waiting call. *Too bad.* He’d have liked to socialize some more but thought better of it. *Some other time.* He hesitated a moment before heading for the exit.

Better give Tracy a call, he thought, let her know I’m in town. He fished for his mobile and made the call. Considering the time past since their last visit, *Boy, he hoped, will she be surprised.*

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Notes

[←1]

Keyhole is a satellite spy/reconnaissance program deployed for military and intelligence agencies.

[←2]

In 2002, SPACECOM merged with STRATCOM to become the Unified Combatant Command of the United States' Department of Defense to oversee the command's global strategic mission.

[←3]

Automatic Digital Network

[←4]

Single Integrated Operational Plan (SIOP/ESI) is a blueprint that tells how American nuclear weapons would be used in the event of war. The plan integrates the nuclear capabilities of manned bombers, long-range missiles and ballistic missiles fired from nuclear submarines. The SIOP is implemented in case the United States is under nuclear attack or if a nuclear attack on the United States is imminent. It also includes procedures on how to mass evacuate the population from congested prone cities. It is a highly classified document, and one of the most secret and sensitive issues in U.S. national security policy.

Extremely Sensitive Intelligence (ESI) is a special access category with a need-to-know restriction that requires special authorization.

[←5]

Garden of the Gods is a public park located in Colorado Springs, CO. Where it used to be a pristine area used mostly by local hikers and rock climbers, toady it is a popular tourist place. The unusual reddish colored rock formations were created during a geological upheaval along a natural fault line millions of years ago.

[←6]

SALT – Strategic Arms Limitation Talks. An agreement signed in 1979 by U.S. President Jimmy Carter and Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev after the second round of Strategic Arms Limitations Talks (SALT II), held from 1972-79.

[←7]

START II – Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty. Bilateral treaty between the United States of America and Russia on the Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms.

[←8]

Launch Control Center for nuclear tipped ICBM missiles.

[←9]

North American Defense Command.

[←10]

In case of a nuclear attack, an Emergency Action Message (EAM) will be issued in accordance with the Single Integrated Operational Plan (SIOP) from the National Military Command Center at the Pentagon or, if it has been destroyed by an enemy first strike, by the Alternate National Military Command Center - Site R at Raven Rock or by the Boeing E-4B National Airborne Operations Center alerting all missile launch facilities, silos, and military command centers.

[←11]

Electromagnetic Pulse is a burst of radiation generated by gamma rays and neutron pulsing caused by a nuclear explosion, solar burst, or cosmic rays (such as a supernova).

[←12]

An intercontinental ballistic missile is a ballistic missile with a long range (greater than 3,500 miles) typically designed for nuclear weapons delivery (delivering one or more nuclear warheads). Due to their great range and firepower, in an all-out nuclear war, land-based and submarine-based ballistic missiles would carry most of the destructive force, with nuclear-armed bombers supplementing the effort.

[←13]

Defense Condition – National Defense Readiness for threat levels one through five. DEFCON alerts apply to the United States national defense designated for global readiness. Since the inception of DEFCON, there has never been a peaceful state of DEFCON-5, because, there has always been a war or conflict somewhere on the globe. Level-4 is considered normal. The alert status remains there unless elevated to DEFCON-3 or 2 through various threat conditions. Since the end of WWII the world has only seen DEFCON-2 one time in October 1962 during the Cuban missile crisis. We are hoping never to see DEFCON-1, since it means all out nuclear war.

[←14]

In contrast to communication satellites, and uncommon knowledge to the general public, there was a breed of anti-satellite weapons moving in low orbit termed attack satellites. These ASATs had been secretly deployed for years. Developed during the Cold War as part of space warfare, the purpose of these was to eliminate missiles and other threats initiated by a hostile nation from entering U.S. airspace. That was the official posture within the political realm of the U.S. government. Its purpose, however, was much more sinister. The real reason was known to only a select group of scientists and mission defense personnel. ASATs, by design were kinetic energy weapons deployed to destroy any possible threat in space such as foreign satellites and other spy objects.

[←15]

National Reconnaissance Office

[←16]

Carnivore is the name given to a system initially implemented by the Federal Bureau of Investigation analogous to wiretapping. Later renamed to Digital Collection System, it was segmented into three packages including Carnivore, Packeteer and CoolMiner, referred to as the DragonWare Suite.

[←17]

The Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency is an agency of the United States Department of Defense responsible for the development of new technology for use by the military.

[←18]

Where DCA (Defense Communication Agency) is responsible for building and maintaining the intelligence network and infrastructure, the DIA (Defense Intelligence Agency) provides the manpower resources.

[←19]

Commander in Chief Pacific (CINCPAC) is the head for all U.S. Pacific Naval Fleets
Headquartered in Hawaii.