

ENDGAME



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Recommended age: 14 years and up.
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Cover by Keith

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CHAPTER ONE

Nick Stratton gazed absently through the window of the descending Learjet. Below he could see tiny white flecks of waves dancing tantalizingly against the golden beaches of Guam. A couple of seagulls circled lazily over the azure ocean, blissfully unaware of the need to develop competitive corporate strategies, actualize priorities, and stay current with the latest software upgrades.

It had been a long week. First, on Monday, the unusual phone call from college buddy Tom Levinski. For the hundredth time Nick reviewed the conversation in his mind.

“Nick,” had come the confident, sonorous voice, “why don’t you come over to Guam next weekend? I’ve got a beautiful place out here. There’s a new project I’m working on, pretty big stuff. I’d like to get you on our team. I’ve been following your career with interest. Whatcha say we talk it over out here? The weather’s great this time of year.”

“Yeah,” Nick had replied hesitantly. He hadn’t seen the guy for four years. “Sounds interesting, but I have quite a bit going on here right now and...”

“Look, I’ll give you a couple of days to think about it, and don’t worry about getting here. I’ll have my Learjet pick you up in L.A.”

“Okay, Tom, I’ll think about it. But why Guam of all places?”

“You’ll understand when you get here.” The conversation had ended with one of Tom’s dry laughs.

Tuesday Nick called Tom to confirm.

On Wednesday, Lorraine, Nick’s girlfriend, had told him she wanted to break up. That was a tough one. They’d been seeing each other for two years, and she was the closest Nick had ever come to wanting to marry anyone. She didn’t say why. The lack of explanation bothered Nick. She said it wasn’t someone else, it wasn’t anything he’d done, she just needed a change.

Nick had only had one night to enjoy his misery and its pursuant alcoholic consolation, which he duly indulged in. The following day the stock market had taken a nosedive, causing havoc in the multinational firm where Nick worked as financial comptroller. It was a pretty good position for a 28-year-old, but then Nick was also one of the best around, by any standard. Acumen, drive, initiative, and an almost intuitive ability to predict changes in the business climate had put Nick on the promotional fast track. But this one had taken him entirely by surprise.

It was a nightmare which Nick wanted to forget. He could already see the writing on the wall for the corporation. He knew it would only be a matter of time until receivership was the only option, or takeover.

It was with a sense of relief that he had flown out of L.A. late Thursday evening. Now, on the other side of the International Date Line, it was Saturday morning local time at Guam International, and the runway was within a few minutes of meeting the Learjet’s already lowered wheels.

“God only knows what this is all about,” Nick whispered to himself. “Better be good, Tom.”

The landing was as smooth as settling down into

an armchair. Within minutes the jet had taxied off the runway. The pretty, efficient flight attendant lowered the cabin door and exit stairs as Nick grabbed his suitcase. As he stepped out onto the small stairway, a balmy sea breeze enveloped his body and a tang of salt in the air reached his tongue.

As he descended the steps he saw a black limousine pulling up. The door opened and a familiar figure stepped out. He slipped on a pair of designer shades and looked up at Nick.

“Hey Nick! It’s great to see you! Glad you could make it out here!” Tom called out as he walked briskly across the tarmac. He was looking good, much sharper than Nick remembered him. The two shook hands warmly.

“Good to see you too, old man! It’s been a few years.” Nick was trying to hide his uncertainty with a display of confidence.

“Sure has! We’ve come a long way since college! You’ve been doing quite well for yourself. I imagine last week’s market plunge didn’t do you much good, though.”

“Not so hot.” The euphemism was the best Nick could do to sound not entirely devastated. “But I haven’t been able to keep track of you so well, Tom. So what ... are you living here, got one of your scandalous scams going on here now?”

Tom laughed almost caustically. “Yeah, I guess you could say that!”

“But ... why Guam?”

Suddenly there was a deafening roar behind them. Nick turned quickly in time to see three F-18s approach, bank sharply to the right, and head out to sea.

“Well, security’s pretty good, for a start,” quipped Tom. For a moment they watched as the three black dots disappeared into the haze.

Nick started fumbling with his passport.

"You don't need that," laughed Tom, almost patronizingly. "We're still in the good ol' U.S. of A., plus you're with me now. Come on, let me help you with your bag."

"No, I'm fine really. It's not heavy."

"Okay—have it your way. You always did." There was a hint of some distant, unresolved conflict in Tom's voice.

"Well, you look like you're doing okay for yourself," said Nick as they walked toward the sleek black limousine.

"Never been better!" affirmed Tom.

"So the stock market downturn didn't hit you too hard in your ... whatever it is you do. Actually, what are you doing these days?"

"All your questions will be answered in due course." Tom nodded to a wide, smartly dressed islander who had emerged from the driver's seat to open the door for them.

"But first," he continued as they seated themselves, "I want to show you something. Harry, stop by the marina on the way, will you?"

"Yessuh," came a grunt from the front seat.

Nick's curiosity was burning, but it seemed for now inappropriate to ask any further questions.



The security guard at the marina waved them through and snapped smartly to attention as they passed.

The limo pulled up by the wharf, and the driver began to laboriously clamber out of his front seat to open the door for them. Tom preempted him, however, by jumping out of the car and gesturing for Nick to follow him.

"Come on Nick, you're going to like this!"

Nick was almost becoming annoyed by Tom's game playing, but there was no choice but to comply.

About halfway along the neatly tiered array of marine extravagance, Tom paused in front of a sleek white yacht, which Nick estimated to be at least a 60-footer.

"Isn't she a beauty?" breathed Tom admiringly.

As if on cue, the cabin door opened and a tall perfectly tanned blonde wearing the smallest bikini imaginable emerged.

"Hi Tom," she called out teasingly.

"Yeah, she's a beauty alright," said Nick under his breath.

"Well she's all yours, Nick ... if you take the assignment."

"The girl or the boat?" intoned Nick, still mesmerized by the apparition before him.

"Both ... if you take the assignment."

"What assignment, Tom?" Nick suddenly snapped out of his reverie, and turned almost angrily to his friend. "What the hell's going on?"

"Come on," said Tom, as confidently as if he were answering Nick's question in detail. "Let's go home. You can take a shower, have some breakfast, and then there's someone I'd like you to meet."

"Bye, Tom!" a flirtatious voice sounded across the waves as the two men turned to go.

"Bye, Sabrina!" Tom shouted back. "Hey babe, this is Nick. Remember? I told you he was coming."

"Hi Nick," she cooed. "Nice to meet you."

Nick's initial fascination was rapidly starting to fade. "Yeah ... I guess I'll catch you later," he said lamely with one hand partly raised in half a wave.

Back in the car, Nick could no longer restrain himself.

"What is this? You bring me all the way out here,

while my whole world's falling apart at home, and offer me this boat with some imbecilic Baywatch blonde in exchange for taking on some assignment which I know nothing about."

"Hey, Sabrina may have a gorgeous body, but don't hold that against her! She also has a Masters in computer science from UCLA."

"What?" Nick's tone softened somewhat. "Who is she? Does she work for you?"

"She's on the team, yeah."

"What team?"

Tom's eyes narrowed as he intoned with an apocalyptic tone in his voice, "Fear not, for all shall be revealed!"

His face cracked again into a grin as he laughed. "Lighten up, Nick. Hey, I know you've had a rough week, but don't worry, things are about to get better ... much, much better!"



Within ten minutes they arrived at a large white gate, which swung open at a signal from the driver. The limo proceeded down a driveway that wended its way through immaculately kept and lush tropical gardens. After about half a mile they pulled up outside an elegant white brick mansion. As Nick stepped out of the car a whiff of sea breeze hit him, and the sound of waves indicated that the property on the other side of the house opened onto beachfront. Trim lawns, copious flowerbeds, ornamental fountains—all spoke of the utmost lavishness and opulence.

Nick let out a low whistle.

"This is your place?"

"One of them," came the casual reply.

"My, my. You have come up in the world."

"Yeah, well, I guess I learned early how to play the game."

"Tell me about it."

"I will." Tom's half mysterious smile appeared and vanished again almost as quickly when a butler, once again an islander but less rotund than Harry, approached to take Nick's bags.

"Show Mr. Stratton to his room, will you, Thomas?"

"Certainly, sir."

"Take it easy, Nick. And whenever you're ready, join me for breakfast."

"Okay, and thanks ... for all this."

Nick suddenly felt very tired, not from the long flight, but tired of his life, the pressure, the heartbreak, the tension, the worry. "God knows I need a break right now."

Tom smiled pensively and beckoned for Nick to follow the butler.

Nick's first-story suite was no less extravagant than the grounds of the mansion. He went first to the picture window, which opened onto a balcony overlooking the sea and shore. He stood for a few long minutes gazing out at the azure ocean, the sandy beach that stretched for miles in each direction, and breathed deeply of the salty air.

Whatever Tom's doing must be the way to go, he mused silently, before turning back into the room and heading for the shower.



After breakfast Nick slept for a few hours, then spent the rest of the morning relaxing, swimming in the Olympic-size swimming pool, flipping through magazines and satellite channels, and browsing the web from the computer provided in his suite.

Tom called on the intercom at 1:00.

"Lunch is served out on the patio downstairs if you'd care to join me."

“Sounds great,” replied Nick. “I’ll be right down.”

“I hope you don’t mind that we get down to business right away,” said Tom as Nick joined him on the well-shaded patio.

“That’s what I’m here for, I guess.”

“I mentioned that I wanted you to meet someone. Well, I hope you don’t mind but I set it up for 2:00.”

“Yep. Sounds good. But may I be so presumptuous as to ask who ‘someone’ is.”

“I was coming to that. His name is Ron Arens.”

“Doesn’t ring a bell.”

“Well I guess you could say he mixes in”—Tom hesitated, searching for a word—“different circles.”

Nick raised his eyebrows.

Tom continued. “He is, I think, one of the most brilliant people I have ever met. An amazing mind.”

“And what field is he in?”

“Well he sort of ... heads up think tanks and ... I think I’d better let him explain himself.”

CHAPTER TWO

It was 1:59 according to the antique grandfather clock in the study. Nick glanced down at his Rolex to confirm and took another sip of coffee. He suddenly felt very nervous. Tom sat silently as if preparing for a spiritual experience.

Nick was startled to attention when Ron entered the room, jumping up from his chair with considerably less dignity than he would have liked.

Nick reached for Ron’s hand, guessing him to be about 50, though as trim and athletic looking as a 30-year-old. He had immaculately groomed gray hair, a finely chiseled face, and the most piercing blue eyes that Nick had ever seen. There was an indescribable air of authority about him, and without knowing how, Nick detected a strange mixture of hardened cynicism and utter idealism as Ron spoke.

“Nick Stratton. It’s a pleasure to have you with us. Tom has told me so much about you, and I’ve personally followed your career with interest.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you too, sir.” Nick hesitated, wanting to continue but not knowing how.

“Although you’ve never heard of me before, and have absolutely no idea who I am and what I do, right?”

“I ... er...” Nick was taken totally off guard.

“That’s alright, we’ll get to all that. I trust Tom’s been taking good care of you.”

“Oh just great. The place is magnificent.”

Ron smiled with a trace of condescension, and Nick suddenly felt like a total rookie.

Tom, who had been silently observing the encounter stepped in to try to rescue his friend.

“Make yourselves at home, gentlemen.” Tom gestured toward an elegant sofa for Ron and motioned for Nick to sit down.

“Coffee?”

“No thanks, Tom. Just mineral water will do.”

Silence ensued for several seconds as Ron seemed to be sizing up every aspect of Nick’s character and appearance.

“So ... Tom was telling me you ... uh ... head up think tanks and things like that.” Nick’s attempt at breaking the ice was futile.

“Yes,” came the monosyllabic-though-somewhat-drawn-out reply. Silence followed for at least another minute. It was obvious that Ron was used to speaking only when he was ready.

“The world,” he began suddenly, and forcefully, “is like a spoiled child—undisciplined, rowdy, rambunctious. We waste countless billions on ridiculous extravagance and inefficiency, plunder our own resources, and destroy our future with our own two hands.”

“Yeah ... I guess so.”

Ron continued, seemingly oblivious to Nick’s halting answer.

“Vast swathes of the earth’s surface are uninhabitable, for lack of only one basic commodity—water—whilst the nations, like quarrelling gang members, fight over a few sordid city streets and threaten each other with expensive high-tech weapons. Billions of

dollars go down irretrievable drains every year because of mismanagement, greed, and ignorance. We have become slaves of a gigantic, moronic Cyclops that our own hands have created, and which dictates to us policies that we are powerless to change, though they are nevertheless reflections of our own warped desires. Religious and ethnic conflicts drain our collective strength and render us powerless against a tidal wave of cataclysm that threatens to engulf us at any minute.”

“I guess you could put it that way,” Nick attempted again.

This time Ron turned and looked Nick full in the face.

“What is the solution, Mr. Stratton?”

“Well, I haven’t really given it much thought.”

“And that is precisely the problem. No one gives it enough thought. A few talk about it, propose solutions, but very little is ever implemented. Meanwhile we careen headlong into the abyss of our own hand-made apocalypse.”

Silence once again engulfed the room, broken only by the sound of Ron drumming his fingers pensively on the arm of his chair. Nick decided to break it.

“So what’s your solution, Mr. Arens?”

“Call me Ron.” Suddenly his voice was almost benign. “I was coming to that. There is a group of concerned individuals who have been monitoring the world situation for a number of years now. We observe trends, discuss problems, initiate think tanks, propose solutions, conduct experiments. Some of the most brilliant minds on the planet are with us. We don’t represent any particular government, ethnic group, or religious conviction. The thing that motivates us is that something must be done to save the human race.”

Ron turned once again and spoke directly into Nick's face, with a quiet intensity that was almost ferocious.

"The one fact that we are all convinced of is the necessity of establishing a global authority."

Nick let out a low whistle. "That's pretty heavy stuff. I mean, what level are we talking about here? How global ... and how much authority?"

"Pretty comprehensive, at least initially."

"You mean an actual global political entity?"

"Precisely."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Arens—I mean, Ron—but that sounds quite scary to me. I mean it's bad enough having a central government in control of a country, but the whole world? The possibilities for abuse of power are endless. What about democracy?"

"Ah yes, democracy. That was a nice idea, wasn't it?"

"Look, I don't know what you're advocating here and who your team is and what you're planning to do, but it smacks of megalomania to me." Nick was beginning to raise his voice.

"Of course I understand your reservations, Nick. We also have grappled very deeply with the political and moral issues at stake. If you'll just hear me out."

"Alright." Nick swallowed, and took a deep breath.

"Imagine the scenario." Ron's voice softened as he became entranced by his own metaphor. "The Titanic heading for the iceberg. Imminent disaster. Most of the passengers blissfully ignorant, eating, drinking, being merry. Even the crew, the captain, horribly complacent, unaware of the danger. A few men become aware of the situation, the impending doom. They try desperately to warn the captain, the officers, but the warnings

are ignored. Again and again they plead, but those in charge refuse to acknowledge the problem, foolishly believing in the invincibility of their vessel. What then is the morally correct course of action? Perhaps take a vote, conduct a poll of the passengers? Present the findings to the captain? That could take hours, and there are only minutes in which to act to avert a terrible calamity. Try again to reason with the officers, who have already proved themselves impervious to any warnings? Once again valuable time would be lost. Would it not then be best to seize control of the ship, if it were within their power, even if use of force were necessary, or deception, in order to save the lives of the innocent, uninformed passengers?"

"I find it very hard to believe that the situation is that desperate," Nick began.

"Excuse me a moment." Ron pulled a slim cell phone from his jacket pocket, and dialed a number. Nick could tell from the number of digits that it was an international call.

"Hey, Steve? Ron here. How's it all going?" Ron seemed suddenly oblivious to the others in the room. "Yes, I'm out here in Guam for the weekend. ... Yep, weather's great! Listen Steve, you working on anything now? ... See I had this great idea for a movie. A ship ... maybe nuclear destroyer, heading into extreme danger. ... Right. ... And you have a rookie captain, too timid or slow to make the big decision. A few concerned crewmembers take over the ship. At first it seems they're wrong, mutineers, but eventually it transpires that they save the lives of everyone on board, maybe avert a war or a disaster or something. ... Right. ... Some character study, lots of action ... exploring the theme of ... right, you got it, or justifiable use of force and control in the face of impending tragedy, somehow linking it to ... right ... right ... yes, global scenario

... implanting the idea that ... yeah, well, I'll just give you that for now, let you run with it. Thanks, Steve. Hey, email me a copy of the script when it's done. ... A plane? Yeah, plane, ship, whatever. I trust you to know what to do! ... Okay, Steve, I'll catch you next time I'm over there. ... Yeah, we'll do that. ... Okay, bye."

Ron folded the phone with a sharp snap and replaced it in his pocket. "Now, where were we?"

"I was just saying that I found it hard to believe that the situation was quite that bad," Nick replied.

"Look at the realities, Nick. The Middle East is a powder keg ready to blow up into full-scale war at any time. Africa is dissolving into mass chaos. Southeast Asia could experience nuclear war any time. Korea, China, Taiwan, Indonesia, South America ... the list goes on and on of situations that are about to blow. Russia is an angry bear robbed of her cubs. And the global economy is like a house of cards, totally interdependent, but frighteningly fragile."

"So you propose a global government. And just how do you suppose the nations of the world are going to be persuaded to yield their sovereignty to such a body?"

"Much very valuable groundwork has already been done. See how in recent years the world community has agreed much more readily to supranational intervention in internal affairs? I mean, one can't have so much as a decent civil war or suppress an ethnic minority these days without the UN or NATO or someone dropping bombs on you."

Nick smiled at the grim sarcasm. "Granted, but that's a far cry from nations yielding political or military power to a central body."

"It's amazing how quickly things can change."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, look at Russia and Eastern Europe, who abandoned communism overnight. If the conditions are right, forces that have been gathering momentum for many years can suddenly take effect. Like atomic matter suddenly reaching critical mass and detonating."

"And what conditions might they be?"

"People need to realize that the old system is fundamentally flawed, in order to be willing to accept the new."

"You mean a global dictatorship?"

"Yes, but the dictatorship is only a transitional phase. Imagine, if you can, the ultimate goal." Ron stood up, and began to pace up and down. "A world linked by technology, where every man and woman has access to the internet. For the first time in history we could know everyone's views on issues. Referendums could be endlessly conducted on all subjects. People could at last be free to express their opinions on the issues that affect their lives. At last there could be true democracy. No more voting for corrupt politicians who are the best of a bad lot and only represent the vested interests of those who paid for their campaigns. No more idle promises, no more millions of wasted taxpayer's dollars on cumbersome bureaucracies. Finally, the people of the world—all people—will have an equal voice."

"Sounds fantastical."

"Yes, but it could work. The technology already exists. All that's needed now is the political will."

"But what about another problem," Nick asked. "Identification. Let's say you could set up the technological infrastructure. How could you possibly verify the identity of those who are voting?"

"Several ways. One biometrics, retina scans, finger prints, etc, the other—"

“Don’t tell me, biochip implants, right?”

“Right. How did you know?”

“Oh back in my hometown in Texas you hear the preachers warning about it. You know ‘the Mark of the Beast’ and all that.” Nick put his hands up to his forehead in a mock horn gesture, and laughed.

Ron laughed too, the first time Nick had seen him do so.

“Amazing, isn’t it!” He suddenly became serious again and spoke with increasing vehemence, “That our plans for helping the world achieve true democracy could be so hindered by the rantings of a Galilean nutcase”—he slammed a clenched right fist into his left palm—“on an island in the Aegean 19 centuries ago, who thought he had a vision of the end of the world—and just happened to accidentally predict biochip technology ... and interpret it as something evil.”

Nick was silent, momentarily uncomfortable.

“What? Have I offended some hidden religious sensibility?” said Ron sardonically.

“None to speak of,” Nick replied, a slow grin spreading across his face.

“Come with us, Nick. Work with us. Help us build the future.” Ron’s tone was suddenly warm, persuasive, inviting.

“I’ll definitely give it some thought.”

“Tom can fill you in on more details, and as you saw today ... we’ll take care of everything. Everything!” Ron smiled and held out his hand.

Nick rose to grasp it.

“Now if you’ll excuse me, I have a few urgent matters to attend to. Tom can fill you in on more details. We’ll talk again tomorrow afternoon.”

“I need to be back in L.A. Monday morning.”

“Tom’ll help you sort out any business details,

travel plans. I’m sure your boss will understand if you need a few more days. Right, Tom?”

“Right,” replied Tom with a knowing nod toward Nick.

“Thanks for everything, Tom,” said Ron matter-of-factly, and left the room.



In the afternoon Nick slept for several hours, then worked out in Tom’s private gym, which would have made the average five-star sports club blush.

As the sun hung suspended like a huge red balloon above the turquoise horizon, Nick walked out on the wide veranda overlooking the bay.

“Nice view, isn’t it?” came Tom’s voice from behind.

“Incredible.”

“Oh Nick, Sabrina just called. Said she’d probably drop by this evening.”

“Sabrina? Oh, the beach bimbo.”

“Hey, give her a chance, Nick. She’s a nice girl.”

“A chance to do what?”

“Don’t worry, you’ll figure it out,” he replied with a smile, and went back inside.



After dinner, Nick was enjoying a glass of port in the lounge. An elegantly carved chess set on one of the shelves caught his eye.

“Nice set,” he remarked to Tom as the latter entered the room.

“How about a game?”

“Ah Tom ... I haven’t played since college days!”

“Well as I recall, the last game we played you beat me, so I think I deserve the chance to even the score!”

“Well, you may very well do that, especially if you’ve been playing.”

“From time to time, yes.” Tom picked up two pawns, one white one black and held them behind his back. Nick chose white. Tom moved the board to a table and the two sat down.

For a while the game progressed smoothly, both building their defense, cautiously, warily eyeing each other’s moves. No risks, no attacking moves. Neither player spoke. Nick began to feel uneasy, tense in the pit of his stomach. Somewhere in the shadows of his imagination the game was starting to take on a menacing significance. He began to sense the symbolism of a greater conflict being waged, perhaps for his life.

Then Tom struck, using a knight to capture a bishop, which Nick had covered by one of his own knights as well as his queen. An exchange of pieces would follow. Nick judged they would end up pretty equal. He paused to contemplate his next move. Suddenly he felt sweat breaking out on his palms.

“The big question, whether to sacrifice the knight?” said Tom reflectively.

The words struck a strange chill in Nick’s heart. He had no idea why. Slowly he moved the white knight into place and removed Tom’s black piece.

Without hesitation Tom removed the white knight and placed a black bishop there, which Nick promptly captured with his queen. The exchange was over for now, and both players sat quietly contemplating their strategy.

“That’s the thing that fascinates me about chess,” said Tom quietly. “It’s not the number of pieces you capture that necessarily determines who wins. It’s all in the strategy, all in the endgame. It’s who executes that final checkmate that matters, not how many pieces you have to sacrifice to get there.”

“And do you think you’re on the winning side,

with your ‘team’?”

“Oh definitely. Otherwise I wouldn’t be doing it, would I?”

“And if I join the team, what do I become? A pawn?”

“Oh no. Definitely more valuable than a pawn.”

“Like what? A bishop?”

“You, Nick? I can’t quite see you as a bishop!”

“A knight perhaps?”

Tom cast a critical eye toward him. “Yes, I think so ... a knight.”

“White or Black?”

“Well, I guess that choice is yours.”

The conversation was interrupted by the butler.

“Miss Brookes has arrived, sir.”

“Good, show her up. Look Nick, let’s finish the game another time. Leave the board set up, and you can contemplate your next move.”

“I’ll be doing that.”

“Meanwhile I need to go into town for a while. Be a good pal and entertain Sabrina for me, will you?”

“Oh, okay.” Nick’s tone was uncertain.

“Get to know her, Nick. I think you and she have a lot in common.”

“Look Tom, if you’re trying to set me up...”

“Sabrina!” exclaimed Tom as she entered the room. “You’re looking great!”

Nick had to restrain himself from uttering a low whistle. Sabrina looked stunning. Waves of ash-blonde hair fell across her bare shoulders. Her short almost see-through dress clung like opaque Glad Wrap to her shapely body. She smiled warmly as the two men rose to greet her.

“Hi Tom, Nick.”

“Listen, make yourselves at home, you two. I’ll be out for a couple of hours. Help yourselves to anything

you want, drinks in the bar, CDs galore ... DVDs if you're interested. Hey, by the way, Sabrina, you should take Nick out in the yacht tomorrow."

"Sounds great," said Nick.

"I'd love to." Sabrina smiled again.

"I'll see you guys later! Be good!" And with that, Tom left.

"Hello, Nick," said Sabrina. "It's nice to get a closer look at you." She held out a perfectly manicured hand.

"Uh yeah ... mutual." Nick held it briefly.

Sabrina sat herself down on a sofa, crossing her legs sensuously while Nick resumed his seat by the chessboard.

"So you're the financial whiz kid I've been hearing about?"

"I suppose I am. And you're the computer guru?"

"I suppose I am." She perused the chessboard momentarily. "You white?"

"Yes."

"You're in a lot of trouble."

"How do you know that?"

"I mean, except for a miracle or a grand master, you're basically dead."

"Looks pretty even to me."

"That's because you haven't seen what he's planning to do with his queen's pawn."

"I'm not afraid of a pawn!"

"Well, whiz kid, in that case you've gotta lot to learn." She looked at him with a faint pout of disapproval. "Since you haven't offered me a drink, I guess I'll help myself."

Nick was already on his feet.

"So what'll it be?"

"Screwdriver, with special emphasis on the *screw*," she cooed.

"Whoa, you don't waste much time," said Nick as he poured the drink.

"I don't believe in beating around the bush. I mean, is that okay or is that okay?"

Nick brought over her drink. He was about to retreat to his armchair but her eyes told him to sit next to her on the sofa. Nick decided to obey the eyes.

"Well, here's to ... new friendships," he said raising his glass.

Sabrina smiled, a trifle condescendingly perhaps, but nevertheless raised her glass.

"I'll drink to that," she said, and took a long sip.

Nick leaned back, attempting to look relaxed. Sabrina moved over next to him. She slid a perfectly toned thigh seductively against his leg, and looked searchingly into his face.

"Look, Sabrina, you're a very nice person and all, but I don't know if I'm ready for this."

"That's totally cool with me. I mean, I can probably stand to wait 15 more minutes before I start taking my clothes off."

"You don't understand. I just broke up with my girlfriend last week."

"What does that have to do with it?"

"Well ... a lot really. I'm not ready for any more relationships ... commitments."

"I don't want to marry you, Nick. I just want to have sex with you."

Nick was silent. It certainly was a tempting offer.

"Come, I want to show you something." She stood up and took him by the hand.

Nick rose uncertainly.

"Come on!"

She led him out of the room and to the left up a spiral marble staircase. They passed by a room on

the next landing, which Nick had already figured out to be Tom's study.

Then another flight of stairs and they came to a wooden door. Sabrina turned to look at Nick with a smile, and opened the door. It led out onto a terrace on the roof of the mansion.

"Come," she whispered. She led him to a white marble railing at the edge of the balcony. "What do you think?" She looked up at him with shining eyes.

Nick took a deep breath and surveyed the scene before him. A full moon hung limpidly in the sky, casting an entrancing net of mystery over the landscape. The ocean was like a vast sheet of silver, broken only by the white-flecked waves that crashed on the shore. Tiny flashes of magnesium blue gave the waves an eerie and unearthly effect. Palm fronds glinted in the moonlight, and a steady ocean breeze rippled through their hair.

Sabrina slipped her arm around his waist, and Nick slid his around her shoulder. Slowly, inexorably, they turned toward each other, until their lips met. Nick ran his fingers through her hair in long searching caresses, and she responded, her body cascading into his, her hands exploring his neck, his back, his shoulders. Nick's hands found the zipper on the back of her dress and started to undo it, sliding his hands in against the bare skin of her back. Her hands began loosening his belt, undoing his pants. She pulled him toward a couch conveniently placed on the terrace, and pulled him down on top of herself, her flimsy dress sliding all the way up around her waist. She began kissing him wildly, almost frantically, fumbling to undo the buttons of his shirt. Nick responded by pulling her dress over her head.

The moon cast its silver blanket over them as they made passionate love, their moans and cries the only

counterpoint to the rhythm of the waves crashing on the beach. When they were done Sabrina lay for a few minutes on Nick's chest, still heaving from the expended passion.

"That was great," she said suddenly. "I gotta go now. I'll be by to pick you up at nine tomorrow morning." She stood up quickly, and started dressing herself.

"Wait," said Nick fumbling around in the dark, trying to find his underpants. "I'll walk you down."

"No need," she said, and was gone.

Nick sat for a few minutes struggling to collect his thoughts.

I must be dreaming, he thought.

Having located his clothes and dressed himself, he went back in through the wooden door and made his way carefully down the staircase. The hallway was dark but a light shone out through the door of Tom's study. Nick stopped by the open doorway, half expecting to see Tom at his desk. There was no one there. The lamp on his desk had been left on. There were some papers left out on his desk. Nick's curiosity got the better of him. Casting a quick glance behind, he walked quietly over to the desk and looked at the documents. The header on the page listed the document's title as "On Operation Scrooge." Transfixed, Nick began to read.

Unfortunately, dear Mr. Scrooge was all too right about the need to "decrease the surplus population." At the time, however, the moral justification for doing so did not exist. Now, the need has never been more glaring. Titanic is sinking and there aren't enough lifeboats.

Our experiments have met with considerable success. The AIDS epidemic, controlled genocide in Cambodia, the resurgence of TB, cholera, as well as the introduction of SARS

and numerous other new viral diseases, carefully fomented ethnic violence in sub-Saharan Africa, the decimation of Iraq's juvenile population, have all proven to be model test tube cases. The time for widespread application of the formulae is rapidly approaching.

We, the elite, will be safe, destined to survive. For the rest, it will be Russian roulette. And if some conspiracy hunters among them come close to realizing what is happening, or even who is behind it, few—and none who matter—will pay them any heed. Any credible information that is leaked on a larger scale can quickly be discredited by any selection of means at our disposal.

Nick sat down involuntarily and let out a gasp. Beads of sweat began breaking out on his forehead.

What is this? Who are these people? What am I getting myself into? Suddenly a thought struck him. He needed proof, needed a record of this. But how? Quickly his eyes searched the room. There was no fax machine, copier, or scanner. Suddenly he remembered, he had brought his camera.

Quickly and as quietly as he could, he ran down the staircase to his room. He rummaged about in the closet for a few seconds. Where had he left it? His suitcase. There it was, the familiar black leather pouch. Quickly he loaded the flash, checked it. Film, yes. Batteries, yes.

Stealthily he left his room and began to climb the staircase. His heart was beating wildly and he struggled to breathe normally, evenly. Quietly he approached Tom's door. As he was about to enter he started suddenly. Tom was in there. Quickly he looked up from the desk where he was now seated.

"Nick? Is that you?"

Nick's heart sank. As blandly as he could muster he answered.

"Yeah."

"Hey, what's with the camera?"

"Yeah, I ... er ... was up on the ... you know, the terrace on the roof with Sabrina before and ... the ocean and the moonlight looked really cool and I thought I'd try to get a shot."

"In this light?"

"Yeah. I have one of those, you know, time-delay lens things for night photography."

"Ah. What aperture do you use?"

"Oh, you know ... the normal."

"In that case you'll need a tripod. Wanna borrow mine?"

"That's okay. I'll just use the, you know, the railing." *Damn, he must be suspecting something.*

"What's the flash for?"

"Flash? Oh ... I always keep my flash attached. You never know when you might need it."

"Are you okay, buddy? Your hands are shaking. You're sweating!"

"It's this Sabrina girl. She's quite something, quite an experience. I don't think I've recovered yet."

Tom chuckled, shook his head.

"Get some sleep, man. You're probably jet-lagged."

"Yeah, maybe so. It's been a long day. Maybe I should call it a night."

"Good idea. Hey, are you sure you're okay? You want to see a doctor?"

"No. I'll be fine after a good night's sleep."

"Great. You know that Ron wants to see you again tomorrow afternoon."

"Yeah, he said so."

“I think he likes you.”

“How do you know?”

“I know the guy well. Plus he called later and said he thought you have great potential.”

“Well, that’s nice to know.”

“Yeah ... he doesn’t say that about just anyone. You’ll go far, my boy, you’ll go far.”

Nick was relieved. Tom didn’t seem to suspect anything.

“Okay. I’ll turn in for the night.”

“Yeah good night, ol’ buddy.”



When Nick reached his room, he couldn’t even think of sleeping. Without hesitation he booted up his computer. Within minutes he was logging on to the net. Firmly, deliberately, he typed in the word “CONSPIRACY.”

Immediately a number of links appeared and he began browsing.

Two hours and 30 or so websites later he found himself falling asleep over his keyboard and threw himself into bed.

CHAPTER THREE

Nine o’clock the next morning Sabrina arrived in a red Lamborghini convertible.

“The weather’s perfect,” she said as Nick climbed in beside her.

“Couldn’t be better,” he agreed. Without hesitation she revved up and spun the agile sports car around toward the gate.

“Did you sleep well?” she asked with a trace of mischief in her voice.

“Well, I took a little while getting to sleep.”

“Oh yes, and why was that?”

“Well, yesterday was sort of an unusual day. Lots to think about.”

“Such as?” They were turning out onto the main road.

“Well, seeing Tom again, meeting Ron, meeting you ... uh Sabrina, thanks for last night, it was ... I mean, you were ... awesome.”

“Well that’s classy! Not so many people say thank you these days.”

“Yeah, we gentlemen are a dying breed.”

“Almost extinct.” She laughed and turned to him flirtatiously, the wind catching her unbraided hair.

Within minutes they were boarding the yacht.

“Come, I’ll show you around,” said Sabrina.

The boat was about on the same level as Tom's mansion.

"I was figuring on something like this in about 15 years, when I make the big break—you know, head up my own corporation," said Nick pensively as they finished the tour and ended up on the bridge.

"And now it can all be yours in a matter of weeks," said Sabrina with a creamy commercial announcer's voice.

"I still don't get what this is all about, this whole deal."

"Don't worry. You'll get the hang of it soon enough. Believe me, it doesn't take long."

Nick sat staring blankly out of the front windshield of the yacht, momentarily lost in thought.

Sabrina giggled.

"Well, what are you waiting for? Take her to sea, Mr. Stratton!"

"Uh, I don't know how. I've never driven one before."

"Here, I'll teach you. There's nothing to it."

"Thanks."

Sabrina adjusted some controls and turned the key. The engines throbbed to life.

"Okay, so here's how you do it. This lever on the left is one engine, on the right is the other one. That's how you steer in a small space like this."

She was a good instructor, and Nick an adept student.

Twenty minutes out to sea, Sabrina said, "Since you're doing so well, I'll go below for a few minutes."

Nick nodded. He had to admit he was enjoying this immensely.

Five minutes later she emerged from the cabin, wearing only a bikini bottom and her white shirt, which was unbuttoned and tied loosely at her navel.

"That's a refreshing sight, I must say," said Nick.

"Keep your mind on the job Cap'n—don't want to strike any hidden reefs."

Gently she started rubbing his shoulders. Her body began to press up against him. She began to caress his waist with the inside of her thigh. By now they were a good five miles off shore.

"And just how am I supposed to keep my mind on my job with you doing that?"

"It's part of the training. Navigation under difficult circumstances."

"Okay, either stop that or tell me how to turn this thing off."

"Two levers with the black knobs to your right." She kissed his ear gently. "Pull them slowly down toward you." Her hands were sliding down inside his shirt, massaging his chest. Slowly he pulled down the levers and the engines died into silence. Her hands slid down past his waist into his shorts, feeling for him. He turned to face her and she sat astride him, pushing him back against the steering wheel, her hands busily reaching, feeling, caressing.

"Why do I get the funny feeling I'm being sexually manipulated," he whispered, as she slid the shirt off his shoulders.

"Just tell me to stop," she whispered back as she undid the knot in her shirt and pulled it aside.

"Maybe not," he mumbled as her breasts touched his bare chest.

"Take me downstairs," she gasped between kisses. "There's a bed in the cabin."



After making love, Sabrina lay beside Nick with her head on his shoulder, running her slender fingers through his hair.

“So what am I?” said Nick. “One of your assignments?”

“Oh no, you’re part of the reward.”

“Reward?”

“Definitely.”

“So they have a system of assignments and rewards.”

“They?”

“Yeah, they, them ... whoever.”

“Who, the masters?”

“Is that what you call them? Like a code name?”

“Code name, nickname, whatever.”

“The masters.” Nick thought for a moment. “Who are they, anyway? Is Ron one of them?”

“I don’t know exactly.”

“You mean you don’t care who you’re working for?”

“I find that’s what works best for me, not to care too much. I agree with what they’re doing and they pay well, very well.” She smiled and pressed her lips against his neck.

“This is weird.”

“Oh, don’t worry, it gets weirder. But better, better all the time. Talking about time, we’d better get back. Ron wants to see you again, right?”

“Right.”



Back ashore, Sabrina dropped Nick back at Tom’s and took her leave, saying she had things to do. An hour later Nick was once again in Tom’s study, listening as Ron began to speak.

“There are two major threats to our plans: One is small armed terrorist cells, such as Islamic groups. They aren’t so difficult to deal with, as public opinion against them is pretty high. In a way they hang themselves and their cause as soon as they fly airplanes into

buildings and blow themselves up in sidewalk cafes. The greater and more difficult thing to deal with is the Christian fundamentalists. They profess a loyalty to a higher power which is quite hard to control.”

“Surely,” said Nick, “it’s a simple enough matter to enforce regulation and monitoring to make sure they don’t do too much damage.”

“But that’s just the problem. Their ideas have a way of growing wings whenever you try to suppress them. There’s nothing that a fanatic loves more than to be persecuted. The specter of Big Brother, be he ever so benign, brings out the martyr spirit in even fairly lackadaisical believers.”

“So what approach works best?”

Ron paused, as if weighing his words carefully.

“The idea is to gradually chip away at the foundation of belief. Make the fundamentalist doctrine appear outmoded, irrelevant. Arrange, or highlight scenarios that help people realize the ... dangers of fanaticism.”

“I get it, a dangerous apocalyptic cult. A mass suicide, perhaps. Or a crazed religious nut gunman.”

“Precisely. These events which seem to take place fairly regularly are, to say the least, very helpful.”

“Well that seems to me to be incredibly cynical, if you don’t mind me saying so,” said Nick, “to capitalize on the deaths of innocent people to further your own political agenda.”

Ron laughed caustically. “I see we have quite an idealist here. Good! Very good.”

Nick felt angry, confused.

“Look”—Ron sounded suddenly sympathetic—“believe me, I’ve grappled long and hard with the moral issues at stake here. We’re not talking about infringing on people’s religious liberty. That’s an inalienable human right. That’s what we’re eventually

hoping to ensure for all mankind. It's just that when archaic ideas stand in the way of progress, some action must be taken. The human race must be set free to take this next historic, destined step in our evolution—free from the shackles of outworn concepts, free from anachronistic morals and dogmas, free from prejudice and bigotry." He paused emphatically.

"Free from God," added Nick quietly.

"Yes—free even from God. Only then can the eternal spirit of man finally take his place, unfettered, unhindered on the throne of the human heart."

"I have a question. Why are you trusting me with all this information? How do you know that I won't go to a newspaper tomorrow with this? How do you know I won't betray you? How can you be sure of my loyalty?"

"I don't need your loyalty, to me or to my cause. The only loyalty I need to see in you is total fealty to yourself. If I am assured of that, then I can trust you implicitly."

"How so?"

"Because you know just as well as I do who is going to come out on top—who will gain control. As long as you know that, you will do all you can to ensure that you are on the right side. As long as you don't profess any loyalty to a higher authority than your own ego, I'm perfectly safe."

"And how do you know I don't?"

Ron smiled. "You've done pretty well so far."

Nick frowned.

"Does that offend you?" Ron laughed. "Come, come. Let's not give way to any sentimental expressions of altruism. Let's be honest. You're here because you want to get the biggest break of your career, and you don't want to go down with that sinking ship of a corporation you work for."

Nick was silent for a long moment. Finally, he nodded his head in uneasy assent.

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

"Then welcome aboard, Nick Stratton." Ron was suddenly warm and charming, a father welcoming a beloved son-in-law to an elite clan. "Tom will fill you in on the details of your first assignment. I'll be flying to Europe tomorrow, so I don't expect I'll see you for a while. I must say it's been a pleasure to meet you. We'll stay in touch." Ron stood up and Nick followed suit.

"Thank you ... uh, I mean—"

"That's alright. You don't have to thank me." Ron clasped Nick's hand warmly. He turned mercurially toward the door. Almost as an afterthought he turned back to Nick with a half smile.

"Oh, by the way, do be a little careful about what websites you log onto."

"You ... uh ... knew?"

"Yes, those sites are all ours, we use them to keep track of conspiracy buffs and other weirdoes. But you never know where else you might end up."

Without another word, he turned, and was gone.

Silence reigned in the room for several long minutes. Nick was grappling with his thoughts. An enormous choice loomed in front of him like a giant breaker about to crash. He had no idea what shore it would wash him up on, whether to fight it or to ride it. There was too much he didn't understand.

Tom broke the silence. "Ron's a very ... forthright, outspoken guy. He calls a spade a spade, but you always know where you stand with him."

"Yeah."

"Look Nick, it's not too late to walk away. That's totally okay. You can be back at your desk in L.A. tomorrow morning and this will have just been a different experience, a glimpse into another world,

one you can choose to retain or forget about. You can carry on with your normal life.”

“You know as well as I do that I don’t have that much to go back to.”

“Look Nick, this is your decision, and I don’t want to try to influence you, but since *I* made the break, I’ve never looked back. It’s the opportunity of a lifetime.”

“What kind of salary are we looking at?”

“Salary?” Tom chuckled. “Salary doesn’t exactly do the subject justice! I mean, it’s more a case of whatever you want you can have. But you’re definitely looking at seven figures up.”

“Per year?”

“Monthly.”

Nick pondered the thought deliciously.

“And what’s the job description? What do I do?”

“Oh, it varies.”

“Great! Thanks for the detailed rundown. Could you boil it down to simpler terms maybe?”

“Well, among other things, I head up an international consultancy firm called Nexo Consultants. Your first job would be under me, I mean for Nexo, working as a chief consultant. First assignment in Georgia, the former Soviet republic.”

“What’s the deal?”

“Well they’re receiving a large aid package from Global Finance Bank, but they need a little help in implementing some of the stipulations. So Nexo has been outsourced to help with monitoring the implementation on site.”

“What sort of time frame?”

“If you take the job, you can be in Tbilisi in two weeks, and it’s probably a three-month tenure there.”

“Okay.” Nick was cautious.

“I have a package you can look over this afternoon. Take your time. Get ahold of the material.”

“Is there some kind of dotted line I have to sign?”

“I guess I’ll need an answer by tomorrow. Time’s running out, so if you don’t want the position then we’ll need to interview the next applicant, so to speak.”

“What do you mean, time’s running out?” Nick’s tone was sharper and tenser than he would have liked.

“Things are most likely going to happen soon, quickly, and we have to move.”

“The things that Ron was talking about? It’s all that predetermined?”

“It’s history, Nick. It’s destiny. It’s an inevitable movement of forces beyond our control, and you can either ride the wave or get dumped by it.”

“So you’re saying that we don’t have a choice.”

“Of course we do Nick. I do, you do, we all do. But the wave is going to break, no matter what you or I do. Our choice is how we position ourselves, and I wanted you to have this break, this chance to be on board.”

“Okay. I just need some time. It’s all very new.”

“Just take the afternoon, Nick. Sabrina will be over in the evening to show you some computer stuff.”

“Computer stuff?”

“You know, communications and all that.”

“Okay. Sounds good.”



Nick spent the afternoon as Tom had suggested, reading through the material. It all seemed fairly logical, although a few things seemed odd to him. He would bring them up with Tom.

His reading finished, Nick pondered long and hard the options he was facing. The document he had read the night before haunted the back of his mind like a bad dream he wanted to forget. Everything else seemed

so perfect. He knew there was nothing for him back in L.A.—a failing company, a devastated relationship, even the thought of living in his old apartment was depressingly burdensome. The moral issues weighed on him, but he could not deny that he saw Ron’s logic. Perhaps Tom’s was even more persuasive. Change was inevitable, inexorable, whether he was with it or not.

By the time the great orange sphere of the sun was sliding noiselessly into the steel gray surface of the ocean, he had made up his mind, and he felt good about it.

He found Tom and told him.

“Great to have you on board, Nick Stratton! I assure you your life will never be the same.”

“Yeah, well I hope I can do your confidence justice.”

“You’re gonna get out there and kill ’em, ol’ buddy.”

Tom was approaching over-enthusiasm and Nick wished he’d stop. He changed the subject and the tone.

“There’s one thing I wanted to ask about the material I read today.”

“Shoot.”

“Okay, so there are stipulations about deregulation, intellectual property rights, social programs and lowering import tariffs. That all makes sense, part of globalization. But why raise interest rates? How’s that going to help them? Couldn’t that actually cause a credit crunch and a financial meltdown? Particularly if it was compounded by an international fluctuation, say in oil prices.”

“Hey ol’ buddy, you’re learning fast. You’re really gonna go places.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well there’s an OPEC meeting in a month, and all the inside info points to a hike in prices. Good instinct. You’re on the right track.”

“But that could cause chaos, destabilize the government, lead to all kinds of social upheaval, riots—people could get killed. It could even cause a domino effect, especially in Russia.”

“Look, as long as they do what they’re supposed to, we won’t let ’em down too far. One of the problems is that people seldom do all that they’re supposed to until there’s a bit of ... pressure applied. The rescuing a drowning man principle. If you try to help him too early he’ll just fight you off. You have to wait until he’s desperate. It’s human nature.”

“More of Ron’s unconventional ethics?”

“Listen, Nick. You’ll need to get used to this. A lot is at stake here, but it’s all for the benefit of the people—the whole world ultimately.” There was an uneasy silence. Nick breathed deeply and thought about the million-dollar salary, his yacht, and Sabrina.

“Okay, Tom. I’ll go with it. I just hope you guys know what you’re doing.”

“Oh, we know what we’re doing alright.”

“So what are *you* working on?”

“Apart from heading up Nexo and all that that entails, I’m working on another pet project.”

“And what would that be?”

“You remember Ron talking about these religious groups?”

“Yeah ... cults and the like.”

“Right. From all we can gather, it appears that some of them know a bit more about what we’re doing than they’re supposed to. These conspiracy buffs have a way of sticking their noses in where they don’t belong. If they only knew what was good for them, and for the world.”

“So what are you going to do? Lock ’em up?”

“No way, totally outdated methodology. That doesn’t fit in very well at all with the image of the pluralistic

utopia we're trying to create. Stuff like that always backfires in the end." Tom paused, as if weighing his words carefully. "No ... we're talking more along the lines of ... discreditation."

"Like for example?" There was an uncomfortable pause.

"Well I have a few ideas, but it's too early to talk about them."

Nick sensed that he had pushed it a bit too far. He backed off gently.

"Well, I'd better get back to my homework," he quipped, gesturing at the papers on the table in front of him.

"Yeah, I've got a bit to catch up on too. See you later, ol' buddy." Tom was out of the room in a moment and Nick wondered if he had said more than he was supposed to.



After dinner Sabrina arrived attired very differently, in jeans and a sweatshirt with her hair gathered up in a ponytail, and a laptop bag slung over her shoulder.

"Ready for business, I see," said Nick as she entered the room.

"Sure am." She sat down and immediately started to remove the laptop from its cover.

"I have a feeling I'm about to see a different side of Ms. Sabrina Brookes." Nick was enjoying the show.

"Yeah, it's a bit like Jekyll and Hyde. My MBA starts to come out after dark." She was already booting up.

"I thought Jekyll was a PHD—you know, *Dr.* Jekyll."

"I'm working on it."

"Really, what's your thesis?"

"Mating habits of financial consultants."

"Okay, so I'm one of your experiments. How was my lab performance?"

Sabrina suddenly stopped, a slender finger suspended inches above the keyboard.

She looked saucily up at Nick.

"I'll give you a B plus."

"*B plus!*" Nick's outrage was a little more than put on.

"Well, since no one's ever scored higher than a B before, I'd say you're doing pretty okay for a freshman. Ready?"

"Ready ... for I have no idea what."

"Passwords and encryption. Security is paramount to the success of our endeavor. This laptop will be yours. It's got some specially designed encryption programs for our email communications. This one I particularly like because it makes the message look like it's not encrypted. There are also decryption programs which are theoretically capable of breaking into almost any network in the world should the need arise. We're also capable of having 24-hour, totally secure, direct satellite communications, although we won't use that unless it's an emergency. This adaptor can plug directly from any satellite dish receiver into your laptop. I particularly enjoy tuning into U.S. military satellites, the resolution is fantastic!

"Okay, and here are three 10-digit passwords that you'll be required to memorize and destroy. With these you can access our private web site from any terminal in the world, should anything go wrong with the laptop. There are three layers, one password per layer, so to get all the way in you'll need to remember all three. They change every three months, and we'll inform you of the changes. Should the laptop fall into the wrong hands, the entire hard drive can be erased remotely via satellite from your cell phone

within ten minutes after being turned on. Even with the encryption, we don't take chances—never know when some hacker gets the jump on you these days. So we keep our messages brief and to the point, and use codenames. Yours will be Knight. Mine is Sea Nymph. That's all you need to know for now. I will be your contact for any messages during this mission. Any questions?"

"Not about the computer."

"About anything else?"

"Yeah, I guess so." Nick was having a hard time getting it out.

"What is it Nick?"

"I just want to know whether you actually like me or whether I'm just some sort of assignment, for the sake of 'the cause.' You know, close your eyes and think of 'the global entity' type deal."

Sabrina suddenly softened. "Hey Nick, I've had the hots for you ever since I started eavesdropping on your email account six months ago!"

"You what? You eavesdropped?"

"Come on, you don't think you'd be chosen for a position like this out of the blue, do you? We did our homework on you first."

"That is totally unethical."

"Well, look what it got you, babe—chance of a lifetime. We just wanted to be sure you were the man for the job."

"I can't believe you can be so matter-of-fact about doing that."

"Hey, welcome to the 21st century. Anyone who's anyone eavesdrops on anyone else who's anyone else these days. It's standard procedure."

"So you know all about Lorraine?"

"Poor girl. She doesn't know what she's missing."

"So I'm not just a new recruit?"

"Look babe, the computer training, that's part of the job. The sex was my idea."

"Really?"

"Yes."

Nick looked uncertain.

"Yes," she repeated, moving toward him on the sofa. He edged closer to her.

"Yes," she almost shouted as she climbed on top of him and sat astride.

"Okay, maybe I believe you."

"Well, let's get down to business, then."

"Business?"

"Aren't you going to try for an A minus?"



An hour later the two were lying intricately entangled together in Nick's expansive king-size bed, passion once more expended.

"So..." began Nick gingerly.

"So what?"

"You know."

"Oh!" Sabrina laughed. "Oh frailty, thy name is male ego!"

"Whence the misquoted Shakespeare?"

"Oh, I've been wanting to revenge dear Willy for saying 'Frailty, thy name is woman' for a very long time."

"I guess that's your prerogative," said Nick.

Sabrina was silent.

"So?" he said gingerly.

"So what?" she asked innocently.

"The score?"

"Oh, the score! The freshy wants to know his first semester results. How cute! Let me see now. Hmm ... I'd say..." Her lips started forming a B. Nick began to cringe. "Brilliant! with a capital A!"

Nick could not resist a grin.

Sabrina hesitated. “And I don’t know if they have triple plusses, but you just earned one, baby!”

Nick smiled and pulled her warm body up against his.

“So are you going to head back to L.A. tomorrow?” she asked. For the first time Nick detected a note of insecurity in her voice.

“Yeah, I guess so. I’ll need to wind things up there and get ready for my first assignment.”

“So you’re in all the way?”

“Yep, looks like it.”

“You won’t regret it, Nick.” She hesitated before continuing. “We’ll be seeing a fair bit more of each other, you know, in the line of work.”

“Seems like it.”

“Are you happy about that?”

“Yeah, it’s great.”

“I’m happy about it too!” She nestled up close to him. “I’m so glad you’re with us. But baby?” Her tone became a little more intense.

“What?”

“Be careful, okay? Play it their way. Don’t try to be a hero or a maverick. It doesn’t work so well.”

“What are you saying?” Nick raised himself up on one elbow and looked at her intently.

“Just take care of yourself, and do the job well, okay? You ... mean something to me. And...”

“And?”

“There will be times that you’ll have to do things.”

“Things?”

“Things that you don’t feel comfortable with. Things that go against the grain. Look at them as”—she paused for a second to weigh her words—“as tests, challenges. But keep yourself focused on the end result. That’s the key, remember. The end result.”

Nick lay back down and lapsed into silence. Once again an overwhelming sense of being out of his depth surrounded him. He couldn’t shake the feeling that Sabrina was warning him of something, but he *intended* to play it their way—after all, there was nothing to lose and everything to gain.



First thing Monday morning Nick called his boss. The response was surprising, as if anything could still be surprising at this stage.

“Oh hi, Nick. Yeah, thanks for calling. Ron already called me earlier this morning. Look, we’ll be sorry to lose you, but I respect your decision. Ron’s a great guy. You’re doing the right thing.”

“You mean you know him?” Nick was trying to sound natural.

“Oh yeah, we go way back.”

“Small world.”

“Sure is.”

“I guess I’ll fly back today and be in tomorrow morning, to start winding things up.”

“Yeah, guess I’ll see you then.”

“Hey, thanks for everything, and for understanding.”

“No problem.”

The conversation ended simply and abruptly, just as a chapter in Nick’s life seemed to be closing and another one opening with almost bewildering speed.

By 11:30AM he was catching his last glimpse of Guam’s Eden-like paradise from the cabin window as the Learjet soared into the crystal blue atmosphere.

CHAPTER FOUR

Back in L.A. Nick rolled up his sleeves and plunged into the rather messy business of straightening out his accounts, preparing to pass his work on to his successor and—a task dreaded but not to be neglected—calling his mother.

“Hey Mom, I have a new job. First assignment over in Georgia.”

“Where, Atlanta? You make sure to drop by and see your Uncle Frank, now.”

“No, Mom, not Georgia, USA. You know, Georgia, former Soviet Republic.”

“Where the hell is that?”

“Uh, it’s on the Black Sea, kind of between Ukraine and Armenia.”

“The Black Sea? Never heard of it. I heard of the Red Sea. Is it anywhere near that?”

“It’s a bit further North, Mom.”

“Well, you take care, now—all those commies and all over there.”

“Mom, it’s not like that any more. I’ll be just fine.”

“Well, stay in touch, Son. Call me when you get there.”

“Yes ma’am.” It was the only suitable response.



The next two weeks were a maelstrom of conflicting emotions, meetings, shopping, preparing, researching his destination country, packing, and communicating with Sabrina via email.

Sabrina flew out to see him before he left and they spent the night together. No commitments needed, she assured him, although he could sense something growing in her feelings. He was frighteningly unsure of his own and needed time to sort things out. He enjoyed the lovemaking tremendously but was secretly glad he would be ten thousand miles away in about 24 hours. She drove him to the airport and they hugged warmly before he entered passport control.

“Remember what I said, babe, and take care.”

“Okay, I will.”

“And stay in touch. You have the codes all memo-rized, right?”

“Right.”

It wasn't until he was boarding the final leg of his journey from Heathrow that he was suddenly aware of the reality of the choice he had made and the vast consequences for his future.

He entered the first-class cabin and was ushered to his seat. Nick had always thought that solo travel was a little like a cross between roulette and arranged marriage. Never know if you're going to end up next to a supermodel, a dead boring suit, or a sumo wrestler with B.O. Whoever it was, you were destined to spend the next 7 to 12 hours next to that person, for better or for worse.

He wasn't disappointed as he glanced at the girl in the seat next to his. She was, he guessed, maybe 25. Slim, dark shoulder-length hair, brown eyes, pretty face. Not a supermodel, but there was something warmly attractive about her. She smiled at him briefly as he put his briefcase in the overhead locker.

“Hi.” He smiled back. Definitely something to brighten the monotony of the trip.

He took his seat and spent a few minutes adjusting the headrest and footrest.

“Hi. Nick Stratton.” He held out his hand.

“Hello. I'm Jenny, Jenny Sanchez.” She took his hand simply but warmly. He immediately knew by her watch, earrings, and clothes that she wasn't of the economic bracket to ride first class. Intriguing.

“Headed to Tbilisi?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“So ... what are you doing there? Holidaying?”

“No, I work on a project there.”

“I see. What kind of project?”

“I'm a full-time volunteer there, with an organization called the Family. We have various projects going, producing educational material for children, giving inspirational seminars, counseling people with problems, and we also help run a home for street kids—a refuge-and-school type thing.”

“That's nice.” Nick's eyebrows were raised slightly, his brow inadvertently furrowed.

“I know what you're thinking,” said Jenny. “How does someone in my line of work get to afford a first-class seat?”

“Well I wasn't going to ask, but...”

“Let's just say, my Boss takes very good care of me.” She raised her eyes heavenward with a knowing look.

“Ah, I see.” *Let's not pursue that train of thought,* Nick thought.

Their conversation was interrupted by a hot towel held out by a demurely attractive flight stewardess. Having completed a thorough face washing the conversation continued.

“So you got upgraded, right?”

“Yes, I’m so thankful. I just flew in from L.A.—economy, of course—and when I checked in here, they’d overbooked somehow,”

“How unusual!”

“So they upgraded me.”

“Well, welcome to first class.”

“Thank you.”

“Forgive me for prying, but you have an interesting accent. Let me guess. You’re not from the States.”

“Right.”

“Nor from England or Australia.”

“Right.”

“Somewhere in Europe, maybe? But you don’t have a strong accent, it’s sort of a mixture.”

“Keep guessing.” Jenny was obviously amused, though perhaps a little embarrassed.

“Hong Kong?”

“Nope.”

“South Africa?”

“Nope.”

“Canada?”

“Nope.”

“Okay, I give up!”

“Well, my dad’s Irish and my mom’s Indonesian-Chinese.”

“Right, that makes perfect sense. But one question, then. How did you end up with a name like Sanchez?”

“That’s ‘cause my second dad is Venezuelan.”

“Oh, perfectly logical. So you have a Venezuelan passport now?”

“New Zealand.”

“Predictable!” Nick laughed. “So how did you manage to become such a ... demographic anomaly?”

“Well that’s a very long story.” She hesitated and Nick sensed she didn’t really want to tell it.

“That’s okay. You can spare me the details.”

“Thanks.”

By now the plane was taxiing on to the runway. As the engines roared into full throttle, Nick watched Jenny’s eyes close and lips start to move in a silent prayer.

Poor child, he thought, almost sympathetically. *I’d like to sort her out a bit.*

There followed a considerable lapse in conversation whilst the two perused newspapers and magazines provided by the stewardess.

Jenny was the one to break the silence.

“So what do you do?”

“I’m going to Tbilisi as a financial advisor to the government.”

“I see. Pretty big position.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“So you’re from the States?”

“Yeah, Texas, but now living in L.A.”

“Did you study there?”

“Yale, actually.”

“Wow. What did you do ... I mean study?”

“Accounting and economics. How about you?”

“Well, I didn’t go to college.” Jenny seemed a tad uncomfortable with the question. “I was homeschooled, and then took correspondence courses for a variety of high-school and college certificates, basically all related to the kind of work I now do.”

“You grew up doing this kind of work?”

“Pretty much.”

“So it’s a religious thing.”

“I’m a Christian, yes.”

“So you believe that there’s a God.”

“Definitely.”

“How can you be so sure? Surely there’s no proof, no way you can know for certain.”

She stopped for a moment, appearing to be thinking about how to answer.

“Well, I guess I’m sure because I talk to Him every day, and He tells me things.”

“Oh, so you hear God’s voice?” Nick was sarcastic. This was going to be fun.

“Yes.”

“So what accent does *He* have?”

Jenny was unperturbed. “I don’t know how to describe it, exactly. It’s just a very loving, very clear voice, telling me things.”

“What kind of things?”

“Anything, really. Sometimes a warning about something, or some instruction, some advice. Practical things, or spiritual things. Sometimes He just tells me He loves me.”

“So is this some kind of Joan of Arc type deal you think you have going with the Almighty?”

“Nothing dramatic like that. Anyone can do it really. It’s just ‘ask and you shall receive.’ You ask Him and you listen.”

“So He tells you things like, watch out the toast is about to burn, your pager battery is going flat, your boyfriend’s sleeping with another woman, that kind of stuff?”

Jenny laughed. Annoyingly, she was refusing to get annoyed.

“Yes, He could tell you that.”

“Great. Maybe I could employ you. Two weeks ago the stock market crash took me totally off guard. You could predict which stocks to invest in. I’ll start you at 75,000 dollars a year. Cool, my own personal guru.”

“100,000,” she replied playfully.

“Done.” He held out his hand. She took it again. He squeezed it a bit. She withdrew it tactfully. *Fair enough, first meeting, keep distances.*

“Seriously though, I really can’t believe that you can hear God speaking. I think it’s just something created by your imagination. Your own desire to believe in something bigger than yourself.”

Jenny raised an amused eyebrow.

“Okay, let’s try you out. What does He tell you about me?”

“Hey, I’m not a medium or anything.” She laughed, a little nervously.

“No, but you claim that God can speak to you.”

“Right.” Her tone was less than certain.

“Okay, well, what does God have to say about me, about Nick Stratton?”

“I guess I could ask and see.”

“Yes. I’d be very interested.”

Jenny appeared to be struggling with the idea, but she closed her eyes and was silent for a few moments. When she opened them again she looked up at Nick with a trace of apprehension in her warm brown eyes.

“Well, what was it?”

Jenny laughed nervously again. “I don’t know. It was weird.”

“Tell me.” Nick suddenly felt a chill run down his spine.

“I just heard one sentence ... look, maybe I shouldn’t tell you.”

“That’s okay. I want to know.”

“Well this one sentence came: ‘He is a white knight, but a servant of the black masters.’ That’s all I got.”

Nick turned to her full in the face and narrowed his eyes.

“Who are you working for?”

“What do you mean?”

“Are you working for them?”

“For who?”

“You know.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Who sent you?”

“Sent me where?”

“Here.”

“Nobody sent me. Just like I told you, I’m on the way to go back to Tbilisi where I—”

“How did you know?”

“Know what?”

“About them!”

“About who?”

Nick stopped suddenly. What was he saying? He was breaking out in a cold sweat. He gripped his armrest and took a deep breath. She obviously didn’t know. Nick forced a laugh.

“Sorry, I was just kidding around,” he said lightly.

“Playing along with the joke, you know.”

“Then why are you sweating?”

“I, uh ... I’ve been under a lot of pressure recently—you know, preparing for this trip and all. I’m a bit stressed out, I must admit.”

“It’s okay. I’m sorry if I said something that upset you.”

“No way, totally cool. Hey, that’s a good party trick. You should work on that, like ‘I’m going to get a message from God for you.’ Some people might even believe it. You could make good bucks!” Nick was being too expansive and he knew it.

Jenny didn’t reply but looked at him once more with those perceptive brown eyes.

Nick buried himself in the *Financial Times*. End of conversation.



As the plane landed, Nick gave Jenny his card.

“Look, if you’re in town, look me up. Maybe we could help you out a bit. Extort some funds your way.”

Jenny laughed.

“Seriously, though, maybe there is something we can do. I can’t say I share your beliefs but I admire what you’re doing.”

“Thanks so much. And I wanted to give you this to read.”

“What’s this?” Nick looked at the booklet. “*Future Foretold*—my God, you’re not one of these apocalyptic people, are you?”

Jenny blushed a bit, but stammered, “Actually, yes, but it ends well. Why don’t you read it?”

“Okay. I’ll give it a look. But be careful, okay.”

“What do you mean, be careful?”

“Well, some people might not understand. You know, apocalyptic cults have a pretty bad name these days.”

“Okay, thanks. I’ll take care, but I’m not a member of a cult. Plus I don’t really care what people say. The truth is what matters, and not many people are willing to tell it these days.” She was suddenly very earnest, almost intense.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right about that.” Nick fumbled uncomfortably with his briefcase. “Yeah, well, look me up if you have time, alright?”

“Okay, I’ll do that.” Jenny smiled broadly.

Nice girl, thought Nick, *a bit deluded maybe, but nice.*

CHAPTER FIVE

A delegation from the Ministry of Finance met Nick at the airport—some lower-ranking officials, led by a jovial middleman in his thirties who introduced himself as Timur Okumiashvily. After about seven attempts Nick began to master the pronunciation. A Mercedes took them through winding streets of the elegant ancient city. They passed at least ten world cup football finals being played out by energetic, raggedly dressed boys on dusty lots and side lanes. Nick imagined the peaceful tree-lined streets thronged with demonstrators, picket lines ... the tanks rolling through the surging crowds, the sickening chatter of automatic weapons, the screams, the ambulance sirens. Quickly he pulled himself together.

“Tbilisi is beautiful this time of year,” he said as cheerfully as he could muster.

Timur smiled warmly.

“Thank you, and you must be a guest at my home for dinner.” His accent was thick but his grammar impeccable.

“That would be a great pleasure.”

“Next Monday there is scheduled a cocktail party with his excellency, Minister Tamaridze, the Minister of Finance. Perhaps you would do our family the great honor of joining us for dinner on Sunday night.”

“That would be wonderful! Thank you!”



“I trust that the apartment is to your liking,” said Timur as he led Nick into the 10th floor penthouse. He looked a little anxious.

Nick looked around. First impression was that the apartment was modern, even luxurious.

“Oh, it’s great, better than I could have dreamed of. Great view.”

Timur seemed relieved by Nick’s positive assessment.

“Please let me know if there is anything you need, and hopefully we will see you Sunday evening.”

“Yeah, thanks Timur. It was a pleasure meeting you.”

Nick slept only a few hours that night. *Probably jet lag*, he reasoned, although he had a sneaking suspicion there was something else. The words that that girl on the plane had spoken kept echoing around in his mind as if they’d somehow become burned into the photographic plate of his brain and couldn’t be erased. He tried thinking about Sabrina, but Jenny’s face and voice wouldn’t leave him.

Not many people these days speak the truth. She was pretty right on about that. That stuff about the white knight, servant of the black masters, was downright spooky. How could she have known? *Must have just been one of those coincidences*, thought Nick, *unless the girl’s a bit psychic—that is, if there is such a thing as psychic. Come to think of it, I’ve never really defined my belief system in these areas.* This was going to take some thinking. Finally he managed to drift off into a puddle of muddy half-sleep.



The first few days were fairly uneventful—getting to know his way around the office, adjusting to the

procedures, doing a fair bit of research and reading about the country, talking to people. *Damn it, this wasn’t supposed to happen*, he thought. *I’m beginning to like the place.*

The invitation to speak at a seminar in the Tbilisi University Faculty of Business Administration didn’t help, neither did Natasha, the pretty secretary who delivered it.

The Sunday night dinner didn’t help either. Timur picked him up at the office and they drove through the sunset-tinged streets oozing with old world charm. Nothing about Timur’s home was pretentious or lavish. His wife, Tamara, was a ravishing dark-haired beauty who welcomed him with a broad smile and almost no English. Their two children greeted Nick respectfully, but let out squeals of delight when Nick produced some gifts he had picked up for them—a fire engine for the boy and a doll for the girl. Nick suddenly felt at home, warm, and cared for with this simple family.

It’s going to be tough for them when the trouble comes, he thought.

By the end of the evening, after an elegantly served traditional meal, Nick was having a harder time than ever reconciling his mission with the reality of the lives in front of him that would doubtless be affected.



Again a sleepless night. This time, endless questions and only one answer: He had to tell someone the truth—tell it quietly to somebody and let it go to work. No one else needed to know. There were risks involved, of course, but if he played his cards just right, he figured he could still keep playing the game, still pick up the monthly seven-figure salary. He would be careful, so careful. Just choose one person to tell, to give the truth one chance to be heard, to delegate the

burden of his conscience to another, so that he could continue his mission unhindered by these nagging thoughts. If things did start getting too hot, after only six months he would have enough from the salary to do almost anything, go almost anywhere. It would be easy just to disappear, with six million dollars. For hours he struggled with who to tell. Finally he settled on it and went to sleep.



Nick had never enjoyed cocktail parties. In fact, he often wondered if *anyone* really did. He postulated that it was perhaps some subtle form of punishment that people meted out for each other, sentencing them to an evening of wearing hot, uncomfortable—or in the case of women, often silly—clothes, wandering around crowded, smoky rooms, making polite conversation with an endless array of people who held little or no common interest, or even if they did, were all equally unable to penetrate the suffocating blanket of superficiality that engulfed the occasion. Making matters worse was the tempting array of dainties that one could never actually eat enough of, for fear of transgressing unspoken rules of etiquette.

Nevertheless, in his career, Nick had managed to bluff his way through numerous such encounters. In fact, it had become somewhat of a cynical sport with him to see how well he could hide how intensely he detested the glib atmosphere, and how he'd rather be off somewhere with a computer, a good book, a glass of wine, or a woman.

Finally, after a number of pretty well-simulated conversations, the last being with an overly ebullient French Reuters' correspondent who forced an exchange of cards, he managed to maneuver himself up next to the minister who was rather too gleefully attacking some prawn-based hors d'oeuvres.

“Good evening, your excellency. Nick Stratton, Nexo Consultants.”

“Ah yes, Mr. Stratton. I've heard all about you. Welcome to Georgia. Are you enjoyink your stay so far?”

“Yes, thank you. Everything has been just splendid.” He cast his eyes about the crowded room. “If I may say so, your excellency throws an excellent party!”

“Thank you. We Georgians love to live up to our reputation of enjoyink the life!” He raised a glass of vodka as a toast, to which Nick responded with his wine glass. Quickly Nick glanced about him. They were momentarily alone.

“Mr. Minister, there's something of importance I'd like to speak with you about.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes. Is there any way we could arrange a private meeting, in a secure location?”

“Well, there are places, if it is of importance.” The minister seemed quite surprised, even taken off guard.

“I believe I could honestly say that it's a matter of grave significance,” replied Nick.

The minister thought for a moment.

“Give me your card, and I'll have my security chief call you tomorrow morning, after I arrange location.”

“Thank you, Mr. Minister.” Nick took a card from his wallet and gave it to him.

“Thank you, Mr. Stratton. I'll look forward to our meeting.”

The minister managed a benign political smile and went on to greet another colleague. The rest of the evening passed without incident.



The call came at 7:00AM.

“Minister Tamaridze cordially invites you for lunch at his country estate,” a thick accent intoned.

“That sounds fine,” replied Nick.

“A car will pick you up at 12:00. Where would be convenient?”

“At my office, Nexo Consultants. The minister has my card.”

“Very good.”



At 1:30PM, after a pleasant drive through rolling hills dotted with citrus orchards and small farms, the car turned into the driveway of a sizeable though not grandiose estate. Nick was shown into a tastefully furnished sitting room, and provided with a drink, where he sat waiting for 15 minutes or so, until the sound of a small motorcade pulling into the driveway outside informed him of the minister’s arrival.

Two security men entered the room briefly and when all was clear the minister followed.

“Mr. Stratton, forgive me for keepink you waitink. This is not traditional Georgian hospitality, I assure you, but my ministerial duties kept me.”

“Not at all, Mr. Minister. I have been enjoying the ambiance of your elegant home.”

“Thank you, you are too kind. Come, lunch will be served on terrace outside. We can talk privately there.”

“So what is this information you are so anxious to divulge to me?” began the minister, after they had been served wine.

“Mr. Minister, what you are going to hear is probably going to sound far fetched, and I believe that I may be putting myself at some personal risk in telling you this.” Nick paused, momentarily assessing the minister’s reaction.

The minister looked gravely into Nick’s face as if attempting to discern the character behind the words. “Please continue,” he said.

“You have doubtless heard of my assignment here, to assess your country’s financial situation and to advise you on the best course of action.”

“Yes. I approved your appointment myself. You come with highest recommendations.”

“Well, I must ... I feel duty bound...” Nick struggled with the words for a moment. “My conscience will not allow me to continue in my post without informing you that I have been instructed by a ... third party to provide you with information and advice which would be directly detrimental to the well-being of your country.”

“Third party?”

“If I may speak plainly, a group of individuals whose agenda is being threatened by the current thrust of your policies and who intend to destabilize your economy and bring you to your knees.”

“What agenda?”

“The creation of a new international central regime ... dictation of economic, social, and even political policies. Basically a new world order with running shoes on.”

“And?” the minister raised his eyebrows, looking straight into Nick’s eyes.

Nick felt a shiver run down his spine.

“Well, I just felt that I should tell you ... for the sake of your country ... your people.” Nick suddenly felt way out of his depth again.

“That’s very kind of you, Mr. Stratton. Admirable, truly admirable.”

“You ... you don’t seem surprised.”

Suddenly the minister’s gravity disappeared and he laughed heartily.

“Mr. Stratton, really, do you think I could be Finance Minister of this country and not be aware of such things?”

“You mean you know ... about them?”

“Which ‘them’ are you talkink about, Mr. Stratton?”

“The masters.”

“The masters, the doctors, the magicians, the surgeons, the mechanics, the company. Take a pick, there are so many ‘them’s’ to choose from. What does it matter to us?” He laughed again. Nick’s face was flushed, and the emotion began to rise in his voice.

“Mr. Minister, I’m speaking not in general terms but of specific events about to unfold that will cause widespread chaos in your country, cause considerable loss of life and damage to property, if you follow the directives which you are being given.”

“Mr. Stratton, have you considered what consequences will come for not followink guidelines?”

“Well, er ... no.”

“Isolation, economic siege, ‘rogue nation’ status.” The minister’s voice began to swell in volume. “Have you considered end result? I have to think of my people, and of best-case scenario for very bad choice, Mr. Stratton, very bad choice.” He brought his hand firmly down on the table.

The door to the terrace swung open and a servant emerged carrying a large silver tray.

“I really recommend you try some local trout. It’s excellent.” The politician had suddenly returned. Nick had caught a momentary glimpse of a bitter, trapped, smoldering frustration, but that’s all he would be allowed to see. “And afterwards a traditional Georgian dessert.” The minister muttered a command in Georgian to the servant, presumably to bring more wine. The servant bowed and departed.

“And I suggest,” the minister lowered his voice and leaned over to Nick, smiling broadly as he spoke through clenched teeth, “that you do the job you’re paid for, stop talkink about matters you don’t understand, and leave your stupid conscience back at Yale where it belonks.”

Nick swallowed, mortified.

“Now tell me what have you seen of my country so far?”

“Uh, not so much.”

“We’ll have to arrange some tours for you.” The minister was suddenly jovial. “Met any nice girls?”

“One or two.”

“One or two only, in five days? Mr. Stratton, you are fallink down on your responsibilities! Georgian girls are amazink!” He laughed again and Nick began to heartily wish he hadn’t come.

The rest of the lunch proceeded with more such trivialities, and Nick was duly chauffeured back to his office. The rest of the day Nick vacillated between chastising himself for his naiveté and consoling himself that he had at least done what he could, even though his warning had seemingly been so ill received.



Back at his place he checked his email. There was one from Sabrina. The first sentence sent a cold chill down his spine and made him involuntarily look around the room.

Hey White Knight,

Remember what I told you. Don’t be a Maverick. What do you think you’re doing meeting the minister like that? Questions are being asked, but you’re still okay. Stay with the plan, just don’t try to pull off any stuff like that again.

Now it's time to get down and dirty. If it bothers you, close your eyes and think of the global entity. If it still bothers you, close your eyes and think of me.

A DHL package addressed to you will arrive at the office in the morning. After the seminar tomorrow afternoon you will be invited for coffee. You will meet a student leader named Yakov Shibley from the political science faculty. He's our man. We need two weeks of demonstrations against the government. He arranges it, he gets the contents of the package.

Delete this email immediately after reading and wipe the free space on your hard drive.

I may be able to make a trip that way in a month. Keep your fingers crossed. I'll keep my legs crossed.

Remember! Focus!

—Sea-Nymph



Emerging battle-scarred from another virtually sleepless night, Nick's first move at the office the next morning was to tear open the seal of the plastic-wrapped package that lay on his desk.

The unmistakable and familiar insignia on the white A4-size envelope brought a flood of memories into his mind. He turned it over; it was unsealed.

Carefully he drew out the first of several crisp sheets of paper. He only had to read less than half the words on the page before he needed read no more.

Dear Mr. Shibley ... careful consideration of your application ... the academic council has unanimously agreed ... award you a post-graduate scholarship ... sincerely looking forward to ... John Traverson, Dean of

Admissions, Faculty of Political Science, Yale University

Numbly he slid the paper back into the envelope. He sat for a few moments—reminiscing on the agony a Texan farmer's son had to go through to get to where that piece of paper came from—before buzzing the intercom on his desk and ordering some coffee.



Nick was secretly quite pleased with the seminar talk that he managed to pull together. The students seemed to be impressed and at least pretended to understand. Afterwards, right on cue, came the coffee invitation. Nick managed to maintain an air of complete professional detachment as Natasha, the pretty secretary, led him to a rather dingy staff lounge and introduced him to the dean of the faculty, whose name he could not pronounce nor remember. After a few minutes of pleasantries, the dean excused himself and Natasha also retreated into the background.

As if his entrance were carefully cued to the others' exits, Yakov came and sat down in an armchair next to Nick and introduced himself, extending a small hand for Nick to shake. If Nick had been asked to describe an archetypal student leader, Yakov would have been it. He was slim and slightly gawky, with straight receding hair, thick black glasses, and a thin inquisitive face.

Yakov glanced around briefly before speaking.

"You CIA?"

"No."

"Who are you?"

"It doesn't matter."

"How can I trust you?"

Nick slipped the envelope out of his briefcase and handed it to the young man.

Yakov looked at him narrowly for a second before opening the envelope and perusing the contents.

Emotionlessly he looked up.

“What do I need to do?”

“Two weeks of unrest, protests against the government, destabilizing the situation.”

“People will die.”

Nick didn’t answer but reached out his hand gently for the envelope.

Yakov held it to his chest for a moment.

“What if I get arrested?”

“You won’t. Just be careful.”

Yakov looked down at the floor and put his hand against his face, pushing his glasses up his nose and resting his forehead against his palm. Nick was pretty sure he could guess the nature of his inner struggle.

“Okay, I’ll do it,” Yakov said after a minute.

“We never met,” said Nick and stood up.

Nick walked away, feeling like an actor who had just played an obscure part in a movie of whose plot he had only the most general idea.

Natasha smiled at him prettily as he walked out, but he did not—could not—respond.



As he left the main gate of the university, Nick put his hand in the pocket of his jacket and pulled out a card. He stopped and looked at it blankly for a moment.

“Who the hell is Jean-Luc Fontescue?” he said aloud. A moment was all it took for him to remember that it was the Reuters correspondent from the cocktail party.

Nick began walking again. He had intended to take a taxi but instead decided to start walking, past groups of chatting students, past street vendors, past lovers

chatting on benches, past playing children and watchful mothers, past interminable, uncountable lives.

Reaching a park he drew his cell phone from his jacket pocket, and dialed the number on the card.

“Alo?”

“Hello. Is this Jean-Luc Fontescue?”

“Oui, c’est moi.”

“My name is Nick Stratton. We met at a cocktail party the other night.”

“Nick? Nick? Oh, yes, I remember now. *Comment ça va?*”

“*Tres bien, merci.*” Nick was struggling with his tenth-grade French.

Jean-Luc switched to English.

“What can I do for you, monsieur?”

“I wondered if we could meet. I have a story I think might interest you. I’d have to be quoted as an anonymous source, you understand, but it’s big stuff, very big.”

“Ow big?”

“You’ll find out when we meet.”

“Okay, okay. Tomorrow morning good for you?”

“Yes. Where?”

“Where do you know?”

“Not much yet, only been here a week.”

“You know the Intercontinental Hotel?”

“Yes, I’ve been past it.”

“Meet me in the lobby, ten o’clock.”

“Good, I’ll see you there.”

It was time to stop walking. Nick hailed a taxi and went home.



That night the sleep he had lost the past nights seemed to envelope him with redoubled enthusiasm, as he gratefully fell into its bosom like a long-missed lover.

Nick was becoming conscious of loud crashing noises. He awoke with a start and looked at the clock by his bed. 3:50AM. In an instant the bedroom door burst open and his bed was surrounded by ten black-clad SWAT-like commandos. Automatic weapons pointed at him like so many menacing spikes of an undersea creature.

“Put your hands on your head, get up slowly,” said one of them in a thick accent.

“There’s gotta be some mistake,” said Nick frantically. “You have the wrong address. Wrong person. I’m here working with the Ministry of Finance.”

“Nick Stratton?”

“Yes.”

“You the one. Get off bed. Put on clothes.”

No point in arguing. Helplessly Nick got up and dressed himself. Handcuffs were smartly applied to his wrist. A gun barrel shoved in his back.

“Who are you?” he said angrily to the leader.

“Internal Security.” The phrase sounded as if it had been painstakingly memorized.

“I need to call my embassy.”

“No. Prison first, call later.”

“Prison? For what? I have committed no crime.”

“No crime? You spy CIA. You shut up now. You only walk.”

Five of the team accompanied Nick to the elevator. Five stayed behind, obviously to search the apartment.

“I must speak with the minister of finance. I was with him on Tuesday.”

“No speak. Prison first. Speak with magistrate.”

Further attempts to communicate were irrelevant. Thoughts swirled through Nick’s head like an angry sandstorm. He had stepped across some invisible line of conduct and was paying the price. With almost detached

curiosity he began wondering if it was the minister who had ordered the arrest or the masters.

As they emerged from the building, flashing red lights harshly greeted his bleary eyes. He was unceremoniously thrust into the back of a prison van with metal-barred windows.

CIA spy? How did they come up with that?

The van lurched into motion. Nick was accompanied by two heavily armed guards. He dropped his head into his manacled hands in an involuntary motion of despair, where it remained for the rest of the half-an-hour-long journey.

On arrival at the prison, Nick was taken to a dingy office, ordered to strip and given a set of prison clothes. Once again he begged the officer in charge to be allowed to call his embassy. Once again a negative response.

He was led to a small bare cell with a single bed, a small table, and a toilet and washbasin. At least there was a mattress of sorts on the bed and something approximating a blanket. As the guard closed the door heavily behind him, Nick’s heart was engulfed in blackness.

After some long moments of agitated self-recrimination, he decided that the only option was to try to sleep and try again to contact the embassy in the morning.

CHAPTER SIX

He was awoken the next morning by some weak rays of sunlight somehow infiltrating into the thick blackness of his cell. Instinctively he looked at his wrist to check the time before remembering that his watch had been taken by the prison officers the night before.

“I doubt I shall ever see you again, O beloved Rolex,” he muttered.

He lay there for he didn’t know how long, washed by waves of regret, until a small sliding compartment in his cell door was suddenly pushed open from the outside.

“Breakfast,” came a gruff voice.

“Hello,” said Nick, immediately galvanized into action, and jumping up from the bed. “Hello, look I need to speak to someone—officer in charge! Who is the officer in charge?”

The only response was a metal tray with a bowl of weak-looking vegetable soup and a few thick slices of stale black bread passed wordlessly through the opening.

Nick was trying to catch the eye of the guard through a small barred window in the door.

“Hello! Please help me! I need to speak to the officer.”

“Sorry, I no speak. Please, breakfast.”

Nick took the tray and tried again. “I want to speak to your boss.”

The sliding door slid shut and the footsteps of the guard began to recede.

Helplessly Nick turned to face his breakfast. He wondered what time it was as he glumly sat down and examined the contents of the tray.

“Oh well, at least it looks like hi-fiber, low fat,” he said to himself, almost managing a chuckle. It was all he could do to try to retain some semblance of sanity.

The rest of the day was a frustrating series of such encounters, with no apparent results. Lunch was equally unappetizing.

“My compliments to the chef,” he called out to the guard as he walked away after further attempts to engage in conversation about contacting some figure of authority had all likewise failed.

Finally, after dinner, the cell door opened. Nick rose quickly from his bed as a guard entered the room. There were two more in the corridor outside.

“Officer see you now,” the guard said.

“Oh, good. Thank you.”

Nick glanced briefly in the cracked mirror above the washbasin. Unshaven, uncombed hair, bleary eyes. He quickly splashed some cold water over his face and ran his fingers through his hair. It was a purely symbolic gesture. Handcuffs were applied again and the guard led the way out into the corridor.



The official looked up from his papers as Nick entered.

“Please sit down,” he said in better English than Nick had been accustomed to hearing the past few days.

Nick took a seat while the official looked back down to his documents.

“Officer, I have no idea what I am accused of. I was told only by one of the SWAT team that took me in last night that I’m accused of spying for the CIA, which is totally untrue. I have not been allowed to contact a lawyer or my embassy, I...”

The officer stared uncompromisingly at his documents, as if relishing presenting a wall of impassivity to Nick’s insistence.

“I am here on a mission to assist the ministry of finance, and was in a meeting with minister Tamaridze only the day before yesterday.”

The officer frowned, as if being forced to speak was a small but annoying tactical retreat.

“Mr. Stratton, please be quiet, or you will return to your cell.”

Nick complied. After a lengthy pause the officer signed one of the papers with a flourish and looked up.

“A representative of your embassy will visit you tomorrow morning. He will arrange necessary legal representation.”

“Okay, that’s a start,” replied Nick.

“As far as the charges against you, Mr. Stratton, that is not my concern. I am only doing my job. You will soon be questioned by police.”

“Soon? How soon?”

The officer raised his eyebrows and opened his palms upwards as if in a silent gesture of submission to the all-powerful, inscrutable will of the bureaucracy he served.

“How soon, goddamn it?”

“All I can say, Mr. Stratton, is that you might as well make yourself comfortable.”

“That’ll be easy.” Nick’s sarcasm was obvious.

“Good night, Mr. Stratton.” The official closed a large tattered report book on his desk with a snap and nodded to the guard, who grabbed Nick by the arm rather too eagerly. End of interview.



At 10:30 the next morning Nick was escorted, with chains and cuffs on his hands, to a dingy visitor room, separated in the middle by a partition and an iron grill that went up to the ceiling.

The man from the U.S. embassy looked as if he had stepped straight out of, well, a U.S. embassy. Balding, awful suit, dreadful yellow tie, thick spectacles, the works.

“Nick Stratton?”

“Yes, that’s me.”

“John Cockburn. Senior security officer, U.S. embassy.”

“Thanks for coming.”

The customary handshake was obviated by the iron grid between them, and the chained cuffs connecting Nick’s hands. Both men sat down.

“They haven’t given me very long, Mr. Stratton, so I’ll get straight down to business.”

“Okay.” Nick was bracing himself for what was coming next.

“I’ll be perfectly frank with you. I don’t exactly know what you have or haven’t been involved in, but from what I can gather, it looks pretty bad for you.”

“What?” Nick’s heart was sinking fast.

“It appears that there’s quite a bit of evidence that you have been involved in some kind of espionage.”

“That’s ridiculous, I’ve never—”

“Mr. Stratton, a laptop computer was seized from your apartment containing a number of top secret CIA-related documents, and also containing a lot of high-end cryptography programs. By all accounts,

quite a coup for the intelligence services here.”

“But I never—”

“Whatever you say, Mr. Stratton, you apparently did. Which surprises me, because until 48 hours ago I’d never heard of you—which is unusual because we normally ... you know ... I mean, we usually know pretty much everything that’s going on with the company.”

“Yeah, well, it’s all news to me too.”

“Speaking of which, Mr. Stratton, you’re one of the lead stories on most worldwide networks. The Russians, Chinese, Arabs, and other non-aligned countries are having a field day.”

“Damn.”

“Yup, that about sums up your case, Mr. Stratton. You see, the Cold War was supposed to be over quite a few years ago. This was not supposed to happen.”

Nick stared at the floor for a few seconds.

“Well, what is happening? Where do I stand?”

“There’s not a lot we can do. You’ve become an extreme political embarrassment, and Washington is looking like it’s determined to wash its hands of you. Your company, Nexo has denied any knowledge of your involvement, and left you high and dry. You’ll probably be given local legal representation, for what it’s worth. Depending on how the trial goes, the sentencing here at best would give you 20 years, perhaps life without parole, or at worst...” He did not need to continue.

“But come on now, you *must* know. You must be able to do whatever you geeks do in those secret computer rooms to find out that I’ve never been involved with the CIA. My God, I don’t know the first thing about it. I’m an ordinary businessman and now a financial consultant.”

“That’s just it, Mr. Stratton. We’ve done a thorough check on you and you do have quite an extensive

involvement with the CIA and NSA stretching back over a considerable period of time.”

“I’m sorry ... I’m sorry, Mr. Cockburn, but you’ve cocked up here. You’ve got the wrong guy. Definitely the wrong Nick Stratton.”

“All the evidence points to the contrary, which is why I was a trifle surprised that I hadn’t heard of you before, as we like to ... keep tabs on what our, uh ... their people are up to.”

“You know it’s them.”

“Them?”

“The masters.”

“Who?”

“There were these people, you know, they took me to this island.” Nick was getting frantic. “It was Guam and there were these people, this guy Ron, and this beautiful girl, Sabrina. She was seducing me, and they’re planning this whole world takeover thing.”

“Mr. Stratton, you are not making the slightest bit of sense.”

“No, it’s true! You have to believe me. It’s this huge conspiracy they’re trying to pull. I didn’t play the game by their rules, so they’re trying to silence me.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Stratton. I don’t have time to listen to this far-fetched nonsense.” He nodded to the guard. “I believe our time is up.”

“No! You’ve got to listen to me! You’re my only hope.”

“I’ll do what I can, and will come again probably about this time next week.”

“No, you can’t leave now. I have to tell you this!”

“Goodbye, Mr. Stratton.”

Nick leapt to his feet, knocking his chair backwards and throwing his whole weight forcefully against the metal grid.

Cockburn was leaving the room.

“Come back here, you bozo,” Nick yelled. “You’re supposed to be representing my interests. I’m an American citizen!”

The two guards behind him quickly rushed forward to restrain him. In an instant Nick found himself on the floor, pinned down by one of the guards while the other pointed a pistol menacingly in his face. Further struggle was pointless. He relaxed his entire frame and let out a long sigh. The guard with the gun relaxed slightly, pulling back but still focusing the barrel on his face. Nick was tempted for a moment to do something sudden to make him use his gun, but a strange force seemed to be restraining him. For a long moment he yielded to its uncannily gentle persuasion.

Crisis ended, the guards recovered their composure and Nick was marched quickly back to his cell.

He lay on his bunk for what must have been hours, staring at the cobweb-framed ceiling, struggling to make sense of the twisted wreckage of his life.

He must have drifted into a fitful sleep. When he awoke from unrecalable torturous and depressing dreams he found himself staring at the cracked mirror on the wall over the sink. There was his way of escape. He rose from the bunk and walked slowly toward it, darkly fascinated. It would be so easy ... break it on the sides of the sink, take the sharp edges ... it would be over in seconds. End of pain, end of agony, end of story ... and then what? The nothingness, the oblivion, the feelinglessness he longed for ... or something beyond? There was only one way to find out.

Strangely detached, he watched his hands reach slowly toward the sides of the mirror. They stopped about an inch from the mirror. Something was checking him, stopping him. Some voice deeply within or even beyond his own consciousness was restraining

him. Once again he yielded to its gentle persistence. For longer than he could estimate, he stood transfixed in some kind of a limbo, as if a battle were being waged over his life in some far distant realm to which he had no access, as if some decision were being made about his future over which he had no control.

Then came a voice, stealing into his mind as clearly as the pealing of a bell. *It is your choice. The battle is being fought for you, but it is your choice.*

Nick started and looked around, as if the invisible speaker might be glimpsed behind him.

The cell was empty, but there was a palpable, if indefinable presence there. Sweat broke out on his brow. He turned again toward the mirror, his hands were still poised an inch from its surface. It took all the effort he possessed—a beaten man struggling to rise one last time before yielding to defeat—as he wrenched his hands away and forced them down by his side. He staggered convulsively to his bunk and threw himself down headlong. An uncontrollable flood of tears seemed to rise up from within his soul and burst out of his eyes.

Suddenly life was a precious fragile gift, made to be embraced, enjoyed, exulted in. Suddenly the pain turned to thankfulness, gratefulness to some unknown benefactor who had bestowed lavish kindness upon him in allowing him to experience its passion, its pleasure, its pain. Suddenly Nick was aware of his own emptiness, his need to be filled.

A knock at the door alerted him that lunch had arrived. He rose up and walked unsteadily to the door. Carefully he received the metal tray through the sliding compartment.

He carried it gingerly to the little table. Suddenly the meager portion of potato stew smelled very good. He began to eat, relishing every bite, every taste.

The afternoon and evening passed agonizingly slowly. Nick had no recourse but to meditate on the meaning of his morning experience. There were no internet sites to surf, no movies to watch, no channels to flip. He was terrifyingly alone with his thoughts. But something had changed. In vain he tried to grasp the strange presence that was trying to preserve his life. He wanted to confront it, to comprehend it, to analyze it. But without success. It defied all his efforts at controlling it. Eventually he began to accept its pervasive but invisible authority. Waves of despair still rolled over him, but in their wake there was sweet strange hope, and the growing feeling that tomorrow would bring a change.



At eleven the next morning there was a knock at the prison door and the guard's muffled voice.

"Prisoner Stratton, you have visitor."

"Okay." Nick arose from his bunk and washed his face. What could it be this time? Maybe the promised justice department visit. A lawyer perhaps?

The door swung open, and once again the hand chains were applied. The guard's manner was stern, obviously not encouraging him to repeat the previous day's encounter. Nick acted as compliant as he could manage, attempting to communicate that he had every intention of cooperating.

As they entered the visiting room, Nick strained to see who his visitor was.

His surprise was complete. It was the girl from the plane.

"Hi!" She smiled sympathetically as he sat down.

"Wow! How on earth did *you* get in here? This place is max security."

"Yes, I know! I guess nothing's impossible! See, I happen to know the director here, because we do

a program at a prison he used to be director of, and well, he's quite favorable to us and he agreed to let me visit you. Especially when I showed him your card and said you were a personal friend."

"Well, thanks for coming. I mean, I'm blown away that you came."

"Oh, by the way, he asked if we could not mention this visit to anyone else, you know, stay off the record. It's kind of an exception." She smiled again, and it was a light filling the room.

"Sure." Nick was struggling to hold back tears.

"Anyway, I saw in the papers what happened to you, and I don't really know, but I don't believe it. I don't think you're that kind of person. So my friends and I have been praying for you, and I just wanted to come and see how you were."

"That's great ... I mean, you don't know what this means to me."

"And we brought you some things, you know, toiletries, a toothbrush and stuff ... and I"—she grinned shyly—"well, I baked you some cookies, but I just wanted to explain that I'm not like this expert cook or anything, and good ingredients are a bit hard to find, but I figured I probably wouldn't have too much competition from the prison food."

"You were right!" Nick was laughing and wiping a tear from his eyes with his chained wrists.

"And I also made you a thermos of coffee. You like it black with two sugars, right?"

"That's amazing. How did you remember that?"

"I don't know, I just like tuning into things like that, the little things that people like."

"You are definitely hired. Well you would have been if I hadn't"—he held up his chained wrists—"changed companies."

"And..." Jenny continued.

"There's more?"

"Well"—again the diffident smile—"since you appointed me as your personal guru, I prayed and asked God for a message, for some encouragement for you."

"I could sure do with a bit of that right now."

"Anyway, all the stuff is with prison security. You know they have to check that I didn't smuggle you a nail file in the cookies to break out with."

"Yeah, right! Hey, Jenny, I don't know how to thank you."

"Then don't! Thank my Boss."

"I don't know if I'm exactly on speaking terms with Him right now. Like I told you, I'm not really a believer."

"Well, just so you know, there are a bunch of people praying for you, including me, and I have faith that somehow it's all going to work out."

"Thanks, that's sweet. It feels good, even though I don't really believe in all that stuff."

"So, how are the conditions here?" Jenny seemed unperturbed.

"It's not quite the Waldorf Astoria." Nick managed a grin. "'Walled-off hysteria' may be closer."

"How about the other prisoners?"

"I don't know. They put me in solitary."

"Whoa, that must be terrible."

"Yeah, well, the mind games get pretty intense after a while."

"Maybe it's partly for your protection."

"What?"

"The solitary. See, they have these separatist fundamentalists here as well, that were arrested recently. I don't suppose they'd take very kindly to an accused CIA agent."

"That's looking on the bright side."

“So what’s happening with your case? Do you have a lawyer?”

“There’s supposed to be one coming but”—he imitated the prison official’s palms up, eyebrows raised gesture—“you know how it is.”

“What about the embassy? Are they doing anything?”

“The other day this absolute nerdacious bozo from the embassy showed up, was absolutely no help. The bottom line is, right now I’m left high and dry. You don’t have to believe me if you don’t want to, but I was really set up here and used, and now I’m basically being left here to rot.”

“You know, that’s amazing. That’s just what I got for you.”

“Got for me?” Nick’s interest was aroused.

The guard behind Jenny moved forward and tapped her on the shoulder, pointing to his wrist.

She answered him softly in the local language, and turned back to Nick.

“I’m sorry, my time’s up, they only allowed me ten minutes.”

“Okay, I understand. Look, I really don’t know how to thank you. Just knowing that there’s someone out there that cares.”

Jenny stood up, her eyes were misty, and filled with a look of yearning sympathy.

“I do, Nick ... we do. Jesus does.”

“Thanks.”

The guard came up behind him.

“I’ll try to come again,” said Jenny.

“Okay, I think I can try to fit you into my schedule. Maybe early next week?” Nick felt like crying but had to be breezy. Jenny played along.

“Then I’ll make an appointment with your secretary,” she answered.

The guard’s firm hands were already directing Nick out of the room and back into the passage.

“Yes,” he called back over his shoulder, “or call me on my cell phone, any time. Get it, ‘cell’ phone?”

“Will do,” her bright voice answered as the door slammed shut. As quickly as it had closed, Nick’s tear ducts opened, and he let it out. No point in hiding anything from a prison guard with whom he had no other way of communicating.

Back at his cell he paced back and forth for a long time, reveling in the afterglow of Jenny’s last sympathetic look.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Five hours later the guard brought the gifts. There was the thermos, a paper plate of cookies covered with glad wrap, the plastic bag of toiletry items, and a white envelope with his name on it.

Just in time for afternoon coffee, thought Nick, who was working on developing his time-estimating skills.

With undisguised relish he took the tray over to his table, and removed the lid of the thermos. It smelt good. He tasted it. It was perfect.

“The girl’s good,” he said aloud. “Hired, definitely hired.” Eagerly he began to consume the cookies, and opened the plastic bag, examining its contents. There was soap, a toothbrush, deodorant, a small cologne, a set of disposable razors and a tube of shaving cream.

“She just got a raise.”

Then came the envelope. With trembling fingers, Nick opened it and pulled out a neatly folded sheet of paper.

Dear Nick,

I was so sorry to hear about your trouble, and I wanted to ask my Boss if He had any encouragement. This is the message I received:

Nick, please believe that I love you and that My hand is upon your life, and I will not let any serious harm come to you. The Enemy of your soul has sought to use you and then to destroy you. You have been used as a pawn in a game, and were to be disposed of. But I have chosen you and earmarked you to be one of My key players in the Endtime game. The Enemy knows this and rages against you. He has even desired to snuff out your life, the precious gift of life that I have given you. But I have restrained him, for I know your worth and your potential. I have chosen you, but the choice is up to you whether you choose to be used by Me. If you choose Me you will become as My white knight. If you do not choose Me, I will not stop loving you, and I will keep My hands outstretched toward you, longing for you to become Mine.

Turn away from the darkness of fear and doubt and come into the light of faith. Open your ears and hear My voice. For I love you and care for you more than you will ever know.

With love, Jesus.

Nick breathed deeply.

“How does she know all this stuff?” he wondered aloud. “She’s good, very good.”

After making his coffee and biscuits last for as long as he possibly could—there was no point in rushing through any pleasure in this interminable time warp he found himself in—Nick sank into a rather more pleasant than usual reverie on his bunk.

Rousing himself after a couple of hours, he noticed several cockroaches availing themselves of the cookie crumbs left on the tray. “Funny that they never came

out for the prison food,” he chuckled. “At least they have good taste.”

Suddenly an idea struck him. From the sink he picked up a few discarded plastic cups that the guard had brought water in. Slowly he approached the table and with a deft gesture managed to bring each of the cups down over a cockroach.

“Yes!” he exclaimed triumphantly. “Now we can have some fun.”

Carefully he picked up the tray and set it down on the floor.

“Okay, my fine-feelered friends, here are the rules of the game. At the far end of the cell is a small hole that marks the only exit from this cell. Upon the count of three I will release you from your starting gates and the first roach to reach the blessed haven of the doo-doo hole will be declared winner of the first annual Tbilisi roach derby. Drum roll, Maestro.” He made a drum roll sound with his tongue.

“And it’s ready, set, go!” So saying he lifted the cups high and the two roaches, after a moment’s disorientation, began scurrying for safety. Nick assumed a racing commentator’s voice. “And it’s Black Knight on the inside making a run for the dune, but a strong challenge from Kreepy Kritter on the outside. Looks like Black Knight might be due to meet his Waterloo in the waterless loo. But wait, Black Knight is holding his own and Kreepy Kritter has got the jitters. It looks like a case of poached roach on toast, but no, Kreepy is making his final challenge and looks like he might just pip him at the post and ... yes, into the grunge they plunge, and the winner is Kreepy Kritter. Ladies and gentlemen, the new all-Georgia champion.”

His voice died away into an absurd echo. Nick sensed something behind him. He turned to see the compartment of the prison door open and the

guard staring down at him quizzically. Nick laughed helplessly. There was nothing else to do.

“Pretty far gone, huh,” he said to the uncomprehending guard. “Not even a week and he’s sunk this low. How about a month ... a year? How long does it usually take them to crack?”

The guard’s only response was a grunt and a plate of dinner thrust through the hole in the door.

“Thank you,” Nick replied tonelessly. The door slammed shut.

Nick suddenly found himself faced with a choice, to dissolve into helpless tears or to collapse in hysterical laughter on his bunk. He chose the latter.

Maybe I really am starting to crack, he thought. It didn’t seem to matter, for the moment at least.



Two long days and several cockroach races later, Nick was informed that he had another visitor.

He was secretly hoping it would be Jenny again, although it was probably too soon. He was right. It was the yellow tie from the embassy.

“So how’s it going?” the man inquired peremptorily as Nick sat down.

“Oh, great. Best vacation I’ve had in years. You know, I can’t thank you enough for your assistance in making sure it lasts as long as possible.”

“Mr. Stratton, your sarcasm is uncalled for. We’re doing all within our power—”

“Well, that’s comforting.” Nick’s tone was bitingly sardonic.

“Anyway, the last few days we’ve had a hard time moving too much on anything because of the riots and all.”

“Riots?”

“Bad situation, lots of civil strife, government’s made some bad economic decisions. Your presence

here hasn’t helped much.”

“Thanks for your encouragement. I’m deeply touched.”

Cockburn continued, unperturbed.

“We’ve had to prepare to evacuate all our nationals.”

“How about evacuating me? Can’t you appeal for extradition or something?”

“We don’t have a treaty, so there’s not much we can do. I’ve called the guys at State and they’re trying to come up with some options.”

“What’s the media coverage?”

“Pretty quiet on your story now, what with all that’s happening in the Middle East.”

“What? I don’t know anything. I mean I’ve called the guys to install my satellite dish at least a hundred times, but they still haven’t shown up. It’s impossible to get anything done in this country.”

“Well, it’s the whole Jerusalem plan, this peace deal that they’re working on. A lot of people say it’s going to fail again but I’m personally quite hopeful this time. I like the idea of the seven-year interim period to iron out the bugs. I think it’s going to take that—”

The guy obviously had a deep respect for his own opinions.

“Yeah, well, when I get CNN I’ll check out the details,” said Nick as sharply as he could. Cockburn realized he had been cut off.

“I’m sorry I don’t have any more positive news about your situation but we’re working on it. I’ll try to come by again next week.”

“I’m deeply moved.”

“Oh, and I stopped by McDonald’s on the way and picked you up a Big Mac and fries. I guess the food here is pretty terrible. It’ll come in after they put it through security.”

“Ah, well, that’s definitely the most positive development so far today.”

“Look Stratton”—Cockburn was losing it—“I don’t have to help you. You’ve caused my colleagues and I no end of butt-pains with your antics. If you want it that way, I can just leave you to rot in here.”

Nick felt the guards behind him tense palpably, expecting a repeat of the previous performance. He was too weak to go for it.

“Whatever,” he muttered. “Whatever.” He turned and motioned to the guard.

Cockburn watched silently as the guard escorted Nick out of the room and the door slammed shut behind them.



Three hours later the hamburger and fries arrived.

“Might as well enjoy a bit of good old American cultural imperialism,” he muttered dryly as he started unwrapping it.

DON’T EAT THE HAMBURGER.

The voice almost seemed to originate somewhere inside him and thunder around him in the cell.

“I am really cracking,” said Nick aloud, and continued unwrapping.

DON’T EAT THE HAMBURGER.

“Whoa, this is weird.” Nick looked around him. “Ah, with whom do I have the honor of speaking? Is this my conscience, pricking me, warning me of the insidious enemy cholesterol lurking within this innocent package? Or some spectral diet counselor, trying to regulate my caloric intake? Perhaps the ghost of Mr. McDonald himself trying to atone for his earthly wrongs?”

DON’T EAT THE HAMBURGER.

There was a quiet but definite insistence.

“Okay, have it your way.” Nick put down the half-unwrapped Big Mac, and went over and lay on his bunk.

“Something is definitely weird here. I am probably going totally mental. I am hallucinating, hearing voices, imagining things, arranging cockroach races. I am losing control. I don’t have to give in to this. I don’t have to yield to this. I need to be strong and decisive. I need to get up, take control of my life and eat the goddamn hamburger.”

He was trying to get up but the same strange force he had felt days earlier seemed to be gently holding him down. It was too much to try to struggle. He let go ... relaxed ... yielded.

Nick must have slept. He had no idea how long. Could have been five minutes, but he guessed it was much longer, maybe an hour. There was no way to tell. He was hungry. Maybe it was dinnertime. *Maybe I can eat the hamburger now*, he thought. *Maybe whoever it was just didn’t want me to spoil my dinner.*

He raised himself up from the bunk and walked over to the table. Suddenly he stopped, and a cold sweat broke out on his forehead and palms. On the table around the hamburger lay four dead cockroaches.

Suddenly he felt dizzy and his knees went weak.

“My God. They’re trying to kill me. Someone is trying to kill me.” Chillingly Nick sat down on his bunk and began trying to analyze the situation. He had no way of knowing whether it was the Americans who would then blame it on the Georgians, or whether it had come from the security in the prison, who would then blame the Americans. One thing was certain. He could trust no one. He felt incredibly lost, deeply alone.

Dinner came and Nick didn’t touch it. Sleep evaded him like a tantalizing mirage. He paced back and forth for hours, reasoning, wondering, agonizing.

It was the longest night of his life. More than once he thought to eat the hamburger and have done with it. Again the restraining force. The question haunted him, plagued him, surrounded him. The voice ... where had it come from and what did it mean? Finally, at about 6:00AM, exhaustion overcame him and he sank into its welcome oblivion.



He was awakened with the breakfast tray at 7:00. Again he didn't want to touch it. He took it and lay back down lapsing again into sleep.

At 11:00 again a sharp knock on the door. The guard didn't seem surprised that he was still alive.

"You have visitor."

"Again?" What now? Once again Nick waited as the guard unlocked the cell, and held his hands out to be chained.

This time the guard led him down a different corridor. He was surprised to be shown into a room with a table and several chairs, without the customary dividing grill. As soon as he was seated, his guard signaled to another guard waiting by a door on the other side, who opened it.

"Hello Nick," said Jenny brightly as she entered the room.

"Jenny!" Nick blurted out. "My God, you have no idea how good it is to see you." He was fighting back a tear, not wanting to let her see.

She smiled, and sat down opposite him.

"I asked the director specially, and he said we could use this room. It's a lot more comfortable. This is where people meet with attorneys and stuff."

"And gurus." *That's right, Nick, keep it upbeat.*

"That too, I guess!"

"Well, this is a very nice surprise, I must say. I wasn't expecting you so soon."

"I don't know. I just had this feeling I should come today, and I ... you know."

"Asked God what to do, right?"

"Yes, and He said I should—"

"I should be getting used to this by now."

"What?"

"The whole 'God' bit. Forgive me. It's still kind of weird."

"Oh, that's okay. I still get surprised quite often. Like today He told me to bring you this, and for some reason they let me bring it in." She produced a paper bag.

"Sandwiches?"

"Yes, ham and cheese. I hope you're okay..."

"My favorite."

Jenny looked at him uncertainly.

"..with mustard."

"Just the way I like it."

"Phew, you know the mustard, that was totally by faith," said Jenny, obviously relieved.

Nick paused momentarily, ceasing his eager unwrapping of the sandwiches.

"You're not going to tell me that God told you I like mustard," he said warily.

"Well I wasn't going to, but..."

"You are too much." He shook his head in disbelief.

"Just enjoy, and don't ask too many questions."

That sounded good to Nick. Greedily he began to tuck into the first sandwich. Suddenly he stopped.

"So no one else has touched them, right?" His sudden suspicious tone of voice seemed to take Jenny by surprise.

"No, like I said, I brought them straight in."

"So I guess it's okay then."

"What's okay? Nick? What happened?"

“Nothing important.” He resumed eating.

“Nick, is everything okay? You look like you haven’t eaten in days.”

“It’s nothing.”

“Something’s up, Nick,”

“*No puedo te hablar,*” he said sharply.

Jenny went quiet, obviously understanding, realizing something was wrong. Nick ate quietly for a few minutes.

“So the food’s been a bit rough?” she ventured gingerly.

“Yeah, you could say that.”

“Sorry to hear about that.”

“Well, these sandwiches definitely hit the spot. I don’t know how to thank you.”

“Thank—”

“The Boss, right?”

“You got it.”

“So you’re one of these people who think the world’s going to end and all that, right?”

“Not end, exactly. But I believe there’s going to be a time of very serious trouble, after which Jesus will come back.”

“What kind of trouble?”

“Well, the Bible talks about this sort of conspiracy to set up a one world government, and how this total megalomaniac is going to take over and claim He’s God. And then...”

“Conspiracy, what kind of conspiracy?” Nick’s tone was sharper than normal, and must have caught her interest.

“Well, I don’t know *all* the details, basically just what the Bible says, but ... why, do *you* know something?”

“I don’t know if I should tell you. But I seem to be in deep enough ... you know, already, so why not?”

He leaned a little closer to Jenny over the table and spoke in softer tones. “A couple of months ago I was ... recruited by an old college buddy and his friend, to come on this assignment. It wasn’t what it seemed. They were basically talking in terms of controlling the world. As you see, things went a bit haywire. I didn’t quite do what I was supposed to, and now I end up here.”

“Wow. You mean there really *is* that kind of a conspiracy?” Jenny seemed excited.

“You mean it’s news to you?”

“Well, I’ve heard about it all my life, but I never actually met ... I mean, I never really knew for sure that...” Jenny was looking a bit sheepish.

“Come on. You’re the one teaching people this stuff. You were the one who gave me that book.”

“Well, it’s like finding out that something you always believed in, but never knew for sure in terms of actual proof, is in fact true.”

“You sound like you’re talking about Santa Claus or the Fairy Godmother or something. I tell you, Jenny, these people are for real and they’re into some pretty serious stuff. Like major population decimation, for instance. Global ethnic cleansing through engineered diseases and stuff like that. It’s not Snow White and the seven dwarfs.”

Jenny looked momentarily stunned. “And ... how deeply did you get into it?”

“Not deep enough, apparently.”

Suddenly the door burst open. The guard turned in surprise, only to fall backwards, obviously struck by a sharp blow. There was a quick and deafening burst of automatic gunfire. A cloud of dust and plaster descended from the ceiling.

“Down!” shouted Nick, and he and Jenny hit the floor. For a few seconds Nick covered his head

with his hands, half expecting a bullet in the back. There were some shouted instructions and then a moment's silence. Warily, Nick glanced around trying to understand what had happened.

There were two heavily armed men in black fatigues in the room. One of the guards was unconscious on the floor. The other, obviously totally unprepared, had been speedily disarmed, and stood cowering in a corner.

"You!" shouted one of the men, kicking Nick, and motioning him to stand up. "You!" he shouted at Jenny, also beckoning her to stand.

The two stood up slowly.

For a moment the two ski-masked figures seemed a little unsure of what to do. They motioned for Jenny and Nick to put their hands on their heads, to which they readily complied.

"What is this?" demanded Nick. "Who are you?"

Jenny said something in the local language, probably asking the same question. The ski mask, realizing her comprehension, spoke to her roughly.

"They said we need to go with them," she said quickly. There was a loud explosion and a round of gunfire somewhere outside. One of the men demobilized the remaining guard with his gun butt. In an instant Jenny and Nick found themselves being roughly pushed down the corridor of the prison with gun barrels to their heads.

"Don't fight it, Nick!" Jenny screamed.

"It's okay! I've done this before!" he yelled back. "I know exactly what to do." A sharp yank on his arm silenced him.

Two other masked men were waiting by the prison door. Two guards lay prostrate on the floor behind them. Nick and Jenny were pushed out into a courtyard and toward a delivery truck that was apparently

waiting. Other black-clad figures were running out of the building. Nick guessed roughly ten. There were four or five men in prison clothes. Nick and Jenny found themselves thrust unceremoniously into the truck through the back door as others of the assailants and prisoners scrambled in beside them.

There was a round of gunfire from an observation tower to their right. One of the black figures running toward the truck stumbled and fell. Another behind him fired up into the tower as he ran. The fire was returned, but he reached the truck safely. Bullets smashed sickeningly into the metal sides of the van. There was momentary chaos as at least ten bodies in the back of the truck dove to the floor. The truck was revving furiously, but not moving yet.

Two men jumped out to help their wounded comrade who was writhing on the ground. Another, with a handheld rocket launcher, jumped out behind them, took quick aim up at the tower and fired. There was a whoosh and a loud explosion. The two men who were carrying the wounded man reached the back of the truck. His black shirt was soaked with blood.

One of them shouted out a command. The door slammed shut behind them. Another volley of bullets slammed into the side of the truck. The truck's engine screamed into motion, tires screeched on the pavement. Nick was lying face down on the floor, his senses reeling. There was the sound of more gunfire from the front of the truck and more bullets hitting and ricocheting off the truck.

The truck swung sharply to the left, sending the inhabitants in the back tumbling into an undignified heap on one side. If the situation hadn't been so intense, Nick would have thought it comical. He turned and saw Jenny's face a few inches from his. She was white as a sheet, obviously in shock. He would have

put an arm around her shoulders, but his wrists were still chained together.

“You okay?” she managed.

“I think so,” he whispered back. The truck appeared to be out on the open road, judging from the speed at which Nick could feel it accelerating. It seemed, for the moment at least, that the breakout had been a success.

People began picking themselves up off the floor. Nick and Jenny managed to position themselves against a wall of the truck. Those in prison clothes were looking around in shock. In an instant the atmosphere changed, and there was a spontaneous chorus of cheers and laughter. The black-clad men were pulling off ski masks and tearfully embracing the prisoners. Thick black beards and swarthy dark skin revealed their unmistakable identity.

“The separatists,” whispered Jenny to Nick.

Amidst the jubilation one of the separatists was keeping a careful eye on Nick and Jenny, his Kalashnikov clasped under his arm.

“Ask him why they took us,” whispered Nick.

Jenny cleared her throat nervously and spoke a few words in Georgian. The reply was gruff, guttural.

“He said for hostages, so they could make their ... escape,” Jenny translated.

“Ask them if now they’ve escaped could they maybe let us go?” Nick’s question sounded absurd, even to himself.

It didn’t seem to faze Jenny, however, who translated the question.

The reply was monosyllabic.

“He said no.”

“I thought as much,” said Nick quietly. He lapsed into silence and a maelstrom of apprehension. He wondered if they knew who he was. Would they indeed

be this casual and permissive with them if they knew they had a suspected CIA agent in their hands? Nick could only shudder to imagine the type of bargaining chip he might become.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Things had quieted down considerably, and the truck seemed to be making fast and unimpeded progress. Near the back door the wounded man was lying semi-conscious, and twitching convulsively. Two of his comrades were bending over him. They had pulled back his blood-soaked shirt, and were examining his wound, but their manner indicated they didn't know what to do. Nick noticed Jenny watching the scene intently.

Suddenly she spoke to the man guarding them in soft low tones.

“What are you doing, Jenny?” asked Nick.

“I took a paramedic course before. I think maybe I could help.”

“Maybe it'd be better not to get involved,” whispered Nick. “These guys are terrorists.”

Jenny didn't answer, but seemed undeterred. Their guard was talking gruffly to the attendants of the wounded man. One of them turned and looked long and hard at Jenny, then beckoned her over.

Quickly she moved over to the wounded man's side. First she took his hand and felt his pulse, looking into his eyes, and speaking to him softly. He seemed to calm down slightly and even managed a weak groan. Then she gingerly began to examine his wound. She asked

the other men a question, but they shook their heads. She turned and looked helplessly at Nick for a moment, a look which told him that it didn't look good. There were obviously no supplies or equipment available. Then she smiled as she looked back into the wounded man's face and continued talking with him.

Nick watched, mesmerized, as she gently took his hand, and spoke to him. Occasionally he responded with a nod, or even a half smile. The pain overtook him and he grimaced and passed out. Jenny continued holding his hand and waited. A few minutes later he came to. Jenny bent over and whispered to him. He nodded and smiled wanly before closing his eyes again.

Jenny felt his pulse again. She looked around at the others and said something. Quickly she bent over and placed her ear to his mouth. Obviously there was no breath, since she began mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. The man's chest heaved slightly, but stilled again. It wasn't working. She felt his pulse again. She pulled back and then began pushing down on his chest trying to pump his heart. He was going.

After several more attempts she looked around at the other men helplessly. They had been watching the exchange quietly, aware that they were powerless to help. The one who had been watching Nick and Jenny momentarily laid down his gun, bent over and kissed his dead comrade gently on the cheek.

Jenny climbed back to resume her seat beside Nick. Silence reigned in the truck for quite some time. Nick was struggling with his thoughts.

After a long pause he whispered, "I don't get it. These people come and take you hostage and you act all friendly with them and then administer CPR to their wounded."

"He was just someone who needed help."

"So what did you tell him?"

"I told him that he could receive the Spirit of Jesus into his heart, and that Jesus would guide him safely into Paradise."

"But this guy was a Muslim, right?"

"Yes."

"And he received what you had to say?"

"All the way."

"Well, I don't see how you can force your beliefs on people."

Jenny didn't answer him, but just looked up at him, for a second, moist eyed, then looked down.

About 15 minutes later, the truck ground to a sudden halt. The door once again was flung open, and bright sunlight flooded in.

Their armed escort spoke again to Jenny.

"He told us to get out," she said. "We're changing vehicles." There was a strong undertone of apprehension in her voice. Nick couldn't help wondering what this defenseless-looking girl could be thinking. There wasn't time to discuss, however. The passengers emptied out, blinking at the sunlight. They found themselves in a secluded orange orchard. Three or four other vehicles were parked, as if awaiting a rendezvous.

Nick and Jenny had no time to enjoy the pastoral atmosphere and the balmy weather, though, as they were firmly escorted into the back of a paneled pickup truck. No sooner had they seated themselves on some rough hessian bags on the floor than the pickup roared into life and lurched into motion. Their apparently self-appointed guard jumped in behind them as the truck accelerated. The other vehicles followed suit. The back flap of the pickup was opened and their guard peered out toward the delivery truck, as if expecting something. The other vehicles followed behind them, in convoy.

When they were about 150 meters away, a deafening roar shattered the stillness of the countryside and the original delivery truck erupted into a fireball. The guard pulled the flap back and closed his eyes for a moment before turning toward Nick and Jenny.

“Where are you taking us?” demanded Nick. Jenny translated. He answered gruffly.

“He said home.”

“God only knows where that might be,” moaned Nick.

“Probably the mountains near the Chechen border. Maybe Pankisi Gorge. That’s where these guys mainly hang out.” Jenny was trying hard to be calm, and was succeeding better than Nick.

“Oh,” said Jenny, “I almost forgot. I have something for you. While I was under the table in the interview room I saw these about an inch in front of my face, I thought we might need them!” Triumphant she produced a set of keys from the pocket of her jeans.

Quickly the guard grabbed them out of Jenny’s outstretched hand. She looked at him with a mixture of disappointment and pleading. He slowly examined the keys, turning them over in his hands as if he were pondering his options. Without a word, he grabbed Nick’s hands, found the appropriate key, and undid the chains.

“Thank you.” Nick managed a smile to the guard who remained impassive as he pocketed the keys and the chained cuffs.

“And thank you,” he said to Jenny gratefully as he rubbed his wrists. “By the way, did I mention you just got a raise?”

Jenny smiled shyly and murmured something inaudible. There didn’t seem to be much more to say right then, so Nick stared blankly at the floor in front

of him, vainly trying to make some sense of the events of the past hours. Eventually he fell asleep.



He must have slept at least two or three hours. When he awoke, his back was aching. He tried to stretch and rearrange himself, but comfort seemed an impossible and extravagant commodity at this time. The guard was still sitting in the same position by the tailgate of the pickup, stoically holding his Kalashnikov. Jenny was singing softly, almost under her breath. Nick strained to catch the tune, the words. There wasn’t much else to listen to.

“Safe in Your arms, dear Jesus, safe on Your gentle breast. It is Your little child, who comes now to be blessed.”

She must have sensed him listening, as the singing stopped abruptly.

“Keep going, it’s nice.” Nick’s sincerity surprised even himself.

“Sorry ... did I wake you up?”

“You have a good voice.”

“How can you tell over all this noise?”

“Really, you sing well. You should ... you know ... sing for people, record.”

“I actually have, on occasion, just backup vocals, though.”

“Hey, that’s great.”

“Well it’s one of a long list of things I’m sort of okay at, but not *that* good at.”

“Hey, don’t put yourself down. You shouldn’t do that.”

“Yeah, I guess. That’s what my dad always told me. You know, the whole ‘glad game’ thing.”

“Oh wait ... I know that,” Nick said. “Pollyanna, right? You watched it when you were a kid, too?”

“Only about 25 times.”

“I remember my mom got me to watch it once, in exchange for letting me go to see Star Wars, but I still remember it.”

“We could do it now,” Jenny suggested.

“What? *Do it* in the back of the truck, under armed guard?” Nick smiled mischievously. *Might as well joke around a bit.*

“No!” She waved her hand dismissively. “I mean, play the glad game.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“Why not? It can’t hurt. It’s better than thinking about what’s waiting for us at the end of this trip.”

“Okay, why not? I’ll start. Um, let’s see ... I’m glad because I used to only be held in a maximum security Georgia prison, but now I get to be abducted by Islamic fundamentalist terrorists. It’s so much more ... culturally challenging.”

“I’m glad because I don’t have to eat breakfast tomorrow.”

“What?”

“Well there’s this guy who I live with, I mean not *live with* live with ... he lives with our group. Anyway, his name’s Brad and he’s a very cool guy though he’s only about 19. But it’s his day on breakfast and he can’t really cook. He makes these slimy scrambled eggs and some crumbly wheat cereal stuff. And that’s about the only thing I can think of that I’m thankful for about not being home tomorrow.”

“Okay, I’m glad because, instead of having to ride around in a stupid Learjet and feel guilty about depleting the ozone layer, I get to ride in this nice truck which has holes in the bottom, encouraging continuous interface with the surrounding environment.”

Jenny giggled. “You’re better at this than I am. Well, I’m glad because even though I get abducted, at least it’s with someone who’s quite a nice guy, you

know, not totally bad looking.”

“Not totally bad? And just what is that supposed to mean?”

“Just what it means.”

“Well, I’m surprised you even noticed. I thought you were maybe above such things.”

“And what is that supposed to mean?”

“Well, do you have a love life? Or are you supposed to be one of those ‘chaste virgins presented unto Christ’?”

Jenny appeared to miss the mild sarcasm.

“You know the Bible?”

“I went to Sunday school.”

“That’s cool. When did you stop?”

Nope, she was dodging the question.

“Don’t try to change the subject!”

“Well I’m not a ... well, not exactly chaste. C-h-a-s-e-d sometimes.” She let out a hollow laugh. There was something underneath there, but Nick chuckled anyway. “But it’s even been a while since that’s happened.”

“Oh really? Pretty girl like you? You mean there’s no good-looking missionary of the male species available for mating?”

Nick half expected a sarcastic rejoinder, but Jenny went quiet.

“There was a guy,” she said after a short pause. “But he ... you know, chose a different ... career path, went to the States ... got a job.”

“What’s wrong with that? You could have gone with him. I mean, did you like the guy?”

“Oh yeah, he was very cool. Very cute too!”

“Well?”

“I don’t know if you’d understand.”

“Try me.”

“Well, I really loved him, and we’d even talked about

getting together ... you know, like married and all. But then he decided that our lifestyle wasn't the thing for him, and that was his choice. But I chose to continue with it, because I really believe in what I'm doing. I guess I'd have to say I love Jesus more than him."

"You were right."

"What? To continue with my work?"

"No, you were right that I don't understand."

"That's okay. I'm not expecting you to."

"I mean, why would anyone give up a perfectly good relationship with someone you really love for some invisible God you can't even feel, some belief in some abstract religious dogma? That doesn't make the slightest bit of sense to me."

Jenny's eyes flashed.

"Look, I don't care if you don't believe what I believe, but I don't think you have a right to try to undermine my convictions." The sharpness of her tone revealed that she wasn't over this event yet.

Nick hesitated, wondering how to continue.

Jenny pre-empted him. "And Jesus isn't an abstract religious dogma. He's everything to me."

"Okay, I'm sorry. Forgive me." He sensed Jenny knew the apology was only a way to extricate himself from the discomfort of the situation, but she didn't reply. Both lapsed into silence, which was quickly overwhelmed by the endless rattling of the truck and the occasional whoosh of a vehicle passing in the opposite direction.

Probably an hour later Jenny asked, "So what about you? Are you married, or with someone?"

"Well, before I got married I was going to start on something a little easier, like learning virtuoso violin, or nuclear physics, or flying F-16s, or Mandarin Chinese, or maybe all of the above. You know, a kind of graded approach."

"Sounds like you've had some rough times." Jenny suddenly sounded sympathetic.

"Some smooth, some rough. I mean, just before I started on this escapade my girlfriend left me."

"Sorry."

"You don't have to be sorry. You didn't do anything. Then there's this other girl, but she's one of 'them.'" Nick raised his eyebrows and made a quotation mark sign in the air.

"Oh." Jenny didn't seem to know what to say. Nick decided to change the subject.

"You know, I can't help noticing that you're quite a brave person."

"What?" The comment caught Jenny off guard.

"Well, first of all, to even come into that high security prison, alone."

"Actually, my friend Brad was waiting for me outside. I hope he's okay. He must be so worried."

"You hope he's okay? What about you? You're the one who's been kidnapped."

"Yeah, well, I know where he is, but he doesn't know where I am, which makes him worse off than me."

"See, that's just what I mean about being brave. You're more worried about your friend than yourself. I don't understand. Aren't you scared?"

"Terrified," she said matter-of-factly.

"Then you're hiding it pretty well."

"By now you ought to know Who to thank for that. See, a couple of weeks ago when I was praying, Jesus told me that I was going to go on an unexpected journey soon. I had a few ideas of what He might have meant by that, but this wasn't one of them, so I guess He knew what He was talking about when He said unexpected. But if He planned it well enough to tell me two weeks in advance, then why should I let being totally absolutely terrified bother me?"

"I don't quite follow the logic, but I guess if that's what floats your boat then that's cool."

Jenny started giggling.

"What's funny?"

"Nothing."

"Why are you laughing?"

"I don't know. That just struck me as such a California New Age thing to say, for a Texan."

"Guess it's one of the occupational hazards of living in L.A. Do you have a problem with my attitude?"

"No, not at all. At least you didn't persecute me for my beliefs this time." She was still giggling.

"I'm sorry about ... you know ... earlier on."

"It's fine. It's already forgiven. It was overambitious of me to expect you to understand me."

"You *are* a bit of a conundrum."

"Well, we gurus have to retain a certain amount of mystique about us. Part of the whole selling point."

"If the Big Guy tells you anything about how we're going to get out of this mess, let me know, okay?" Nick was being facetious, but there was more than a hint of wishful thinking in his tone.

"Will do." Jenny fell silent and Nick watched as she closed her eyes.

Must be "on line" right now, he thought.

He, too, closed his eyes, and managed to slip into a welcome stupor of forgetfulness.

When he came to, Jenny was conversing in earnest but quiet tones with the guard. Nick didn't feel he should interrupt but listened, trying to catch some of the drift of the conversation. The language they were speaking didn't sound like the Georgian he had been hearing over the last week. He tried in vain to identify it, but soon drifted back to sleep again.



After what seemed an endless journey, exacerbated by the tension of not knowing where they were going and what awaited them, the truck turned into what felt like a dirt or gravel side road and soon afterwards lurched to a halt.

The first thing that struck Nick was the quietness. A caress of moist, mossy night air slid under the tarpaulin that covered the back of the truck and sent a chill down Nick's back.

Nick guessed it must be after midnight. The guard opened the tarpaulin at the back as some voices could be heard approaching. Greetings were exchanged and the tailgate lowered. The guard motioned for them to step out.

Nick and Jenny stepped out into the moonless night, trying in vain to make out where they were. A canopy of brilliant stars covered the sky and despite the desperation of their circumstances, Nick could not suppress a short gasp of wonder as he looked up. It had been a week since he had been outside and he drank in the unsullied mountain air in deep gulps. One of the men had a flashlight and he indicated the way toward a dimly lit building to their right.

They walked in silence, feeling a sort of freedom in the darkness around them that was offset by the consciousness of the guard's ever-present Kalashnikov. Large patches of starless black all around them indicated that they were in some sort of valley, although the outline of hills could not be clearly seen.

They were shown into a simple but comfortable sitting room. The furniture consisted of a couple of armchairs and a sofa with a long low table. There was a TV in the corner.

The guard pointed to the sofa with his gun. Nick and Jenny sat down. The guard sank into an armchair and threw a leg over one of the arms.

A few other men followed them into the room, talking and laughing animatedly.

“What are they saying?” whispered Nick.

“I can’t catch it all, but it’s something about how they were able to escape ... and I think they said the word for chicken, but I don’t get how that ties in.”

“I could see how some chicken could be considered highly appropriate at this—” Nick hadn’t finished his sentence when the door opened once more and two other men entered. They were carrying five large cardboard cartons emblazoned with the letters KFC.

“I don’t believe it!” Nick exhaled in amazement.

“Kentucky Fried Chicken, Tbilisi,” said one of them proudly as they set them down on the table, and gestured to them all to begin. There was no hesitation in complying with his request.

“There must be some kind of profound irony about this,” said Nick as he helped himself to a carton of French fries and a piece of chicken, “but to be honest, at the moment I couldn’t care less.”

“This must be their shiner prize,” said Jenny as she also extracted some goodies from one of the cartons.

“Their *what?*” asked Nick curiously, drumstick suspended in mid air.

“Oh,” she giggled, “I wasn’t thinking what I was saying! It’s kind of a game my parents used to play when we were young, a reward system for being good.”

“Oh right. I get it. Must be our shiner prize too.”

After all present had heartily devoured the contents of the cartons, one of the men that was with them turned on the TV and flipped through the satellite channels until they came to CNN.

“And now to update you on our breaking story. A daring midmorning raid by a group of Muslim funda-

mentalist guerillas took place at a high security prison in Tbilisi, Georgia. Two prison guards and at least one of the guerillas died in the raid, which was aimed at freeing separatist guerillas held in the facility. The assailants succeeded in liberating at least five of their colleagues. It is thought at this stage that some of the attackers gained access to the prison through long abandoned escape tunnels, others using a disguised delivery van. Now, as our correspondent Duncan Ogilvie reports, a strange new twist to the story is emerging.”

“Thank you, Jim. Yes, a further unusual development. We’ve just learned that accused CIA spy Nick Stratton was among those abducted—or should I say liberated—by the attackers. Now we have no idea whether that was an intentional move by the separatists or an accident. It also appears that a female humanitarian worker from an as-yet unidentified organization is also missing, and may have also been taken. Jim?”

“The Georgian capital has seen its share of unrest after the severe economic downturn that rocked the country and sent shockwaves through much of the former Soviet block this past week. How does this latest attack affect the credibility of the government?”

“Well, it’s definitely a setback, Jim, as security has been a major concern. The recent unrest in the Middle East, the opposition to what many see as a compromise in the drafting of the Jerusalem agreement, has stirred up a melting pot of Islamic militants in other countries as well. There has been criticism over the Georgian government’s lack of resolve in cracking down on the rebels and this latest fiasco only serves to set them further back on their heels.”

“Thank you, Duncan. And we’ll have more on that story and others that are making news around the globe after this short break.”

Someone muted the volume and the room fell into an uneasy silence. There were some whispers and a few curious looks in Nick's direction. One of the men slipped quickly out of a door in the back. He returned a few minutes later followed by a heavy-set, bearded man wearing fatigues and a traditional headdress, who emanated a palpable air of authority.

He sat down on the couch opposite Nick and Jenny and stared at them uncompromisingly for at least a minute. Nick shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Jenny was also obviously nervous.

Finally the bearded man spoke in a rough but intelligible English accent. "You Nick Stratton?"

"Uh, yes."

The big man's intense frown suddenly cracked into a grin and he began to chuckle.

"What a fish ... what a fish we have caught." His chuckle rapidly escalated into a full-fledged guffaw punctuated by some words in Georgian, which must have been a translation of his English utterance. Most of the others in the room followed suit with smiles and laughs, except Nick and Jenny's guide, who remained silent and solemn.

"So tell me, Nick Stratton, what is like to work for CIA?"

"I don't know," replied Nick coldly.

"I don't know," repeated the Georgian, continuing to laugh. "That is good one, good spy answer!" He wiped his eyes on his sleeve. "Ah, but forgive me, I did not introduce myself. I am Georgi. Georgi the Georgian! I am commander of this post, and you are now our guest. You and your charming companion...?" His voice trailed off as he looked inquisitively at Jenny. Nick shuddered at what he might be thinking.

"Jenny," she replied, seemingly unfazed.

"Jenny, welcome to our camp. I trust you had pleasant journey?" Georgi had a mischievous twinkle in his eye.

"Mr. Georgi," Nick interjected with undisguised annoyance in his voice, "could you at least tell us where we are? Are we still in Georgia?"

"Where we are?" He laughed ponderously again. "Maybe we are in Georgia, maybe we are in Chechnya, maybe we are in Armenia, Azerbaijan, maybe in Iraq!" At the mention of the last country he raised his eyebrows in mock fear and laughed once again. "Where we are, it doesn't matter what they call the country. It doesn't matter where they draw the borders. We own these mountains and we are free!"

Nick felt it was futile to pursue the subject, and fell silent.

"I suppose you are all tired." Georgi sounded suddenly almost civil. "Ahmed."

Nick and Jenny's guide raised an obedient but somehow not totally submitted eyebrow.

"Take care of the accommodations for our guests. Make sure they are comfortable."

Ahmed's blank stare prompted Georgi to repeat the request in the local dialect.

With a cursory nod Ahmed stood up and beckoned the two weary captives to follow.

Ahmed opened the door to a hallway and showed Jenny to the first room on the right. Nick was escorted to the next room.

He was more than pleasantly surprised at the room. There was a small gas heater and a comfortable looking bed. Apart from bars on the window he could have been in a quaint local hotel.

Ahmed nodded to him as if to ask if everything was to his satisfaction. Nick indicated in sign language that he wanted to take a shower. Ahmed nodded again and

left the room. A key clicked in the lock. Nick quickly felt the door. It was locked securely. He tried the only other door in the room, which opened to a well-used but clean bathroom.

Within minutes a middle-aged woman with a scarf over her head entered the room, Ahmed standing behind her with the ubiquitous Kalashnikov. She brought a clean towel, a change of clothes, and a pair of striped pajamas, which Nick observed with a mixture of amusement and gratitude. He hadn't worn pajamas since grade school.

He thanked her warmly and received a shy smile in response. She left the room and the lock clicked once more.

With relish Nick discarded his filthy prison clothes and dove into the warm shower, letting the water run over his body in rivulets of pleasure.

"Maybe there is a God after all," he quipped to himself, wondering momentarily how Jenny was faring.

Within minutes he had dried himself, donned the pajamas, slipped under the quilt on the bed, and was fast asleep.

CHAPTER NINE

Nick was woken by a loud knock on the door. He had no idea of the time but felt he had slept long. The knock was followed moments later by the key turning in the lock. The same woman who had brought him the pajamas spoke with a labored accent.

"Breakfast ready."

Nick pointed to his wrist to ask the time. She replied by showing him her watch. It was half past nine. Then she withdrew from the room, leaving the door unlocked.

Nick dressed himself in the fresh clothes—which weren't exactly Saville Row, but fit tolerably well—and made his way unescorted into the sitting room. Jenny appeared to have just arrived and was sitting on the sofa buttering a piece of toast. An array of breakfast food was spread out on the long low table. The only indication that the scene wasn't a suburban living room was Ahmed, who sat in silent vigil on a chair in the corner of the room, Kalashnikov on his lap.

Jenny looked up with a smile as Nick sat down opposite her.

"This sure beats the hospitality of the Georgian justice department," he began.

"You look rested. Did you sleep well?" Jenny asked, herself also looking refreshed.

“A shower, a real bed? Best sleep in weeks!” He helped himself to some toast.

“Coffee?” she offered.

“Thank you. I did tell you you’re due for a raise, didn’t I?”

Jenny didn’t answer but smiled a little bashfully as she handed him the steaming mug.

“So what were you able to find out from our friend?” Nick had lowered his voice and raised an eyebrow surreptitiously in Ahmed’s direction. “He doesn’t speak English, does he?”

“No.”

“So what was that language you were speaking to him last night? It didn’t sound like Georgian or Russian to me, not that I would really know.”

“That was Arabic.”

“You speak Arabic? How did you manage that?”

“I lived in the Middle East for four years.”

“Huh! Amazing. You’re full of surprises. So how come Ahmed speaks Arabic?”

“He’s Palestinian.”

“That figures.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, they’re mostly terrorists down there, aren’t they? Probably has quite a good résumé and CV for joining a group like this, you know, lots of job experience.”

Jenny’s face fell. She put down her toast mid bite.

“Hey, what’s up? Everyone knows that. That’s common knowledge.”

“You know, that is such a typical American attitude.” Jenny’s voice was raised. “You know what I think? I think that underneath all that sophistication you’re just the good ol’ flag-waving, apple-pie-eating American boy. You probably think America is the

last bastion of democracy, right? The leader of the free world, the preserver of truth, justice, and the American way!”

“I guess it’s true, America is all that.”

“Well, I’ve got some news for you. And that is that there are about five and three-quarter billion people in the world that maybe don’t agree with you. You might just be outvoted on that point. If there was an election for world policeman I’m not so sure your country would win.” She shook her head. “I can’t believe that you would still think that way after what they did to you.”

“I’m talking about the principles that the USA is based on ... democracy, freedom of speech, and all that.”

“Yes, all that for *Americans*, and smart bombs and sanctions for the rest of the world—particularly if they don’t buy into your party line.”

“I think you’ve been talking to too many terrorists.”

“By the way, Ahmed is not a terrorist. He’s fighting for a cause that he believes in, whether you or I agree with his cause or the way he fights for it or not.”

“So you support terrorism? My God! They just took you hostage, and you sympathize with them?”

“I didn’t say that I agree with their actions, but that doesn’t stop me from trying to understand their motivation.” Jenny seemed to be trying to control her agitation but was not succeeding.

“Yeah, but you have to be careful.” Nick was trying to calm things down. It didn’t work.

“Ahmed’s father and mother were evicted from their house when he was just a child, and they lived the rest of their lives in a refugee camp. Ahmed’s own brother died in his arms after being shot by Israeli soldiers. His country was stolen. He was deported

and can't go back. He couldn't find work in the other Arab countries, so he came up here with a friend to join these guys."

There was silence. Nick fingered his toast uncomfortably.

Jenny continued. "Now he has something that he believes in and is willing to sacrifice his life for, whether you or I agree with his methods and goals or not. But maybe that's something that you wouldn't really understand."

"That is so unfair, to judge someone like that when you don't even know him."

"Like calling someone a terrorist, right?" Jenny retorted quietly.

Silence fell like a suffocating blanket. Nick sipped his coffee and chewed on his toast.

Jenny excused herself and asked Ahmed something in Arabic. He pointed to a door across the room. It was a bathroom. Jenny went in and closed the door.

Nick was staring blankly into space trying to fathom the logic of this unusual girl. He hated to admit it, but she had a point. To accept it fully was too much of a challenge to all he had always known to be right, so he contented himself with admitting that she had a right to her own opinion but he wasn't going to change his.

Five minutes later Jenny emerged from the bathroom and sat down opposite Nick on a couch. She looked at the floor for a few minutes before breaking the silence.

"I'm sorry for the way I spoke to you. I'm not totally sorry about what I said, because I believe that it needed to be said. But it wasn't right to raise my voice and make it personal. I guess this whole thing is making me a bit high strung. It's not necessarily

your fault that you think the way you do. You've just been brought up and conditioned that way."

"That's very charitable of you." Nick was sarcastic, but not biting.

"Anyway, for some reason we're stuck in this situation and we have to make the best of it, and it's not going to help if we're arguing with each other. So please forgive me, okay?"

"Okay. I was going to dock your salary, but maybe I'll reconsider. I guess part of your duty as my guru is informing me of viewpoints contrary to my own, and keeping me updated on the climate of global opinion. But it's been quite a while since I got a tongue-lashing like that."

Jenny smiled sheepishly.

"Friends?" He held out his hand.

"Friends." She took and squeezed it briefly.

The rest of the day passed uneventfully. Jenny was able to find out some sketchy details from Ahmed. It seemed fairly certain that they had not planned to kidnap Nick, and certainly not Jenny. It seemed the plan was now to use Nick as a bargaining chip of some kind with the CIA, although Nick was quick to remind Ahmed, through Jenny's interpreting, that he had nothing to do with the CIA. Ahmed just shrugged his shoulders at that information, as if he didn't really care, but didn't believe him anyway. That caused Nick considerable frustration, until he began wondering what it must feel like to be labeled a terrorist.

The terrorists were at least not skimpy in their hospitality—a generous lunch and dinner were served, as well as tea and coffee between times, bringing welcome punctuations to the monotony of the day.

Watching the news seemed to be somewhat of a highlight of the day. At ten in the evening a small group congregated around the TV. The kidnapping

was the third story, following reports on the progress of the Jerusalem agreement, and the European economic crisis.

“It has now been confirmed,” began the anchorman, “that the humanitarian worker taken hostage during the Georgian prison breakout is 25-year-old Jenny Sanchez, a member of a fringe religious sect known as ‘The Family.’ Duncan Ogilvie has more.”

“There are red faces here in Tbilisi, as officials try to explain how a member of a fringe Christian sect was together with a maximum security prisoner at the time of the raid. The sect in question runs a center for street children here, which on the surface seems to be bona fide. But accusations are surfacing that the group has ties to or at least sympathies with Islamic fundamentalists. One local reporter has even claimed that The Family was involved in orchestrating the escape, and that the girl is not a hostage but an accomplice. Prison authorities have categorically denied those reports, pointing out that the group in question has been running a counseling and support service for prisoners here for the past several years.”

The report cut to the prison director, who spoke in Georgian. The thickly accented translation faded in.

“We can only speak from our experience that these people helped us very much and for many years helped raise the morale and quality of life for the inmates. We trust that they are good people, and have no reason to believe that Jenny Sanchez or any member of their communities was involved in this escape plot.”

Ogilvie continued.

“A spokesman for The Family stated today that the goals of the organization are purely humanitarian and spiritual. But that doesn’t erase the skepticism

in some quarters, and authorities are continuing to investigate the sect and its activities here in Tbilisi. Duncan Ogilvie, CNN Tbilisi, Georgia.”

Someone turned off the volume. Jenny was staring at the floor.

Nick looked at her narrowly. She looked up and caught his eye.

“So you believe that?” she said softly.

“What ... about the sect, or about you being an accomplice?”

“Either ... both ... whatever.”

“Well, the sect thing I suppose I’m not surprised. So your group is called the Family...”

“Yes. Have you heard about us?”

“Now that I think about it, I probably have, though maybe not by that specific name.”

“Good? Bad?”

“Let me put it this way: Amongst my former employers, people like you aren’t exactly highly popular.”

“And so you believe the escape plot thing, that I’m somehow involved?”

Nick shifted uncomfortably.

“These days I don’t know what to believe. I don’t know who to trust any more.”

“So you trust CNN? *CNN*? The same guys who say you’re a CIA agent?”

“Just because I’m not a CIA agent doesn’t mean you’re not a closet Islamic fundamentalist. I mean, you have to admit, you do have sympathies, you speak Arabic, and you seem pretty comfortable around these people.”

Jenny was quiet for a long moment. Nick was half expecting a sequel to the morning’s impassioned outburst. But she spoke quietly.

“There’s nothing I can say or do to prove to you that I’m not involved in this. You can choose whether you want to believe a satellite channel that’s probably being run by a guy who’s best of friends with the guy who ordered the cyanide for your quarter pounder, or whether you believe someone who really wanted to do something to help you because she cared about you. If you think that I was just visiting you as part of some kind of setup ... well, I guess you can choose to think that, but I can tell you honestly that it’s totally untrue. I did it because I care about you and I believe that God does too. Anyway, it’s probably pointless for me to try and convince you. You’re going to have to make up your own mind.”

Nick was silent for a moment, struggling with his thoughts. He was saved from having to give another non-committal response by the entry into the room of one of the commander’s aides, carrying a Kalashnikov. After a brief moment of swaggering and looking around the room to establish his authority he walked over to where Jenny was sitting, and began to run the tip of his gun along her jean-clad calf. She squirmed uncomfortably.

“Commander Georgi want to see you.” He smiled with raised eyebrows. “Find out if you sympathizer ... how much you sympathize.”

“If any of you lay one finger on her, I’ll kill you!” blurted Nick impulsively.

“With what?” barked the aide, turning quickly and aiming the barrel of his gun directly into Nick’s face. His frown quickly dissolved into a menacing laugh.

“Nick, chill!” hissed Jenny. “It won’t help.”

Nick decided to agree.

Jenny stood up and allowed the aide to escort her out of the room.

The animals, he thought. He had never felt so helpless in all his life. Jenny was right. There was nothing he could do. Three armed men in the room, and he was well aware that he was no Rambo and that this wasn’t a Hollywood movie. He stared disconsolately at the floor. Maybe the girl was a cult member or whatever, but she did seem sincere. The CNN report had troubled him, but in the end he figured there was no way that Jenny could be implicated with the operation. It didn’t make any sense. Nick agonized with the fact that the last words he had said to her had been accusatory, non-trusting. What if she didn’t come back? Would the lack of trust he had shown be the last thing she heard ringing in her ears?



An excruciating hour later Jenny walked back in the room. She looked calm, composed. Nick, who had fallen into a half doze, immediately sat bolt upright.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m okay.”

“They didn’t hurt you? Molest you?”

“No, I’m fine. I just told them about the work I do with children, about my faith and how we live and they were actually pretty respectful.”

“You never cease to amaze me. You weren’t scared?”

“Mildly terrified.”

“You sure hid it well.”

“The scared-rabbit look brings out the hunting-hound instinct. I just decided my best bet was to treat them with respect like the human beings that they are, and trust God for the rest. I guess it must have worked—so far at least. Talking about okay, how are you? You don’t look too good.”

“I feel terrible, actually. Particularly about the fact that I doubted you back there.”

“It’s okay. It’s understandable. Even I sometimes believe CNN.” Jenny grinned.

“I guess I just need some sleep. It’s been a long week, lots of stress at the office.” Nick managed a half grin.

Jenny capitulated. “Maybe you should take a few days off, go somewhere relaxing. I hear the mountains of Georgia are lovely this time of year—especially Pankisi Gorge.”

“Sounds great! I’ll leave tomorrow.”

It was time for bed.

CHAPTER TEN

The following 14 days seemed to Nick to fade together into a strangely woven tapestry of contrasting colors. There was the ever-present black thread of tension, apprehension, and fatigue. There were the worries that seemed to nibble at the hidden corners of his mind like so many invisible mice that scurried away when confronted but were always lurking in the dark, ready to emerge in distracted moments. Then there were bright flashes of color. Jenny somehow managed to persuade the guards to let them join in with daily basketball games played with a rusty iron hoop on the back of one of the buildings, against a backdrop of exquisite forested hills and crystal-clear blue skies. Then the fading gray thread of daily news reports as the Nick Stratton story gradually waned in significance and became an occasionally referred to phenomenon, a mystery with no conclusion, a troubling yet insignificant historical event that was analyzed out of all personality, a process that Nick watched with an odd sort of detachment.

There were the ubiquitous red and khaki threads of their guard’s headdresses and uniforms, the quiet but unflinching presence that hemmed and framed their every moment. There were the invisible threads of decisions made that Nick and Jenny were not privy

to, the silence and absence of the commander, the constant guessing and hypothesizing as to where things stood, what would be their fate, actions of those they had never seen and would never see, whose unobserved choices dictated their fate.

Then there were also strange and flimsy white threads of hope, that Nick did not at first dare to believe. Jenny was permitted to make a 30-second call to her home in Tbilisi to let them know she was alive. She also somehow sweetly inveigled their captors into supplying her with a Bible and a guitar. Nick decided to humor her and let her read to him and sing her catchy (although he judged somewhat simplistic) songs. He began by expressing feigned interest in the Bible readings, after all, there was not much alternative mental stimulation other than nightly CNN broadcasts. If he cut her off through disinterest or disrespect there would be nothing else but a return to the gray morass of his own thoughts, a tenuous tightrope over an empty precipice of fear. At least it was good literature. But there was a strange and distant comforting echo in the words that troubled him and wooed him at the same time.

One day Jenny had not joined them on the basketball court and when Nick returned she was fingering the guitar nervously.

“I ... uh.” She hesitated.

“Go on,” Nick encouraged.

“I ... uh ... wrote ... I mean got ... this song, and I wanted to share it with you.”

“Wow. You wrote a song? Good work!”

“Well, it’s a work in progress. ... It’s actually sort of written for you.”

“Really? I don’t think anyone ever wrote a song for me before.”

“It’s not like great or anything. ... I’m just an amateur.”

“Stop apologizing and sing the thing.”

“Okay. It’s called ‘Praying for You.’”

She started, clearing her throat nervously and struggling through the opening chords before seeming to summon an extra reserve of confidence from somewhere and launching into the song.

Did I catch a glimpse of something
 In those tender searching eyes;
 A hidden dream that died so long ago.
 Did I see a trace of sadness
 That so subtly belies
 The brave front that you try so hard to
 show?
 If you let me listen to your heart,
 I’ll tell you it’s okay.
 But if you choose to walk away,
 Then please just let me say:

That I’m crying for you, baby,
 Praying for you daily,
 ‘Cause I feel you hurt so deep inside;
 Wanna heal the wounds you try to hide.
 And I want to hold you near me,
 And I’m hoping that you’ll hear me.
 You can stay or you can go,
 But baby you should know, I’m praying
 for you.

Did you catch a glimpse of firelight
 Through your door of darkened dreams?
 Little child that’s frightened of the storm,
 Did I tell you that the dark night
 Is not as scary as it seems?
 If you’ll come inside and let me keep you
 warm,

If you break and cry in my arms,
I'll only love you more.
But if you choose to go it on your own,
Still I think that you should know

That I'm crying for you, baby,
Praying for you daily,
'Cause I feel you hurt so deep inside;
Wanna heal the wounds you try to hide.
And I want to hold you near me,
And I'm hoping that you'll hear me.
You can stay or you can go,
But baby you should know, I'm praying
for you.

There's no way I can understand
The secret battles that you've fought.
But every moment, every day,
You're never too far from my thoughts.

That I'm crying for you, baby,
Praying for you daily,
'Cause I feel you hurt so deep inside;
Wanna heal the wounds you try to hide.
And I want to hold you near me,
And I'm hoping that you'll hear me.
You can stay or you can go,
But baby you should know, I'm praying
for you.

She finished the song a little clumsily and looked nervously up at Nick.

"Hey, that's really good," Nick responded. "Kind of country flavored, right up my alley. Good tune, nice lyrics. Really, you should do something with it."

"Yeah right ... like release it on the Georgian

resistance top 40."

"Hey Jenny, thanks ... thanks for praying for me. You still haven't got me to believe that it helps but ... I appreciate it."

She looked softly at the floor. Nick could tell she was hoping for more, but he couldn't bring himself to say it. He lapsed into a stubborn confused silence.



Later that evening Jenny was once again summoned to the commander's office. There was none of the tension or coercion of the previous invitation. Ten minutes later Jenny came quietly back into the room and sat down.

"So what was it?"

"It's okay. Nothing."

"You talked to the top dog and it was nothing?"

"It's okay. I don't want to talk about it."

"What was it? We can't have secrets from each other." Nick was getting exasperated.

"Look, trust me. It's not worth talking about."

"How can I trust you when you don't tell me what's going on in there? Were they talking about me?"

"No, not specifically." Jenny was staring at the floor.

"I don't believe you. What are they going to do? Take me out and shoot me?"

"No Nick, it was nothing bad. Let's just leave it."

Nick was almost shouting.

"Leave it? How can I leave it? We're talking life and death here. We could get killed at any time and you're telling me to just leave it? How the hell am I supposed to just leave it?"

"I can't tell you, Nick."

Nick sensed she was about to give. Ahmed was staring at the floor, nervously fingering his Kalashnikov.

“You have to tell me. We have to know what’s going on with each other.”

She caved, tears springing into her eyes, still staring at the floor.

“They told me they were going to set me free.”

“You, just you, right?”

“For now, yes.”

There was silence for a full minute. Nick mustered all his strength and restraint.

“And so ... when do you go?” He hadn’t done a very good job. She didn’t reply.

“When are you going? You are going, right?”

“Nick, I...”

“Jenny!”

“I told them I didn’t want to go. Not until they release you too.” She was biting her lip again.

“You what? Jenny ... that’s the stupidest thing I ever heard. You go back in there right now and tell them you’ve changed your mind.”

“No, Nick. I won’t leave you here alone.”

“Goddamn it Jenny, I don’t need your charity! I don’t need your sympathy! I screwed up very badly and I can pay the price for it. I don’t want to be responsible for taking someone else down with me.”

Jenny was struggling with her tears, struggling with something she was trying to get out. Her eyes met his. It was fire shining through tears.

“You’re just saying that because ... you don’t want to owe anyone anything. You don’t want to be accountable, be indebted. You don’t want anyone’s help because you want to be free. You want to be independent. You don’t want to be indebted to me or to God, so you turn us both away.”

Nick had never seen her so intense. The words struck deep, but he fought. “Don’t try to psychoanalyze me. I’m not one of your goddamn orphans!”

The response was the one Nick feared most, a flood of helpless sobbing. She excused herself and went to the bathroom.

This time it was ten minutes until she returned. Nick summoned the courage to speak.

“Jenny ... I ... I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. I was being a selfish jerk.”

“It’s okay,” she half whispered, half choked.

“No, it’s not okay. You were right. You were so right it scared me. I just never saw it before.”

Jenny’s head was buried in her hands but Nick saw her glance up at him out of the corner of her eye.

His voice caught. “No one’s ever done anything like this for me before. I don’t have the faintest idea how to react.”

It was Nick’s turn. He leant back against the wall and wept openly. “I don’t understand how ... why ... what would make anyone do that for someone else. Someone they hardly even know...” His voice trailed off.

Jenny’s composure had returned to a degree and she spoke softly. “When I was a kid, there was this story in a book I had, about this Chinese guy, Lao Fook or something. Anyway, he heard about these Chinese slaves in Africa, and he sold himself into slavery to help them and bring them the gospel. That story always scared me, but I always prayed that if it ever came down to it, I’d have the strength to do what I had to do.”

“And what happened to the Chinese guy?”

“He died a captive.”

“Whoa.”

“But before he died he helped a lot of people to ... you know...”

“Find God?”

“Yes.”

Nick was quiet for a long moment.

“Jenny, you don’t have to prove yourself to me. You don’t have to suffer for my sake. And I don’t think you should do this just to prove yourself to yourself.”

“That’s not why I’m doing it, Nick. I just know it’s the right thing to do.”

Nick looked at her. She brushed a strand of hair out of her face and smiled, wiping tears from her reddened eyes with the back of her sleeve.

“God, I wish I could hold you right now,” Nick whispered.

Jenny smiled again and quickly looked away, attempting to straighten her disheveled appearance.

Ahmed somehow produced a box of tissues and proffered them silently but with a certain reverence to Jenny.

“*Shukran*, Ahmed,” she said gratefully. He offered them less ceremoniously to Nick, who accepted with a cursory nod.

“You know, this whole God thing,” said Nick, “sometimes I think it’s just something that you do to console yourself. Like there’s this whole fantasy world you have with this Jesus, the Knight in shining armor on His white horse who’s going to come and snatch you away one day, and the reason you do it is to compensate for the reality of our situation which basically totally sucks. Then there are other times when you seem so sure, so intense about it that I almost believe it myself. I mean, in a way I’d almost like to believe it, but it just seems like a cop-out to me, like not facing up to and dealing with the awful reality of the absolute septic tank of my life that I’m trapped in. You realize, don’t you, that even if I did get out of here, there’s nowhere for me to go, nothing for me to go back to.”

“Yes. I realize that.”

“So what can I do? Where can I go? To some invisible, inaudible God?”

“He’s ready to speak to you whenever you’re ready to listen.”

“You make it sound so simple. Way too simple.”

Jenny obviously didn’t have any more to say. She excused herself and went to bed.

Nick spent a half hour longer sitting silently lost in thought, alone on the dilapidated couch, distracted from time to time by Ahmed, who absentmindedly tapped out a tabla rhythm from his distant youth on the side of his gun. At last he heaved a sigh and indicated to Ahmed that he would go to his room.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Jenny was sleepily stirring some coffee into a couple of mugs when Nick burst into the sitting room, followed by the puzzled looking guard who had let him out of his room.

She looked up in surprise.

“What’s with the sudden burst of early morning energy?” she queried.

“I tried it.”

“Tried what?”

“The asking/listening thing.”

“You tried it?” Jenny was almost incredulous.

“Yeah ... I figured I don’t have much more to lose at this stage.”

“So what happened? Tell me! Oh, here’s your coffee.”

“Thanks.”

They seated themselves in armchairs.

“So before I went to bed I just talked ... you know ... into thin air and I said, ‘Listen God, if You’re real—and I barely believe You are, but I’m willing to give You at least a fair hearing...’”

“Wow, how charitable of you!” Jenny’s sarcasm was totally benign.

“So I basically described the total mess we’re in and how there seems to be no way out ... and I said,

‘Okay then, if You are real and You really *can* help, can You give me some step-by-step instructions, something to go on, at least some kind of a clue as to what I’m supposed to do.’

“And?”

“Then I just shut up and tried to listen, and...”

“And?”

“Well there was this voice, quiet but loud at the same time. Way in the background of my brain, but somehow totally all pervasive ... it’s so hard to explain.”

“What did it say?”

“This is the interesting part. It was just a very short sentence. Only seven words.” Nick stopped and waved his hand deprecatingly. “This is going to sound silly. You’re going to think I’m making it up.”

“No, go on, tell me.”

“Promise you won’t tell me I’m weird?”

“Promise.”

“It said, ‘Am I God or am I God?’”

“That’s all? Am I God or am I God?”

“That was it. End of message.”

“That’s good. Brief and to the point.” Jenny was obviously pleased.

“It was short, but the implication was very broad. There was definitely no doubt in the mind of the speaker as to His ability to extricate me from the dung heap into which I have managed to plunge myself. Didn’t say how He was planning to do it, but the message was unmistakably clear.”

Jenny was suddenly quiet, distant.

“What is it?” asked Nick, intrigued by the sudden change in manner.

“We have to get out of here.” She spoke with a sudden urgency.

“Okay, I agree with that. Let’s just let Ahmed know and we can be on our way.”

“Nick, I’m not kidding. It suddenly came back to me when you were talking. I had this incredibly vivid dream last night. There was fire everywhere. The whole room was engulfed in flames. We can’t stay in here. We have to move.”

She immediately turned to Ahmed and began speaking in Arabic, gesturing with her hands to make the point.

He shrugged his shoulders helplessly. Obviously it was not within his power to just get up and walk out of the room. His reluctance only heightened Jenny’s insistence, but she was not making any progress.

“He probably thinks it’s a trick,” offered Nick, who had been watching the exchange with a mixture of amusement and interest in who would prevail.

A low, distant rumbling sound began to fill the room.

“What’s that sound?” said Jenny, almost frantic.

“Hey, chill,” said Nick. “Probably just an airliner flying over.”

“Now is not the time to chill,” Jenny retorted.

Ahmed was listening. The sound grew louder. He ran to the window. Suddenly there was a loud, high-pitched screaming hissing sound, approaching, gathering intensity.

“Down!” shouted Ahmed, gesturing wildly before diving for the floor.

Nick and Jenny both hit the carpet a split second before a deafening blast shook the room, smashing in the windows and cascading tiny fragments of glass in every direction. The explosion was quickly followed by the roar of two fighter jets over head.

Ahmed was on his feet right away, brushing fragments of shattered glass from his back as he checked on Jenny and Nick who both lay face down with their hands covering their heads.

“Out!” he shouted. The roar of the circling jets could still be heard. Quickly he flung open the door. Nick and Jenny were on their feet, immediately following Ahmed. Across the courtyard one of the main buildings was totally decimated, a mass of smoldering twisted iron and steel. Blackened bodies lay beside it. Khaki-clad figures ran to and fro in confusion.

Ahmed beckoned them wildly to get away from the buildings. The three of them sprinted as fast as they could muster up a hill behind the camp. They could hear a second missile screaming its deadly way in. Glancing behind him, Nick glimpsed the ominous black finger-shaped object followed by a blazing fire trail.

“Down!” he shouted.

They hit the grassy hill just before the missile slammed into the building they had just left. A deafening shockwave passed over them as the building erupted into flames, followed by the roar of the jet, maybe 500 feet over their heads.

Nick rolled over and checked on his companions. They were both unhurt. Ahmed was on his feet again, anxiously scanning the sky to the north from where the attack had come. The two ominous black dots appeared, gradually increasing in size.

“Maybe they’ve seen us!” Nick panicked. “We need to run for cover!”

There was a good 100 meters to go until the cover of the forest—way too far to make it before the jets arrived. Nick turned to Jenny who had risen to her feet and was standing, seemingly transfixed, staring intently at the oncoming fighters. Further up the hill, anti-aircraft guns began to crackle into life. Unscathed, unhindered, two screaming black shadows swooped inexorably toward them.

“Jenny, let’s go!” shouted Nick. Ahmed was shouting something at her in Arabic.

Oblivious, she jutted out her hand toward the jets.

“Jesus, by the power of the keys of the Kingdom, stop them!” Her voice was raised. It was not a helpless scream, but a pleading command which possessed a desperate authority that Nick had not previously seen in her.

Without any warning the lead jet suddenly exploded. The second fighter tried to swerve upwards to avoid the airborne conflagration, but must have hit some of the debris and itself burst into flames. The two flaming, tumbling fireballs careened over the heads of the stunned observers and smashed into a mountainside further ahead of them.

There was a sudden, almost eerie silence broken only by the cries of a scared flock of birds ascending from near the crash site. Dazed by the rapidity and intensity of all that had transpired, Nick looked over at Jenny who was staring white-faced at the twin pyres of smoke ascending from the forested mountainside.

Gunshots rang out behind them. Nick flinched instinctively and turned to see what it was. Some of the fighters who had manned the anti-aircraft guns were dancing in jubilation, firing their weapons into the air and shouting, “Allahu Akbar!”

The scene in the camp, however, was in stark contrast. The two devastated buildings still smoldered. Dark figures ran wildly back and forth.

Ahmed spoke quickly to Jenny and ran off toward the camp.

“What did he say?”

“He said to go down to that road there and wait for him.” Jenny still seemed stunned, and spoke in a low monotone.

“What do *you* think we should do?” Nick asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Well ... we’re unguarded now. We could escape.” Nick gestured toward the woods behind them.

Jenny seemed to be thinking hard.

“I don’t know, but for some reason I feel we should do what Ahmed said,” she replied quietly.

“Why? This could be our chance to break free!”

“Nick, we don’t know the area. We don’t have anywhere to go, any money or food. They’ll probably just come after us and recapture us. Come on.”

She began walking down the grassy slope toward the road as Ahmed had instructed.

Nick hesitated for a moment, tempted to take off on his own into the forest. The thought of even a day of unfettered freedom of movement seemed like bliss to him. But he knew Jenny was right. It would be short lived. Within minutes they were on the road.

A four-wheel-drive jeep was heading out of the camp toward them. Nick recognized Ahmed at the wheel. He pulled up beside them.

“Get in,” he shouted. “Quickly.”

“Hey, you speak English,” said Nick.

“So what?” retorted Ahmed. “Get in the jeep.”

“Where are you going?” Nick was unconvinced.

“I’m going to do what they say in your stupid American movies and get the hell outta here,” he retorted.

“Nick, quickly, let’s go!” said Jenny. “I asked the Boss. He said it’s what we should do.”

Ahmed was revving the engine impatiently.

“Okay, why not? You’re the guru,” said Nick with a trace of annoyance in his voice. He swung himself up beside Ahmed. Jenny climbed in behind them.

In an instant Ahmed was accelerating up the road away from the camp.

“Will somebody please tell me what’s happening?” said Nick after about a minute.

Nobody told him.

“For example, why Ahmed can suddenly speak perfect English, and why we’re driving at full speed into this totally deserted forest, and why we just got bombed by Georgian fighter planes, and how you poorly armed terror ... sorry, freedom fighters just managed to shoot down two jets?”

“Let’s take it a point at a time shall we,” said Ahmed, swerving to avoid a pothole in the road. “One, I speak English partly because I graduated in political science from the States. Two, we’re driving into this forest because I don’t want to be a resistance fighter any more, probably no more than you want to be imprisoned by resistance fighters, or as you so kindly put it, terrorists. Three, they weren’t Georgian fighter planes. Georgia doesn’t have that type of plane, or such missiles. I think they were maybe Russian, and why they were bombing us, I don’t know. Four, I also don’t know how to answer, because I don’t think that my freedom fighter friends with their fifteen-year-old anti-aircraft missiles have the ability to shoot down a duck, let alone a state-of-the-art fighter jet. Maybe you can ask your guru friend here. I think she might know more about it.”

“Jenny?” Nick turned to look at Jenny, who was staring distractedly out the window of the jeep. She hadn’t heard him.

“Jenny?”

“Wh-what?”

“You okay?”

“I guess so.”

“What happened back there, with those planes?”

“What do you mean? The anti-aircraft missiles shot them down.”

“Ahmed says that’s not possible.”

“Well, it happened.”

“So how did it happen?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you remember what happened?”

“Vaguely.”

“You put up your hand ... and you said something about Jesus and the power of the keys ... and then the plane exploded.”

“Nick, please!”

“I think we should talk about it. I mean, that’s a pretty awesome power ... governments would pay millions for that type of technology.”

“I’d rather just leave it.” She wiped away a tear.

“Okay, fine. We’ll leave it.”

Nick turned back to watching the road ahead. They were entering a dense part of the forest.

“I’m taking this route,” said Ahmed, “because I’m assuming that we’re being tracked by satellite. Hopefully we can lose them in the forest.”

“Who would be tracking us?”

“Whoever is trying to kill us,” said Ahmed shortly.

“Who might that be?”

“Georgians, Russians, Americans, CIA—whoever it is you used to work for. I don’t know. You tell me. How did they find out our location?”

“I don’t know. You tell me.” Nick wasn’t planning to echo Ahmed’s words, and his tone was more biting than he had expected.

There was a prolonged silence as Ahmed negotiated a series of sharp turns, finally turning left onto a dirt track that led deeper into the forest.

“Do you have any idea where you’re going?” said Nick caustically.

“I know these hills. We trained here for months.”

“Nice, a drive into the hills. Did you have a particular hill in mind? You’re just going to drive to a hill and stay there?”

“No,” replied Ahmed evenly. “I think I’ll go across the border to Chechnya, Armenia, Syria, down through the desert to Jordan, and then back to Palestine where I belong. I might even have a country soon, at least on paper.”

“Oh, right. You’re just going to drive over to Jerusalem and live there. Nice.”

“Not drive. We’re probably going to have to ditch the jeep before we leave the forest. It’s way too easy to track. Go on by foot.”

“So the Georgian government has all this hi-tech equipment to track jeeps, so they can hunt you down?”

“Not the Georgians. Not me.”

“Then who?”

“Listen, I’ve been a ‘terrorist’ for five years, and I’ve never seen anything like today. A few helicopter gunships, the occasional APC, some mortar rounds, but an attack like today, two jets? Never. They wouldn’t waste it on rabble like us.”

“What are you trying to say?” Nick was cautious, apprehensive.

“I think maybe there’s someone somewhere who knows you know something that you shouldn’t know and wants to make very sure you’re dead.”

“Me? That whole attack was about me?”

Ahmed shrugged noncommittally. “You tell me.”

A shiver ran down Nick’s spine. The dense forest crowded in on them. Dark, menacing trees, like so many un-faced fears, blocked the light in all directions. A terrible feeling of hopelessness surged into him like waters from a bursting dam, and he struggled to regain the thin lifeline of hope that he seemed to have momentarily grasped that morning.

“The Boss will take care of it.” It was Jenny, somehow suddenly kicking back in.

Nick turned, surprised. She was smiling.

“What did you say?” He had heard it perfectly well, but he wanted to hear it again.

“Remember? ‘Am I God or am I God?’ Such a good line, worthy of Moses.”

“So what’s the little guru-ess so chipper about all of a sudden?” Nick hated the fact that that had come out so sarcastic. Jenny didn’t seem to mind.

“Oh, you know, Pollyanna, on-line time, combination of the whole thing. Plus, we have some decisions to make and I suddenly realized I don’t have time for anguish and misery right now. I’ll have to save it for later.”

“Sounds like a Hershey bar.” Nick actually smiled.

“So what’s the plan?” Jenny was right into business mode.

“Ahmed wants to ditch the jeep.”

“Yeah, I heard all that. How?”

Ahmed cleared his throat, as if preparing to delineate a plan he’d thought through quite carefully.

“We can drive through this part of the forest for another 50 kilometers or so. As we come out on the other side there’s a lake. We ditch the jeep into the lake, making it look like an accident. If they see it, hopefully they’ll think we’re dead. Even if not, it’ll take them days to get in dredging equipment and find out we’re not there.

“There’s a village about 20 kilometers from the lake. We walk there, staying under the trees as much as possible. Then we buy a car.”

“Oh right, like all chip in.” Nick seemed very unimpressed.

“Okay. *I’ll* buy a car. You don’t think I’d come on a trip like this without baksheesh? You think I’m stupid?” Ahmed was peeved.

“Your plan is, to say the least, outlandish. How much money you got?”

“None of your business.”

“Guys, simmer down,” Jenny pleaded. “This isn’t helping.”

“Okay.” Ahmed was obviously offended. “Why don’t I just shut up and let homeboy here tell us how he plans to get us out of this?”

“No, go on,” urged Jenny gently. “It sounds good.”

Ahmed paused before glaring at Nick and summoning some hidden reserves of graciousness which enabled him to continue.

“So we buy a car and head east to the border. There will probably be roadblocks, so we’ll need some kind of disguises. Close to the border we ditch the car, maybe go across by horse or donkey, or even on foot. I suppose that’s where you both will have to make a choice.”

“Choice?” Jenny sounded uncertain.

“Well, from this point on, wherever we go, whatever we do is dangerous. For you, Jenny, to go back to Tbilisi is dangerous. You don’t know what’s happened to your friends. For me, I can’t go back to my freedom-fighting career. That’s over since this morning. My only chance is Palestine. But it’s a long trip, also dangerous, without passports. If you want to come with me, Ahlan wa Sahlan. For you, Nick Stratton...”

There was an uncomfortable pause.

“Okay. Maybe I should just go to the nearest U.S. embassy, turn myself in and...” Nick’s voice trailed off into a continuation of the uncomfortable pause as the scenario played itself out in their minds.

“Bad idea,” he continued. “Okay, go back to Tbilisi, get a good shave and shower, and report for work at Nexo office on Monday morning.”

Third uncomfortable pause.

“No—bad idea number two. ... Stay here, learn Georgian, and become a woodsman. At least there are plenty of trees. ... This is getting ridiculous. Hey Ahmed, does Palestine accept American refugees?”

Ahmed looked him up and down for a moment before raising his eyebrows and clicking his tongue in a typical Arabic gesture of negation.

“I take it that was a no. Listen, we took in hundreds of thousands of you guys for years.”

“Sorry, you don’t meet the qualifications. You need 20,000 dollars in the bank, at least one relative living in Palestine, character references from your former employer, police report to prove you’ve never been in jail, basic fluency in Arabic.”

“Okay, give it a rest, terrorist!” Nick had been kidding but he was starting to become angry.

“Please, you two,” Jenny interjected. “This is so not helping the situation.”

Ahmed revved the jeep, moved into a higher gear and flattened the accelerator. The jeep careened wildly up the trail. Nick grabbed his armrest as Jenny, frustrated, let her head drop into her cupped hands.

“Hey chill!” shouted Nick. “You want to kill us all now?”

Ahmed slammed on the brakes and the jeep skidded to an abrupt halt. He bent down as Nick peeled himself off the dashboard, and pulled his Kalashnikov out from under the seat.

“That is the first good idea you’ve had all morning,” Ahmed snarled, pointing the gun into Nick’s face. “Get out of the jeep!”

Jenny started crying. “Ahmed, no!” she pleaded.

“Jenny, look the other way. Out of the jeep, Nick Stratton!”

Numb, dazed, Nick opened the door and climbed down.

“Ahmed, please!” screamed Jenny.

Ahmed didn’t reply but opened his own door and jumped out.

“Stand over by those trees. Face away from the jeep.” Ahmed waved the gun as he rounded the front of the jeep.

Silently Nick obeyed his commands, moving up to the trees at the side of the road.

Ahmed came up and stood a few paces behind him, the gun aimed at his head. Nick could vaguely make out the muffled sound of Jenny crying and praying in the jeep.

“Turn around.”

Nick turned and flinched slightly as he looked down the barrel of the gun.

“Now,” began Ahmed, “we have three options. One, I could kill you right here. Two, I could drive off and leave you here, and you can decide what you want to do, and handle the situation in your own free American way. Three, I could put my gun away and we could begin talking to each other like sane human beings. Which option do you prefer?”

Nick’s throat was dry and his voice cracked as he spoke hoarsely.

“I think ... I would tend to favor ... er ... option three.”

Ahmed was quiet for a moment.

“I was seriously considering option one, but out of respect for the prayers of your friend, I won’t go through with that. Option two—I must admit I’m still tempted. Shall we say for now that we try option three and then if that doesn’t work we still leave option two open?”

Nick gulped and nodded.

“Okay. Back in the jeep.”



The journey continued in near silence for the next few hours, each inhabitant of the jeep lost in his or her thoughts. At one point Ahmed spoke in Arabic to Jenny, who nodded quietly and reached into the back section of the jeep, producing some bread, cheese, and water, which she distributed. At times the forestry road almost disappeared beneath a carpet of green. It was slow progress negotiating steep ascents and rough terrain, but Ahmed was obviously a skilled driver.

Eventually they reached what seemed like the peak of a ridge and began to descend into a valley, although the thick foliage around them did not afford a view. Gradually, however, the trees began to thin out, and glimpses of rolling hills could be seen, and eventually the blue expanse of the lake.

Ahmed pulled onto the shoulder of the dirt track about 20 meters before it veered left out of sight. The absence of trees on the other side of the turn indicated a steep escarpment. Through the gap before them, the far shore of the lake was visible, melting into wooded hills. Ahmed turned and looked at Jenny, ignoring Nick.

“Up ahead the road turns left and there’s a steep slope down into the lake. It’s the perfect place to ditch the jeep, if that’s what we think we should do.” His tone was considerably more humble than before.

“What are the other options?” interjected Nick.

Still focusing on Jenny, who was listening intently, Ahmed continued.

“We could continue on in the jeep. There are two dangers to that. One is that we could be tracked by satellite. Secondly, we could be spotted by ground forces as we are coming out into the open. The town we are heading for is under our control, but there are frequent government patrols in the area. We would be an easy target. They could call in helicopters.”

“I have one question,” said Jenny after a moment’s thought. “Wouldn’t ditching the jeep expose our general whereabouts more? Make us easier to locate? What if we just left it somewhere in the forest, and went on by foot to the village.”

“I think we should keep the jeep,” said Nick. “I don’t see how they could still be tracking us, even if they did get a fix on us as we were leaving the camp, which is unlikely. We’ve been in the forest for three hours now.”

“Easily,” said Ahmed. “There are only a few roads coming out of the forest. They could be monitoring all of them, and the jeep is big, easy to distinguish from normal cars.”

“Well, I don’t agree. I think you’re way overestimating their tracking capabilities. Plus, what if you can’t find a car to buy? Then we’ve lost the jeep and we’re stuck.” Nick was starting to get heated again.

“Yes, but a normal car sticks out much less than this big thing, plus I have friends in the town. It’s under our control. I used to train there.”

“Well, it doesn’t make any sense to me to lose the jeep right now.” Nick was growing more adamant, and Ahmed began to visibly bristle.

Jenny cut in quickly. “Listen guys, I’m totally not an expert at this whole escaping thing, and I don’t know anything about satellites, nor do I know the area. I don’t know if this will make any sense to either of you, but I really believe in praying and asking God what to do. I think we’re all in pretty much over our heads here, and one wrong move could cost us our lives. Would you object ... I mean, would it be okay with you if we prayed now and asked God for direction? I know you probably aren’t used to it, but I’ve seen it work so many times.”

Ahmed looked a little unsure.

Nick raised his hands in a gesture of somewhat less-than-willing compliance.

“Sure,” said Nick. “If you wanna pray, go right ahead. I won’t stop you.”

“Okay, but I’m not the only one God can speak to here,” Jenny added.

“No, but *she’s* good. Very good.” Nick was half serious, half sarcastic. “God even told her I like mustard on my cheese sandwich.”

Ahmed looked intrigued by that piece of information, but still less than convinced.

“I suppose it can’t hurt,” he managed. “How do you do it?”

“I’ll just pray, then we can all stop and try to listen to God’s leading, like an inner voice in our minds or hearts, and everyone can say what they get.”

To Nick, Jenny sounded as matter-of-fact as someone demonstrating how to use a food processor.

Strange girl, he thought for the hundredth time.

She closed her eyes. Nick and Ahmed eyed each other warily before following suit.

“Dear God,” she prayed, “we are in this difficult situation and have no idea what to do. We ask You to please speak to all of us and lead us by Your Spirit. Speak to us clearly and show us what we should do. In Jesus’ name.”

“Bismallah rahman a’rahim. Ahmin,” intoned Ahmed reverently.

After a minute or so Jenny opened her eyes with almost childish excitement.

“So what’d everyone get?” she asked brightly.

The two men eyed each other suspiciously once more.

“Ahmed?” She wasn’t going to let them off the hook.

“I don’t know, it’s strange. This never happened

to me before. But a verse came to me from the Koran. It talks about how God blessed Isaa ... Jesus ... with clear signs and with the Holy Spirit.”

“That’s in the Koran?” said Nick. “I thought you guys hated Christians, killed them?”

“No, we respect them—those who live by what they are supposed to, what is written in the holy books. Not those who claim to be Christians but ignore the words of God, and support those who kill innocent people.”

Nick did not miss the cutting undertone, but chose to ignore it.

“So what do you think it means, Ahmed?” Jenny was still traffic controlling.

“I think it means, like you prayed, that God will show us by His Spirit, and with clear signs.”

“What about you, Nick?”

“Uh ... you know I’m not very good at this ... it’s only ever happened to me once ... twice, actually, so I didn’t really ... I mean, it’s stupid. All I could think about was mustard. You know, that really nice yellow mustard that they put on hot dogs, not that terrible brown French stuff. I was just thinking how nice it would go with the bread and cheese we had.”

“Okay.” Jenny was obviously making an effort to be positive. “That’s a good start. So we have the Holy Spirit, clear signs, and mustard ... yellow mustard.”

“So what about you?” asked Ahmed.

“I couldn’t help but feel somehow that we should go with Ahmed’s plan—ditch the jeep. That’s what I got. I don’t know, but it seemed clear to me.”

Ahmed was obviously quite pleased with her response, while Nick shook his head, still unconvinced.

Jenny, meanwhile, was staring intently through the front window of the jeep.

“Hey, what’s that?” she said quickly, pointing to the bend in the road before them.

“What?” Ahmed was jumpy, alert.

“Look, there’s a sign there. It’s yellow—mustard yellow. Look at the picture.”

It was a warning road sign, with a simplistic picture of a car plunging off the side of the cliff into the water below.

“See, it’s a clear sign ... and it’s yellow like mustard. And look!” Jenny jumped up and down excitedly. “There’s a bird sitting on it. It’s a dove! Guys, this is so weird.”

“The sign I get,” said Nick dryly. “I don’t see the relevance of the bird.”

“The dove, stupid,” said Ahmed. “Symbol of the Holy Spirit. Don’t they teach you anything in your American schools?”

Nick grimaced, but held his tongue, remembering the Kalashnikov under the seat.

“Wow, you guys are awesome!” said Jenny enthusiastically. “Who would ever think! The sign, the dove, the mustard yellow! Thank You Jesus!”

“Hamdulillah!” added Ahmed

“I guess it is quite a coincidence,” said Nick begrudgingly.

“So everyone agrees, we ditch the jeep?” Ahmed asked.

“Yes,” replied Jenny.

“I guess so,” added Nick, not quite as confidently.

“I have supplies in the back. We can carry them in packs, which I have. Also I suggest you change into the uniform of my fighters, which I have. It will help us going to the village. They know me and they will think you are with us. Then no questions.”

“How did you get all this ready so quickly, Ahmed?”

Jenny’s question was almost childlike, Ahmed’s response gentle.

“We always have jeeps ready to go, packed with supplies, in case of attack. This is the life of a resistance fighter. Let’s go. We have no time to waste.”

Ahmed exited the jeep, followed by the other two, and in a moment was handing them uniforms. Jenny looked around a little nervously for a place to get changed.

“Find somewhere with good overhead cover,” smirked Nick, reading her thoughts. “Remember the satellites are always watching. Don’t want to give those guys at the NSA a free show.”

Jenny chose a thicket of bushes about ten meters away.

Ahmed and Nick were silent as the former began unloading the jeep and the latter changed into the neatly pressed fatigues. After a few minutes Jenny emerged from the thicket, still trying to adjust the uniform to make it comply to her figure.

“Does it look okay?” she asked uncertainly as she rejoined the men.

“Cute!” Nick smiled and winked.

“I never saw one of these stupid uniforms look so good,” was Ahmed’s contribution.

Jenny smiled self-consciously and looked at the ground. Looking quickly for something to do, she began helping to unload the jeep.

“So Ahmed,” Jenny remonstrated as they unloaded, “I can’t believe you let me speak my terrible Arabic all that time and didn’t let on you spoke English. How could you?”

Ahmed smiled briefly, the first time Nick had observed the phenomenon.

“For one, your Arabic is quite good, and secondly ... well, it’s obvious, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, I guess so. You were checking us out.”

Ahmed shrugged helplessly.

“Actually, if you want to know the truth...”—he hesitated before continuing—“I volunteered to be with you, I asked the commander. There’s something about you that fascinated me.”

Jenny blushed a little and concentrated on the bag of bread and cheese she was unloading. Nick suddenly felt a strange twinge of jealousy at Ahmed’s comment, Jenny’s reaction. Bad news—he was becoming attached to the girl.

Within minutes they had unloaded the supplies and distributed them among the various packs. There was food, blankets, matches, flashlights, as well as some rounds of ammunition and hand grenades which Ahmed took possession of, carefully loading them into his pack.

“Hold this,” he said shortly, handing his Kalashnikov over to Jenny. She took it gingerly.

Ahmed went to the driver’s seat of the jeep. With some rope he fastened the steering wheel in place, aiming directly forward. Looking around on the ground he found a large rock. Nick guessed that it was for the accelerator pedal. Quickly he climbed in, switched on, and began revving the jeep.

The vehicle lurched forward, Ahmed keeping the door open beside him. Jenny gasped as the jeep picked up speed and the khaki-clad figure dove out, slamming the door behind him, and rolled into the ditch by the side of the road. The engine screamed as if in protest as the helpless jeep careened down the slope. As if in a final gesture of defiance, it smashed headlong into the mustard-colored sign before hurtling wildly into the waiting abyss. A distant echo of metal smashing into rock followed by a loud splash signaled its final end. Curiosity urged Nick to run down the slope

and confirm the jeep’s demise, but he realized the escarpment was much too exposed for comfort.

Jenny, meanwhile, was running to Ahmed who was still lying prostrate in the ditch. Nick followed quickly. As she bent over him, Ahmed raised himself on one elbow with a groan.

“Are you alright?” she asked anxiously.

“Not bad,” he said, sitting up and rubbing his left shoulder ruefully. “This maneuver is part of terrorist training.” He looked pointedly at Nick. “I never got this one down so good.”

Nick stretched out a hand to help him up, but Ahmed ignored it and jumped briskly to his feet, brushing dirt and pine needles off his fatigues. Jenny offered him his gun, which he accepted with a gruff “Shukran.”

“Come.” He waved his hand brusquely toward the three backpacks. “We need to move.”

The three donned the packs and Ahmed led the way up into the forest at right angles to the road.

“If we work our way along this ridge, we will come to a place about two kilometers from the village,” he said as they began. “There we can stay the night and I will go to buy the car. I will come in the very early morning, pick you up, and we’ll drive on.”

There seemed no further reason to question Ahmed’s planning, so the trio trekked on in silence. Nick was glad to finally be out of confinement. The brush of fir needles against his face, the crunch of twigs beneath his feet, the occasional caress of the pine-scented, zephyr-like breeze on his cheek—all seemed to speak of a freedom he had almost forgotten existed. He determined to ignore the worrisome thoughts of a shapeless future that lurked like dark demons in unsupervised corners of his brain, and instead to enjoy an hour, a day, even a moment of blissful carelessness.

It was slow progress through the dense undergrowth and by the time they had covered the nearly 20 kilometers to the edge of the forested area near the village, the sun was beginning to set.

The exhausted walkers sat themselves down in a clearing.

“Here we’ll make camp,” said Ahmed. “But sorry, no fire. Too easy to see.”

“See from what? Satellite?” Nick was being sarcastic, but Ahmed didn’t catch it.

“Maybe, but I’m more worried about government patrols.”

“I thought you said the area was under your control?”

“The village, yes. The forests, nobody really controls.”

“So are we safe here?”

“Probably safer than Chicago or New York.” Ahmed was busying himself arranging his pack.

Nick was quiet, a response to Ahmed’s jibe brewing in his thoughts.

Jenny, obviously sensing the tension and hoping to circumvent the coming storm, broke the silence as brightly as she could muster.

“I don’t know about you guys, but I’m famished. How about some dinner? I’ll cook. There’s a choice. We could have bread with cheese, or cheese with bread, or cheese sandwiches, or maybe club sandwiches with ... er, cheese ... or toasted cheese sandwiches, but sorry, we can’t toast them because of the fire factor ... or we could have just bread, or maybe cheese for an entree and bread as the main course.” It wasn’t working too well.

“Whatever,” said Nick glumly.

“I’ll take the bread and cheese,” said Ahmed in a monotone.

Jenny produced the goods from her pack and handed them out. They munched in silence, the dusk gathering about them.

“Sorry, I forgot the mustard,” offered Jenny, another attempt at ice thawing.

“What is it with you, Ahmed?” Nick could contain himself no longer. “I mean, administration after administration has spent years trying to broker peace in your country, get you a workable state, provide security for the Israelis, and finally the draft of the Jerusalem agreement is on the table, and you’re *still* not satisfied. You Palestinians are still complaining that it’s not enough, still resisting. I just don’t understand how you can be so ... so ... uncooperative, so ungrateful.”

Jenny was looking anxiously at Ahmed, who seemed to be meditating on how to reply. He was remarkably phlegmatic.

“Let’s change the scenario around,” he began. “Let’s say 20 years from now, the U.S. economy collapses, and the Chinese become the world superpower.”

“Highly unlikely, but ... okay, continue.”

“So the Native Americans, being a similar ethnic group to the Chinese, decide that they should get some Chinese support to reestablish their claims to their country, the land they used to own, their historical homeland. The Chinese, wanting to establish their power base on the North American continent, agree to support them in exchange for their alliance.

“So with a tremendous amount of Chinese logistical support, the Native Americans, with their faces painted, and whooping war cries, ride into Washington D.C. and drive the helpless U.S. cowboys into the desert. Those who don’t leave are either shot or terrorized, so most of them leave and go north to Canada, or south to Mexico. Some remain to try to

resist. The Native Americans establish control of the country, but the most patriotic of the Americans, or the Colonials, form underground resistance groups, such as the ALO, the American Liberation Organization.

“Of course, the world community urges negotiation and peaceful means to end the conflict, like a compromise solution where the Colonials get the West Coast and the Natives get the East. Of course, the most sensitive place is Capitol Hill and the White house, the traditional symbol of U.S. democracy. The Native Americans allow the Colonials to keep meeting on Capitol Hill, though many want to set up their big teepee there, claiming that it is also sacred ground to them. Also the Natives begin to reconquer the Wild West and set up reservations and teepees in many places, even though that’s against the agreements that were made.

“The Chinese urge them to stop but do nothing about it, as they don’t want to lose their alliance. The Natives by now have got most of the lakes and waterways and the Colonial standard of living is getting lower and lower, particularly in Texas, where millions of refugees from the rest of the country are herded into a giant 100-square mile concentration camp in Galveston, which they nickname Gaga. The Colonials are also treated as second-class citizens, whilst the Natives are first-class citizens with full rights.

“Finally a compromise is reached whereby the Natives get sixty percent of the country, including the best farm land and most of the water, and the Colonials get forty percent—but military security and security control belongs to the Natives.

“Let me ask you, Nick Stratton, what would you do? Would you stand by idly and let your country,

everything you worked for and dreamed of, be cut up and humiliated? Or would you be a man and fight for the liberation of your country, even against terrible odds, and though it might even cost you your life—and certainly your comfort and safety? Would you compromise with a deal that is so unfair, just so your children can grow up in peace, even if under discrimination and oppression? Would you suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or would you take arms against a sea of troubles. To be or not to be, Nick Stratton, that is the question. What would you do?”

“I don’t see that the analogy is exactly correct,” began Nick defensively. He paused for a moment and looked down at his hands, then up at Ahmed. “I guess I don’t know ... I really wouldn’t know.”

“You know, Nick Stratton,” Ahmed spoke softly, almost sadly, “I ask myself these questions every day, and I still don’t know the answers.”

A few seconds of vulnerability seemed to be all that Ahmed could manage. He quickly pulled himself together, looked at his watch.

“I’m going to leave now,” he said, “for the village. I will come in the very early morning with the car. Don’t move from this place. Don’t light fires. You have flashlights in your pack, but don’t use them unless you really need to. The road is only 50 meters down the hill. Wait for me here.”

“Ahmed,” said Jenny apprehensively, “what if you don’t come back? What if you are delayed, or something happens? Perhaps we should go together.”

“No, it’s too dangerous. With three of us there will be many questions, problems. Don’t worry, I’ll come.” So saying, Ahmed grabbed his trusty Kalashnikov, that suddenly seemed to Nick to be his only true friend, and disappeared into the night.

“Phew, that was a long day,” breathed Nick as he pulled a backpack over and lay down, resting his head on it.

“Yes,” answered Jenny. “When you think about it, we actually went through a fair bit. Being attacked by jets, escaping into a forest, and some of us almost getting murdered.” Jenny managed a dry laugh. Nick was pensive.

“Jenny, I hate to bring this up again, but the thing with the jets ... why were you so defensive about it, so upset? They were trying to kill us.”

Jenny suddenly became thoughtful. “I don’t know. It’s all just so awesome, so above my head. I never asked or wanted to do stuff like that. All I can think about is the poor pilots. Maybe they were married, had wives, kids ... how are they going to be feeling tonight when their dad doesn’t come home, when they find out their husband isn’t coming back?”

“Jenny, you’re not responsible for that. You didn’t kill anyone. You just prayed. I mean, that is a pretty awesome power you have. Even Ahmed said that those guys with the Stingers could never have brought those jets down. I mean, how did you do that? It’s like something out of *X-Men*.”

“It’s nothing I did, I mean ... like you said, I just prayed.”

“So what’s this ‘keys of the kingdom’ deal?”

“It’s something the Lord promised the apostle Peter way back in the Bible, and then recently He told some of us in prophecy that He had given us this awesome power again in its fullness, because in the days we’re going into, we’re going to need that extra power. Like today.”

“So you somehow have this power?”

“It’s not me. It’s not like I have the power. I just claim it and ask the Lord to do it. It’s not like it’s

anything to do with me.”

“Well, if it wasn’t you, then why are you feeling bad about it?”

“I don’t know. I just feel there might have been a better way to do it. I just didn’t have time to think. I just asked the Lord to stop them. I didn’t want to cause anybody’s death, even if they were trying to kill us. Oh, it’s all so weird, so way above me, so hard to understand.”

Nick was way out of his depth. This girl seemed to be in some advanced course that made what he was learning seem like kindergarten. He wished there was a way to help her, but his logic seemed to be totally inapplicable to the strange esoteric lessons she was somehow being forced to take.

“I’m sorry,” he blurted out. “I wish there was a way I could help, but I’m kind of new at all this. These issues are a little difficult for me to try to resolve here.”

“That’s okay. I don’t expect you to understand. I guess I’m supposed to have been preparing for stuff like this all my life, but now that it’s happening to me, and so suddenly and unexpectedly, it seems just incredibly scary. I just want to go back to my Home and my sweet little street kids.”

“Yeah, and I want to go back to my sweet little Wall Street.”

“Really?” Jenny seemed a bit taken aback.

“Well, when I think about it, maybe not.” The wind breathing through the pine needles and the chirping of crickets took over for a few minutes while Nick tried to figure out what to say next. “I am bushed,” was the best he could manage.

“Okay. Let’s get some sleep, then.” Jenny withdrew herself to a safe distance and arranged some blankets on the ground.

Nick read the non-verbal message very clearly and quickly started dismissing the thoughts of late night erotic forest escapades that had started to formulate in his mind. Mercifully, he was asleep in less than five minutes.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The next thing he was aware of was being jostled into unwilling consciousness by the butt of Ahmed's gun against his shoulder. He started and raised himself on both his elbows, blinking at the rays of sunlight that were already piercing their way into the clearing. Jenny was already awake, shaking and folding her blankets.

"I brought some coffee," said Ahmed, placing a brown paper bag roughly on a rock near Nick's elbow, and extracting a steaming plastic covered Styrofoam cup for himself. "We need to leave here quickly."

Nick pulled himself out from under his roughly arranged blankets, stood up, and began folding them somewhat less neatly than Jenny's.

"Quickly, we need to load the car," urged Ahmed.

Jenny was already starting to do so, carrying her pack down a short incline to where Nick could make out a gray car through the trees.

"I just need to take a leak," Nick muttered, and walked sleepily between a couple of pine trees in the general direction of the rising sun. He suddenly found himself on an embankment overlooking an idyllic valley where shreds and wisps of mist still lingered amongst the dawn-gilded pines. He could see the road about 50 meters below him. He walked about

ten meters down the gradual incline and stopped by a worthy-looking pine tree. He struggled for a moment with the unfamiliar buttons of the uniform pants, and then proceeded to relieve himself against the tree.

For a split second he bent his head, concentrating on the suddenly difficult task of doing up the buttons. A shot rang out. Nick ducked instinctively as the pine wood just above his head splintered. Panicking, he began to run up the slope toward Ahmed and Jenny. A volley of shots rang out from behind him. Bullets sputtered into the grass around him. Suddenly he was hit. A sickening searing pain shot through his thigh, and he fell, clutching his leg.

Another volley of shots rang out. Nick looked up to see Ahmed, Kalashnikov blazing, running down the slope toward him. In an instant he had picked him up and slung him across his shoulder, still somehow firing his gun with one hand at the adversaries that Nick had not yet seen. With all the pain wracking his leg, Nick still found himself wondering how Ahmed was able to carry him and shoot at the same time.

There was cover five meters away behind some rocks, and by some miracle they made it there. Ahmed ducked behind the rocks and dropped Nick roughly on the ground. Jenny was now by the car, about 30 meters down the slope, mercifully out of sight of the attackers.

“Jenny! Start the car! The key is there.” Ahmed raised himself momentarily above the rocks and discharged another burst of fire, quickly surveying the attacking force before ducking back down. A hail of bullets followed, ricocheting off the rocks and smashing into pine trees.

“Four men, maybe five, on foot, 500 meters away. Can you walk?”

Nick shook his head lamely, clutching his blood-soaked leg.

“Okay, I’ll carry you.” There was a clear dash of ten meters or so before the slope and the line of trees provided better cover.

Ahmed grunted as he lifted Nick across his shoulder, and in an instant he was running across the clear space, dodging stumps and rocks, and careening down through the trees toward the car that Jenny was revving furiously. Shots continued to ring out, bullets sputtering into the dust behind them.

They made it to the car. Jenny was opening the back door. Ahmed deposited Nick on the seat, and was in the driver’s seat in a second, while Nick was still writhing in pain in the back. Jenny quickly climbed in the other side.

“We have three kilometers to make it to the village!” Ahmed shouted to Jenny as the car lurched into motion. “We’ll be safe there.”

Jenny was leaning over the back seat as Ahmed flattened the accelerator to the floor, and the car careened down the gravel road.

“Are you okay? Where is it? Let me see.”

Nick, almost fainting from the pain, pointed to his thigh, where a rip in his fatigues and the bloodstain showed where the bullet had entered.

“Ahmed, do you have a knife?” she shouted over the noise of the screaming engine.

Without replying Ahmed pulled a khaki sheathed army knife out of his pocket and handed it to her. As gently as she could, she tore the cloth of Nick’s trouser leg open to reveal a gaping wound. She blanched visibly and swallowed. Nick winced as a river of pain shot up his leg. Jenny cut away the trouser leg and tore a strip from the cloth, then wrapped it around Nick’s thigh, to staunch the profuse flow of blood.

“Is he hurt bad?” Ahmed called out, without taking his eyes off the road.

“It’s hard to say!” she called back. “We need to get him to a doctor. How does it feel?” She was looking into Nick’s face with an indescribable tenderness that momentarily distracted him from the pain.

“Right now,” he managed to groan, “it hurts so bad I can’t feel anything.”

Jenny closed her eyes and laid her hand gently on the makeshift bandage.

“Jesus, I don’t know why You let this happen. I have no idea how bad this wound is, but I know that it’s within Your power to heal it. Nothing is impossible to You. There’s nothing You can’t do. Please heal this wound by the power of Your keys, and please get us out of this safely somehow. Thank You for the miracle that it wasn’t worse and that You protected Ahmed and—”

“Jenny!” Nick’s voice was urgent. “What’s that sound?”

“What do you mean?”

“Listen!”

Above the sound of the car’s engine a faint low rumbling could be distinguished.

“Helicopters!” shouted Ahmed. “They must have radioed for gunships. This is bad, very bad.”

“What are we going to do?” Jenny was frantic.

“Look behind! See if you can see them!”

Desperately Jenny searched whatever patches of sky she could see through the trees that were flashing past the car’s windows. The low rumbling was growing louder. No sign of the helicopters.

The road was winding up a small incline. As it reached the crest, the roaring of the helicopter climaxed and the almost deafening whoosh of the rotors filled the vehicle as it crossed at right angles

to the road maybe 50 meters above them.

“They’ve seen us,” shouted Ahmed hoarsely as the chopper slewed out over the valley to their right and began to turn. “This is it!”

The village had come into view about a kilometer and a half ahead of them.

“Jenny, you need to do your thing.” Ahmed’s tone was desperate.

“No!” she screamed. “I can’t! Not again.”

“If you don’t do it, we’ll all die!” he shouted back.

The black and khaki gunship was turning, getting into position to launch the fatal missile at the speeding car.

“Do it!” shouted Ahmed.

“Jesus!” Jenny was crying. “I don’t want anyone else to die. I don’t want there to be any more destruction. But Lord, we need Your protection. We’re totally defenseless. Lord, please do whatever You have to do to protect us! I claim the keys of miraculous deliverance!”

There was a loud explosion and flash as the gunship launched. Ahmed slammed on the brakes and the car skidded, slewing to the right across the loose gravel surface of the road. The eerie scream of the missile grew louder as the car came to a halt and Ahmed shoved the gear into reverse and revved wildly.

The car lunged backwards for a second before the missile slammed into the embankment 20 meters ahead of them. Jenny and Ahmed managed to duck as the force of the explosion shattered the windshield and sent the car reeling further backwards.

Ahmed quickly recovered himself, not bothering with the cubes of windshield glass that were tumbling off his hair and back. He slammed on the brakes again, this time violently ramming the gear into first and plunging the car into the cloud of dust and smoke

ahead of them. The car was suddenly full of dust and blinding, choking, acrid fumes. Ahmed shielded his face with one arm as he veered to avoid the crater on the left side of the road. Jenny managed to right herself and turned instinctively away from the blinding wind that poured in through the open windshield.

As they emerged from the smoke on the other side the helicopter was still visible to their right. This time it was banking to its right side, obviously intending to come up behind them for a closer shot. Suddenly there was an explosion from in front of them near the perimeter of the village.

Jenny ducked again.

“Are they ahead of us too?” she cried out.

A missile screamed over their heads.

“No, that’s ours!” shouted Ahmed. “Stingers.”

The missile obviously missed the gunship. Ahmed accelerated with renewed vigor. Another Stinger was launched from the village perimeter. The helicopter’s engine screamed as it took evasive action. The missile must have missed again for there was no impact, but the sound of the chopper’s engine was growing fainter. Obviously the pilot had given up the pursuit, deeming it too risky. They were now in full view of the village. Ahmed slowed the vehicle down.

“Jenny, don’t say anything. Hold my gun. Put your cap on and pull it down. I know these guys. They will think you and Nick are fighters.”

A Kalashnikov-toting fighter emerged from a roadside bunker ahead of them. Ahmed stopped the car, and wiped his sleeve across his dusty, sweat-stained face.

They spoke a few words in Georgian, Ahmed gesturing toward Nick who was still prostrate on the back seat. Jenny sat quietly looking at the Kalashnikov in her lap.

The fighter cast a curious glance at her before grinning broadly and cracking a joke, at which Ahmed managed a laugh. Without another word he stood back, gave some kind of prearranged signal to unseen eyes watching from the village, and waved them through.

At this point Nick, who had been acutely aware of the action and somewhat distracted from his pain, promptly fainted.



When Nick came to, he was lying in a darkened room. The throbbing pain he expected to surge through his leg was strangely absent. For an instant, fear gripped him as the thought entered his mind that he had lost his leg. He reached down instinctively. It was still intact.

As if in response to his stirring, Jenny spoke from across the room.

“Nick, are you awake?”

Straining, he could faintly see the outline of her form stand up from a chair and walk over to him.

“Yeah.”

“How is it? It must be really painful. There’s a doctor on the way to see you, check your leg. I have some painkillers if you need them.”

“Uh ... it’s really weird, like totally numb. I can’t really ... feel anything.”

“What? You mean you’ve lost all feeling?”

“I don’t know, it just feels ... normal.”

At that point the door swung open and Ahmed entered with a short, elderly, balding man, who walked over to Nick without so much as a greeting and began undoing Jenny’s hastily applied bandage. Ahmed turned on the light and Nick was able to take in some more of the bare, spartan room in which he had been placed.

The doctor completed his inspection briefly and spoke his first words in a surprisingly clear accent.

“You are a very lucky man. The bullet only grazed the skin. It’s just a surface wound.”

“Doctor, I don’t understand,” Nick replied. “I mean this is the first time I’ve ever been shot, so I don’t speak from a vast stock of experience, but when it happened it certainly didn’t feel like a surface wound. I couldn’t stand, couldn’t walk and the pain was incredible.”

“Probably a mixture of fear and shock. Quite understandable, a psychological overreaction.”

Ahmed was looking at Nick’s discarded trouser leg which was lying on the bed beside him.

“Look at this doctor,” he said.

“What?” The doctor’s expression changed to one of puzzlement. “This was the leg of your fatigues? It’s totally soaked in blood. There’s no way this amount of blood could have come from this wound.” He paused for a moment thoughtfully. “How long ago did this happen?”

“About an hour ago,” Ahmed responded. “We arrived here at the house about half an hour ago. By that time he had passed out, either from pain or loss of blood.”

The doctor looked at Nick curiously.

“Are you a believer?”

“What?”

“Are you ... do you believe in God?”

“I don’t really know for sure. I don’t exactly know what I believe.”

“Well, I think you should by now,” said the doctor emphatically, “because I don’t have any other way to explain your condition but that a miracle has happened. Even a surface wound shouldn’t look as good as your leg looks now.”

Nick was quiet. Ahmed looked meaningfully at Jenny, who had been silently observing the conversation.

“I’ll just clean it, bandage it, and give you some painkillers, and you should be fine in a few days.” He shook his head. “I wish all battle wounds were this easy to treat.”

He clicked open his small medical kit and began to clean and dress the wound.

“Doctor,” said Ahmed, “it’s the girl.”

“The girl?”

“She has the power to do miracles.”

Jenny looked at the floor uncomfortably.

“Yesterday we were under attack by MiGs. She pointed her hand at them and prayed ... and they exploded in the sky. Like that. Today she also prayed and we were protected from attack by helicopter, and after that, she prayed for his leg and it is healed. She has powers.”

“Powers?” The doctor looked at Jenny inquisitively.

“And by the way, she also reads minds,” added Nick. “She can tell what you’re thinking, even what sort of sandwich you like.”

All eyes were on Jenny, who was obviously not enjoying all the attention.

“I know...” she started lamely. Her voice was trembling and she seemed to be grasping for the words to say. “I know that I can’t ... I don’t know anything and I don’t have any special powers. All I know is that I pray and ask God to do things and He does them—but it’s just to show people how much He loves them, and not to show that I’m anyone special.”

The doctor was quiet for a moment.

“There is a child,” he said quietly, “a beautiful little girl. She is only ten years old and has leukemia.

They sent her home from the hospital, said there was nothing they could do for her, it's too advanced. Only God can help her now. Can you pray for her?"

Jenny seemed to struggle for a few moments.

"I will certainly keep her in my prayers."

"No, I mean come and put your hands on her and pray for her." The doctor's tone was pleading.

"Doctor"—Ahmed spoke quietly but with conviction—"we shouldn't let these two move about the village. There's too much chance of misunderstanding, with them being foreigners, and the situation being as it is. We must keep their location here a secret. Let the girl come here."

"Yes, I will bring her here. Is later on today good? Would you be willing?"

Jenny's reply was a somber nod that betrayed a mixture of apprehension and resignation.

"But please, Doctor," Ahmed urged, "as I asked you, don't tell anyone of the foreigners' presence here. Even the girl, you must explain to her and her parents that it's a secret."

"Alright. I will seal my lips. And thank you, Miss..."

"Jenny." She managed a half smile.

The doctor closed his bag.

"Here are the painkillers, and stay off the leg for a few days, just to be sure."

"Thank you, Doctor." Ahmed was trying to press a bill into the man's hand as he turned to leave.

"Absolutely not," the doctor insisted. "It's not every day I am able to witness a miracle. That's more than enough payment for me." He smiled warmly at Jenny and left the room.

There was a tense silence for a moment, Jenny staring at the floor.

"In the future," she started hesitantly, "I'd appreci-

ate it if you two wouldn't go on about ... these things that are happening. It's nothing to do with me."

"Why?" asked Ahmed. "People need you. They need what you can do. I can see that you're special. You have gifts. It helps people to have faith."

"No, I'm not special. I'm just an ordinary person."

"Yeah right," Nick butted in, "who reads minds, shoots down MiGs with her bare hands, and heals bullet wounds."

"Stop it, guys!" Jenny blurted out. "Enough! I need to go to the bathroom. Is there a bathroom here?"

"Out of the door, turn right, end of the hallway on your left," Ahmed replied.

Jenny was out of the room in an instant, closing the door behind her so firmly it almost resembled a slam.

Ahmed and Nick looked at each other in helpless bewilderment for a few seconds.

"Unusual girl," said Nick, shaking his head.

Ahmed nodded. At least there was one issue they could agree on.

"Uh ... Ahmed." It was Nick's turn to be uncomfortable. "I just have to thank you for what you did back there. It was ... well ... it was so brave it was stupid. I probably would be dead by now if you didn't."

Ahmed was dismissive.

"It was nothing. Just don't call me a terrorist again, alright?"

"You got it. ... But what made you do that? You almost wanted to kill me yesterday."

Ahmed suddenly became pensive.

"I don't really know. I had a cousin. He lived in the West Bank in Palestine. He was one of the Fateh youth, always throwing stones at the Israelis, often arrested, spent years in Israeli jails. One day during the peaceful time he and his friends were swimming

in a river that leads down to the Dead Sea. There was a sudden, what do you call it, flood?"

"Flash flood?"

"That's right. There were some Israelis swimming there also, and one of the girls got into trouble. My cousin, Firaz, dived in to try and save her. He managed to push her to the bank and she was safe. But the current was too strong and he was carried away. He drowned. Think of it. He gave his life saving one of his enemies. He didn't think about what he was doing. He didn't have time. But my people are taught to help people when they need help."

Nick thought for a moment.

"So does that mean I am your enemy?"

"I suppose that depends on you."

"I guess I owe you an apology for the things I said."

"I guess I shouldn't have pointed my Kalashnikov at you."

Nick held out his hand and Ahmed grasped it warmly. The door opened and Jenny entered. The two men suddenly self-consciously and clumsily let go of each other's hands.

"Hey, don't let me interrupt," said Jenny brightly. "I can leave again if you want to continue."

"No, we're cool," said Nick quickly.

"We're finished," added Ahmed. They looked at each other uncomfortably.

Jenny looked first at Nick, then Ahmed.

Nick was the first to reply to her unspoken question.

"I ... ah ... was just thanking Ahmed here for, er ... saving my life."

"And I was just ... er ... apologizing to Nick for almost ending it the day before." It was the first time Ahmed had called him that.

"Well, it sure is a welcome relief to see you two being halfway civil to each other."

"Guess I discovered that Ahmed's a fairly nice guy.... for a terrorist."

"And Nick is quite okay ... for a mindless puppet of Zionist imperialism."

There was an uncomfortable moment of silence. Sentimentality obviously wasn't familiar territory for either of them. Ahmed broke it.

"Now if you two will excuse me, I'm going to get some food for us."



"So what was that all about?" asked Jenny after Ahmed had left.

"I guess when someone saves your life, you have to say something."

"It would seem to be the appropriate thing to do under the circumstances."

Nick was quiet for a few moments while Jenny let him formulate something he was struggling with.

"And I have something to say to you, too."

"Go on," she said with a strange mixture of warmth and uncertainty.

"For quite a while when I first knew you ... and after ... well, to be perfectly honest, I think I felt sorry for you. I thought you were this very idealistic but quite deluded girl who invented this fantasy world of 'God' and this imaginary friend Jesus as a sort of escape from the awful reality of an emotionally troubled life. I'm sorry if I'm being blunt here, but hear me out. It seemed to me that you were very good at creating this whole separate reality as a sort of panacea ... an emotional pain-killer, but I felt bad for you that one day you would wake up and have to face the awful reality that it's all just make believe, and that all you have is yourself and whoever you can get to love you."

Now I..." He paused. This wasn't easy, and both of them knew it. "Now I'm starting to realize that I'm the one who needs to wake up."

"And?"

"I need God. I need what you have."

"He loves you, and if you'll only ask Him, He'll come in." Jenny's warm, brown eyes were radiant.

"But there's a problem. I feel like a total hypocrite. Do you realize what I did?" Nick's tone was bitter, dark. "I made a decision to sell out everything, my conscience, my values, anything in life that I could have held sacred. I sold it all for a seven-figure income, a boat, and a promise of a hot sex partner. That's what it came down to. I mean, I sort of tried to half believe the pseudo-moralistic tripe that Ron was spouting off about. I actually think he even has himself convinced. But I knew in my heart what I was doing. I was selling my soul. I did it knowingly, willingly. So now, how can I in any good conscience turn around and say to God, 'Okay Buddy, I'm sorry I messed up back there. Now can You forgive me, and I'll just go on with living and forget that I knowingly bought into a plan to wipe out half of humanity to save my own ass?'" Nick let his hands fall down by his side in a gesture of despair and turned his face to the wall, away from Jenny's penetrating but warm gaze.

"That's the amazing thing about Jesus," she said after a moment's reflection. "He can forgive anything. And look ... what about the *other* decision you made, to tell the truth to the Finance Minister, and to tell the Reuters guy?"

"Thereby getting myself almost killed as well as dragging you into this whole mess and endangering your life."

"Nick, you can't take that on yourself. I have peace about this whole thing. The Lord is working. I

even told you that He told me in advance about this whole ... trip."

"You make it sound like some kind of a vacation. I don't understand how you can have such faith. Which reminds me, how come you always come back from the bathroom looking so much more composed than when you left, like just now?"

"I guess that's one of the many reasons the Lord created bathrooms."

"So you go there and pray, right?"

"Yes."

"Okay, I get it. Not exactly the Revelation of Saint John, but a revelation in the john ... pray as you pee, sort of deal?"

"Sometimes there's just nowhere else."

"I don't think I could ever be like you." Nick sighed. "I don't deserve for Jesus to save me. I feel that I want what God has, what you have, but it's like there's this huge dark wall blocking me from getting there. I've been too bad for too long. Sorry, I'm probably not making any sense. Maybe almost getting killed does weird things to your brain."

"All you have to do is ask. Have you tried that?"

A silence fell over the room. Suddenly Nick was dimly aware of an enormous struggle taking place in some unseen but adjacent realm. Huge wall-like waves of darkness seemed to surround him, hungry to engulf him. He was drowning in a turbulent sea of guilt and fear. There was only one way of salvation—the single life saver of a word that seemed to dangle within his reach above his head but took an enormous effort to reach out and grasp. Jenny seemed to sense the battle and closed her eyes in a whispered prayer.

"Okay." The word seemed to shatter the suffocating silence like a gunshot shattering a mirror. "Okay. What do I do?"

“Just ask Jesus to come in, to save you and forgive you. It’s that simple.”

“I have to say that?”

Jenny smiled and nodded. Nick closed his eyes.

“Uh ... Jesus,” he began stumblingly, “I don’t ever remember talking to You before this, at least not directly. I would imagine right now that You are fairly—forgive my language—pissed off with me right now, that is if You get pissed off, or whatever You call it there, omnipotently wrathful or whatever. So I don’t really have a leg to stand on as far as trying to exonerate myself from any accountability here. I’ve been very bad and as far as I know, have chosen some of the worst options currently available to mankind, such as selling out all my convictions for my own selfish benefit and potentially causing a large number of people a tremendous amount of harm.

“So I don’t really know how it works. I’m reasonably well acquainted with the justice system of the USA and I think if I were You I’d give myself at least 30 years with no parole. Anyway, Your friend and associate here, Jenny, seems to know You and Your operating procedures better than I do and she assures me that all I have to do is ask You to save me. Well, it doesn’t make much sense to me how that would work. But I’m prepared to try that on her recommendation, since I’ve observed her in a number of situations and can honestly say she lives what she believes and it works for her.

“So if it please Your Honor—is that what I should refer to You as, in this case? I would like to appeal for clemency, although there’s no way on God’s earth, that is ... Your earth, Your Honor, that I deserve it. In other words, put more simply, I’d like to ask You to save me, and forgive me, and somehow, if possible, erase my criminal record. Give me a new start. I

don’t know if that’s asking too much of You, but I need Your help with this because I don’t know how to get out of this mess myself. Do I say Amen now? Okay, Amen.” Nick turned to Jenny. “Did that make any sense at all?”

“That was the most beautiful prayer I’ve ever heard in my life,” she said, her eyes glistening.

“So what do I do now?”

“You read, and pray, and love and...”

“I guess I’m supposed to love Ahmed too, right?”

“Right.”

“Phew, this is going to be tough. Challenging job description!” Nick laughed. It felt so good to laugh. “Hey! I feel good! I actually feel good. I can’t remember when I felt this good! What did you do to my leg? The pain’s almost totally gone!” Nick flexed his heavily bandaged thigh. “You know, I think I could almost walk on it.”

“You may have to soon,” said Ahmed tersely as he entered the room. “We can’t stay here long.”

“Hey Ahmed, ol’ buddy? How’s life?” Nick was approaching euphoric.

“What happened to you?” Ahmed looked at Jenny nervously. “What did you do to him?”

“Don’t worry, man, she didn’t do anything to me. We haven’t been indulging in any secret nookie while you were gone. Something superior even to that.”

“You mean there’s something better than that?” Ahmed seemed genuinely curious.

“Best deal in the universe!” Nick beamed.

“Guys,” Jenny interjected quickly, “maybe we should discuss this another time. Ahmed, what were you saying about having to leave?”

“People at the market were asking questions. I think there are suspicions. It’s not so safe for us to be here. There are many fears about foreigners. Plus,

soon word will come from the camp to the resistance leaders here about our desertion. We need to stay on the move.”

“Where are we going to go?” Asked Nick.

“Even though Nick’s a lot better, he still needs to rest,” added Jenny.

“We’ll have to find a farm or some place that will be willing to put us up for a few days, or hide somewhere. But after that we’ll probably need to move on.” Ahmed looked down at the paper bag in his hand. “Oh, I almost forgot, here’s some food.”

He passed around the bag and all began to eagerly partake of the freshly baked, warm bread rolls.

“But I think we should leave now,” continued Ahmed. “It’s not safe to stay here.”

“What about the doctor, the little girl?” asked Jenny.

“We can’t risk staying here for that,” said Ahmed tersely.

“I thought you didn’t want to do that, you wanted to avoid things like that,” added Nick.

“Yeah, well, while I was in the bathroom, I guess the Lord changed my mind.”

“Maybe He can change it back again, because I don’t think it’s worth the risk.” Ahmed was becoming increasingly adamant.

“But I feel bad because we promised them.” Jenny’s tone was pleading.

Ahmed went quiet but intense for a moment. When he spoke he was obviously restraining himself from raising his voice even more.

“I respect your wishes to help people, but you don’t know these people like I do, and you don’t know this situation. It’s very serious and we could get captured or even killed.”

“I agree with Ahmed,” Nick chimed in. “It’s not

worth the risk.”

Jenny didn’t say anything but wasn’t backing down. It was a standoff.

“Okay then, let’s do the thing,” said Nick after a moment. “You know, the ‘ask God’ thing.”

Jenny looked at Ahmed with a trace of apprehension.

“Okay,” Ahmed said with a shrug of unwilling resignation. “If that’s what you want to do.”

“Lord, we don’t know what to do,” prayed Jenny. “Ahmed’s right that it’s dangerous for us to stay here and we should move. But we promised the doctor we would pray for the little girl. Now we don’t know what to do. We ask You to please guide us.”

It was Ahmed who broke the silence.

“I haven’t done any Zakat for a long time. Many Ramadans. Maybe this is my chance.”

Nick was next. “Well, my knowledge of religious matters is far inferior to Ahmed’s, and even more so to yours, Jenny. But I remembered this chorus from Sunday school, what was it now? ‘Jesus loves the little children ... all the children dum dum dum, black and yellow, white and red ... um ... now I lay me down to rest, my sleepy head ... for the Bible tells me so ... Jesus loves the little children, this I know.’”

Jenny was trying unsuccessfully to suppress a giggle at Nick’s earnest attempts to sing. It definitely wasn’t amongst his foremost talents.

A little piqued by her obvious mirth, he retorted, “Well, I suppose what it means is that we should try to help this girl.”

“Sorry Nick,” replied Jenny, somehow managing to rein it in. “I wasn’t making fun of your ... singing abilities. It was just the interesting way you managed to combine extracts of so many different songs, very creative.” She again dissolved into a giggle.

“So what did the Almighty tell you, O prophetess?” Nick’s tone was biting, but benevolently so.

Jenny was right back into business mode. “Okay, I got that we should do it, but as quickly as possible. That Ahmed should go and fetch the doctor, even explain the situation to him that we need to leave, but that we want to help the girl and if it doesn’t happen right away, that we should just leave and pray for her, remote-control style.”

“Sounds good,” said Ahmed. “I agree. Nick?”

“Let’s go for it.”

“Okay then. Don’t move from here. I’ll try to be back within fifteen minutes.” Without another word Ahmed was out of the room.



Twenty minutes later Ahmed was back. The doctor followed him into the room. Behind him was a middle-aged man with his daughter. The father, plump and balding, had his arm around the girl’s shoulder. She was pale, and walked with a slight limp. A checkered, knee-length dress hung limply around her thin, bony frame. A brightly colored scarf framed her emaciated face, obviously to disguise her lack of hair.

The doctor indicated Jenny to the father. He looked at her respectfully and spoke a few sentences in Georgian. Jenny nodded and smiled.

“He says that he is most grateful for your help and believes that God can do a miracle for his daughter,” the doctor translated.

Jenny answered the father briefly in the local language. His sad but expectant eyes brightened at her response.

“Ah, you speak our language,” replied the doctor, obviously gratified.

Jenny called the girl to her and took her hand, looking into her eyes with a palpable warmth. She

spoke a few words which obviously meant “What is your name?” for the girl replied with a shy smile, “Lala.”

Returning the smile with a brilliant one of her own, Jenny spoke a few more words, obviously putting the diffident girl completely at ease.

Nick marveled at Jenny’s poise, which was in stark contrast to the reluctance she had shown only half-an-hour earlier. There was not the slightest hint of a religious ceremony in what happened next. Jenny put her arms tenderly about the girl’s wasted shoulders and let the scarf-bound head rest on her shoulder. She began praying, and although Nick could not understand the meaning of the words, he could tell it was as natural to Jenny as breathing. Jenny was in her element.

The prayer ended, Lala opened her eyes and looked around at her father, who had been watching the entire process spellbound.

She said something in Georgian, looking at her father curiously.

The doctor translated for Nick’s benefit. “She said she feels all funny inside, all...”—he paused, searching for the right words—“warm and tingly. And she says her head has stopped hurting.”

With one more smile for Jenny, Lala detached herself and ran to her father’s embrace. He held her tightly and a tear escaped from his closed eyes. After a long moment the father turned to Jenny and began to thank her profusely.

“It looks good,” said the doctor to Nick. “The absence of head pain is a good sign. I must carry out some tests.”

The father was saying something more to Jenny. Nick looked at the doctor inquisitively.

“He’s saying, if you need anything, he can help. If you need a place to stay, he’s saying that he has a

farm about fifteen kilometers out of the village. His mother lives there now. There you will be safer than here in the village, and she will take care of you until you are better and ready to travel.”

“That’s good,” said Ahmed. “Very good.”

“Amazing,” was all Nick could say, shaking his head.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

That evening found the three of them sitting in front of a blazing fire in the farmhouse, which nestled cozily between forested hills on three sides. Gregori, Lala’s father, had ferried them there in the back of a battered old delivery truck and introduced them to his mother, a wrinkled but sprightly old woman who spent a good part of the rest of the day fussing over her honored guests. Warm baths furnished from a large iron pot over the fireplace had been a highlight, endless offers of tea, coffee, and vodka had been alternately accepted and parried. Jenny had attempted to refuse some of the lavish hospitality, but to no avail. After serving them a hearty dinner, the grandmother had finally taken her leave and retired for the night.

“It’s amazing,” Nick pondered out loud, “that people still live like this. No TV, no phone, and the only logging on they do is out the back in the forest. I’m just comparing with my life back in L.A. No one can last a day without the net. It’s almost weird out here, but when I think about it, I wonder who’s really weird, us or them.”

“She seems pretty happy with it all, doing pretty well for an 81-year-old,” Jenny added. “She told me her mother just passed away last year, she was 102.”

“This may sound strange,” Nick was pensive, “but I’m starting to be happy with everything that’s happened. If I’d have stayed in my old life I’d have just stagnated. I’d still be dressing in the same style suit every Monday morning, going to the same office, drinking the same coffee, eating the same donuts, staring at the same computer screen, sitting in the same meetings, and learning absolutely nothing. If you’d have told me three months ago what I’d be doing now, I would not have believed you. Especially this last 48 hours I feel like everything’s suddenly coming into focus in my life. There’s just something about actually thinking you’re most probably going to die that does it unlike anything else.”

Ahmed was nodding in silent agreement, as if reflecting on some thought-provoking near misses of his own.

“Jenny, I’ve been thinking,” Nick continued, “Ahmed has said he wants to go south, back to his country. But what are *we* going to do? What are *you* going to do?”

“I don’t know,” she said uncertainly. “I’m still praying about it. These last few days I’ve just been concentrating on staying alive.”

“Yeah, I know how you feel,” said Nick. “Have you ever played chess?”

“No, not really. I kind of know the rules.”

“Well, when you play against a really good player, sometimes the first half of the game or even more you’re just defending, trying to stay alive, countering his attacks, trying to foil his strategies. Then there’s that one moment when he just stretches it too far, overestimates his strength or underestimates yours. That’s the time to strike.”

“What are you saying?”

“This whole time I feel like I’ve been totally on the defensive, just escaping with my life, by the skin

of my teeth. But now I feel I want to do something about it.”

“Like?”

“Go back to Tbilisi. Try to find out what’s going on. Try to expose what’s happening.”

“Nick, that’s incredibly dangerous.”

Ahmed was shaking his head. “You won’t last ten minutes,” he said grimly.

“Look Jenny, I don’t want to scare you but ... I have reason to believe that your people, your group, may be in danger.”

“What? Why?” Jenny was genuinely alarmed.

“When I was in Guam with Tom Levinski, he was talking about cults and sects, some project he had going. It didn’t sound too good.”

“What was it?”

“They were talking about discreditation, how it works better than banning or imposing legislation, outright persecution. It all clicks now, why they were claiming on CNN that your people had ties to Islamic fundamentalists. They may be getting ready for ... something.”

“What?”

“I don’t know, but maybe I can find out.”

“How?” This time it was Ahmed’s skeptical question.

“I still know the codes, and they said they change them every three months, so there’s a chance I could still access their sites, find out what’s going on.”

“But surely that’s dangerous,” Jenny remonstrated. “If you log on, won’t they trace you?”

“That’s why I have to go back to Tbilisi, do it from the Nexo office. That way they won’t suspect.”

“You mean go right into the Nexo office? That’s totally crazy!” Jenny was uncharacteristically worked up.

“I don’t see any other way,” said Nick staunchly. “At least I know the security procedures there, and they’re probably not going to be expecting me. They either think I’m dead by now, or at the very least they wouldn’t expect me to do something so ... stupid!”

“I don’t know. I’d really have to pray about this.” Jenny was shaking her head.

“If it’s the will of Allah,” said Ahmed, turning his palms upward. “Whatever you decide. Tomorrow I will go and get the car fixed. It should be ready in two days. Then we drive near to the border. You can drop me and take the car, a different road back to Tbilisi, if you decide to go.”

“You’ll just give us the car, like that?” Nick was surprised.

“I won’t need it where I’m going,” Ahmed responded. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m tired and need some sleep.” So saying, he stood up quickly and left the room. Anything to avoid more thanks.

The mother had offered three sleeping places: a little room off the porch which Ahmed claimed, as self-appointed guardian of the trio; a bedroom, presumably one of her children’s, which the gentlemen offered to Jenny; and a mattress in front of the fire place, which fell to Nick.

On Ahmed’s departure, Jenny busied herself with making Nick’s bed for him. He watched her silently as the peasant dress which she had been given by the grandmother cascaded around her shapely legs and the firelight glinted through her dark hair. Her total absorption in her motherly task afforded Nick a full minute of uninterrupted gazing. Suddenly she looked up and caught him looking at her. He knew he was caught, but didn’t mind.

Jenny’s response was evasive, defensive. Quickly her pretty brown eyes dropped to the pillow she was

arranging.

“Not exactly the Waldorf Astoria, but I think it’ll do.”

“Jenny, I...,” Nick began.

“Good night,” she said as quickly as she could manage, and retreated to the safety of her room.



In the morning a lavish breakfast was once again forced ingenuously upon them by the mother, after which Ahmed set off into the town to work on fixing the car.

Jenny busied herself helping the mother with tasks around the cottage, and Nick limped his way out on to the porch where he situated himself in a battered but strong old rocking chair, and sat enjoying the pine-scented morning breeze, and feeling whimsically like a regular old Georgian grandfather.

“Have you decided what you’re going to do?” he asked Jenny as she brought him out some coffee.

“What about you?” she replied, setting down the cup on a dusty table and brushing a few strands of hair from her face.

“I don’t know, but I feel that it’s the right thing to do, to go back to Tbilisi. I just have this feeling about it.”

Jenny pulled herself up onto the wooden railing with her arm around a vertical support and looked pensively out at the forested hills for a moment before replying.

“This morning I was praying and I got something about it. I got that it was the Lord’s voice telling you to go, and though it looks dangerous, that He would protect you because you were doing it for the right reasons, and that I should also go back and try to get in touch with my friends there, but to do it carefully until we understand the situation better. And I also got”—she looked at the floor for a moment as if

summoning some reserves of courage—"I got that it was incredibly brave of you to do this, and that the Lord is very proud of you."

Nick let the warmth of her last sentence wash over him for a moment.

"I certainly don't feel like I've ever done anything to make Him proud. You and Ahmed had your turns. I guess maybe this is mine."

"The days we're going into, I think we're all going to have plenty of turns." Jenny laughed wryly. She suddenly stopped laughing and glanced once more out at the forest, this time nervously. "Hey, do you think it's safe for you to be out here? Anyone could see you."

"You're probably right. We should stay inside—although you're probably okay, dressed like that, looking like a typical Georgian peasant girl. All you need is a scarf on your head."

"I've been thinking of it actually, to keep this rebellious hair out of my face. Maybe the mother has one I could borrow."

"Now that would be cute." Nick chuckled as he heaved himself out of the chair. Jenny offered a steady-hand, which he accepted, and they went inside.



At midday Ahmed was back. He greeted Nick with a cursory nod as he entered the living room. Jenny was in the kitchen helping the old woman cook. Ahmed looked tense and spoke a little tersely.

"The car will be fixed tomorrow, and also tomorrow morning the doctor will come and look at your leg. Then I think it would be best if we travel tomorrow, if you are able."

"If it doesn't involve any marathon running, or for that matter 100 meter sprints, I think I'll be okay."

"So you're ready to travel?"

"Apart from dreading the thought of reentering the high-stress city life, I think I'm ready. I was beginning to enjoy life in the slow lane."

"You better be ready for excitement. I heard the situation in Tbilisi is not good. Many protests against the government. And on the news I heard rumors of a coup attempt in Russia. People are tired of all the freedom and no food on the table. It looks like the hard-liners are coming back in power."

"Wow!" Jenny was coming into the room and had overheard the end of Ahmed's sentence. "Did you say a coup in Russia?"

"Rumors at this stage, but even rumors are serious enough."

"The beast that was wounded to death and came back to life," she said thoughtfully.

"What did you say?" Ahmed and Nick said simultaneously.

"It's in the Bible. That there would be a great Beast, symbolic of a ruler, country, or a political system, that would blaspheme and persecute God's people. For a while it would look like it was dead and gone, but suddenly it would be resurrected and the whole world would be amazed. Some people think that the Beast is communism, or at least a political system like it, that will rise up and dominate the world."

"I don't think the States will just stand by and let it happen." Nick was shaking his head.

"According to the Bible the Beast is going to burn this other country which is called the great whore with fire, and a lot of people think that the whore is the States."

"Really? That's in the Bible?" said Ahmed. "Sounds interesting."

"When I was young," Nick added, "the preachers used to say the whore was the Catholic Church." Nick

obviously wasn't enjoying the turn the conversation was taking.

"Ever the patriot," said Jenny with a giggle.

Nick scowled.

"Please teach me more about this," said Ahmed.

"I want to know what the prophets tell us. In the Holy Koran it says that Jesus will come, peace be upon Him. When will He come?"

"Oh, I'm not a great expert, but I can tell you what I know. Pity I lost that Bible when your camp was attacked."

"I have one," said Ahmed.

"You do?" Jenny was surprised.

"When you asked us to get you a Bible, I ordered two—one for you and one for me. I wanted to know what it is that makes you believe and act the way you do. I've kept it always with me in my bag."

Nick shifted uncomfortably.

"I'll get it now ... unless you have other things to do." He looked at Nick meaningfully and then back at Jenny.

"Well, I don't have a lot on my agenda right now," Jenny replied, smiling.

Ahmed returned the smile and left the room. Nick cleared his throat.

"It may be none of my business, but I think you should be a little careful here, Jenny. Don't be naive. I've seen the way he looks at you. I think I know what he's probably after."

"So I wouldn't need to worry about the way *you* look at me, right, Mr. Stratton?" she replied playfully.

"Look, if you're talking about last night, I..." Nick hesitated.

"You what?"

Nick was stumped. He looked down and fidgeted with the buttons of his shirt.

"Look," said Jenny, "we're going to read the Bible together, okay? Like Sunday school? So there's nothing to worry about. You can join us." Jenny's reassurance did not help Nick greatly.

"Okay." He sighed and shrugged. "But if something happens, don't tell me I didn't warn you."

The door opened and Ahmed entered carrying the small black volume. He handed it carefully to Jenny, and sat down in the chair next to hers.

Nick watched as she took and deftly thumbed through it until she found the place she was looking for. Nick's pique soon dissolved into interest as Jenny skillfully wove a tapestry of scriptures together that sounded frighteningly similar to the scenario being played out on the world stage. Ahmed listened, nodding his head gravely and occasionally adding a comment.

"Question," interjected Nick at length. "These people I was working for, the 'Masters' or whatever they're called, how do they fit in with this whole 'Beast' deal, if at all? If the 'Beast' has something to do with Russia, as you say, then what about these guys who are based out of the States and Europe? Are they just a parallel conspiracy that's trying to take over the world but are going to fail?"

"That's a good question," replied Jenny, and paused for a moment. "I don't have an answer for that. I'll have to think about it and pray about it. I guess the whole thing goes way deeper than any one of us could ever hope to understand. But God has their number. He said that there's nothing hidden that won't be revealed."

At this point the mother entered the room, beaming and gesticulating for them to come to the enormous lunch she had prepared.



The rest of the day was spent in a combination of eating, sleeping, and talking world conspiracies—a subject Ahmed seemed to never get enough of.

Nick managed to suppress chuckles as he listened to Ahmed's personal elaborations on the locally popular conspiracies about George Bush and Osama Bin Laden being partners in a construction company, about Israel clandestinely importing Iraqi lamb, about American tankers smuggling Iraqi oil through Shatt-al Arab, and about princess Diana having been liquidated by the British secret service because of her links to Egyptian fundamentalists.

That evening Nick prepared to take his place by the fireplace. Jenny once again played Florence Nightingale and helped make his bed. It was a replay of the previous night's scenario, but she was studiously avoiding eye contact.

"You know what it's like?" said Nick suddenly. "It's like being serviced by an extremely beautiful dentist. There are these pretty eyes looking at you and these beautiful lips about six inches from yours and this soft hair you could reach out and touch any time, but there's this line you can't cross, this professional distance that both of you know you have to keep, and you know that if you dare to cross that line, you're in big trouble. But at the same time ... you're tempted."

Jenny suddenly relaxed, sat on the half-made bed and looked up at Nick.

"I need your help with this," she said falteringly. "I have made certain decisions in my life and they include commitments about my relationships with people."

"Okay, you don't just sleep with anyone, right?"

"Right. But it's not that I believe that there's anything wrong with sex, or that it's evil."

"That's a relief."

Jenny struggled with her next sentence for a minute before letting it out.

"I feel for you, Nick. I know you've been through a tremendous amount. And I've lived long enough to have done a fair bit of first-hand observation into the effects of prolonged loneliness on the male testosterone level. And it's not that I'm above feeling lonely either, you know, wanting..."

"Then what could it hurt?"

"I just can't, Nick. I'm sorry. I can't explain all the reasons why."

"But you want to."

"I didn't say that."

"I definitely remember hearing the word 'want.'"

"Please try to understand." She was getting emotional.

Nick moved over and tried to put his arms around her, but she pulled away with a mumbled goodnight, and went into her room, closing the door behind her. The key clicked in the lock.

Nick ran to the door.

"Jenny, please, let's talk this out."

"No, Nick," was the reply, accompanied by what Nick imagined to be a muffled sob.

A further appeal was met with silence.

Nick threw himself down on his bed and gazed disconsolately into the fire, until sleep enveloped him shortly afterwards with its healing anesthesia.

He had no way to tell how much later it was when he felt a faint rustle behind him and a hand lightly caressing his back and shoulders. He turned over and met Jenny's soft gaze. The fire had died down to embers, the red glow of which reflected from her eyes.

There was no need for words. Their lips met and her hair cascaded gently over his face. He rolled onto his back and pulled her on top of him. His hands firmly,

gently pulled the flimsy nightshirt over her head as she removed his boxer shorts. As they reached the height of passion, Nick was suddenly aware of a new consciousness of the unfathomable power of love. It was a flood-tide of white light bursting through the dammed wall of fear and pride, and inundating his soul with ecstasy that was physical, yet intangibly far beyond physical. Quizzically, he also realized that the bandage was gone from his leg and the discomfort he still felt had disappeared.

Instinctively, he reached down to feel for where the bandage had been. Suddenly it was there again. He was lying on his side still gazing at the dying embers of the fire. Jenny was nowhere to be seen. He raised himself on one elbow and looked around the room. It was dead quiet.

“Almost better than the real thing,” he muttered with a sigh, and lay back down to try to enjoy the afterglow of the dream.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Nick’s body was still faintly tingling when the morning bathed the room with shades of orange and mauve. There was little time for reminiscence however, as the sound of a car pulling up on the gravel outside jolted Nick into reality. Moments later the door burst open.

“The doctor will be here in ten minutes,” Ahmed began as soon as he entered. “Then we will leave right afterwards.” He strode over to Jenny’s door and knocked heavily, to which a muffled response was forthcoming.

“We must leave soon. Please get ready.”

The relative peace of the former afternoon had obviously dissipated with the coming of the new day.

The mother entered the room with four steaming mugs of coffee, somehow sensing the urgency of the situation.

Ahmed took a cup with a warm word of thanks and sat down holding it between his hands to dispel some of the morning cold.

“In Russia they are saying it is not a coup,” he said. “They are saying it is a restructuring of the government, a state of emergency to cope with the economic collapse. But I know a coup when I see one. Power is shifting back to the hands of the hard-liners.”

Nick was listening and grunting monosyllabic responses as he pulled on his shirt and sweater.

Ahmed continued. "But the difference is now the people are not resisting. They want the strength, the power. They want a strong Russia. They don't care about democracy any more. Of course, America says they are watching the event with grave concern. Always they are concerned. But what can they do? Invade? Put sanctions?" Ahmed had obviously been listening to the news. "And still no agreement in Palestine. But they are proposing what they call the interim plan. Seven-year implementation period. What is this? It will never work. We had seven years of Oslo and nothing was better. Seven years, twenty years, seventy years. They will never agree, unless they are forced to."

"According to Jenny, that's what will happen," Nick answered.

At that point Jenny emerged from the room, catching the tail end of the sentence.

"What's going to happen, according to me?"

"Just doing some early morning news analysis here, discussing the possibility of an international force to enforce the Jerusalem agreement, like you were prophesying," said Nick.

"Coffee first, prophecy later, please guys," said Jenny, gratefully accepting a cup from the mother's proffered tray.

The door opened and Gregori entered, followed by the doctor. After warmly embracing his mother he turned to Jenny, and began to speak profusely in Georgian.

"He says he is very grateful to you, and to God," the doctor translated. "He says that Lala is much better, that her head pains have totally stopped. He knows it is a miracle and wants to thank you. He says if you

ever need help, his doors are always open to you and any of your friends. If there's anything he can do in his small way to repay you, he is always ready."

Gregori turned, misty eyed, to his mother who was beaming broadly.

"I have done some initial tests," said the doctor, "that indicate that the cancer has gone into remission. We will soon travel to the city to confirm it, but I think I can say that I agree, a miracle has happened. Lala already looks better. I have never seen anything like this in my career."

Gregori was laughing as he continued in a flood of words. Jenny, the doctor and the mother joined in the laughter. Catching Nick's inquisitive gaze, Jenny translated.

"Lala heard we were leaving and wanted to come with us, be one of Jesus' disciples and spread the word."

"Now let us see how *this* patient is progressing," said the doctor.

Carefully he undid the bandage on Nick's leg and inspected the wound.

"Yes, it's healing very well. I'll just put a small plaster over it for protection and in a few days you should be able to take it off." He looked up at Jenny with a wink. "Just as well you are leaving, or I would be soon out of a job!" He proceeded with his treatment.

"So we are clear to leave," said Ahmed.

The mother seemed to sense his eagerness to get moving and remonstrated loudly in Georgian.

"I don't think you'll get away that easily," said the doctor. "Not before a Georgian breakfast."

Taking command of the situation, the mother was herding the unwilling Ahmed and the rather less unwilling others into the dining room where a lavish spread already awaited them. Gregori grabbed

a handful of his own flab and quipped to the doctor who responded with a hearty chuckle.

“He says now you can see the reason he has such a beautiful figure,” Jenny translated to Nick.



Less than an hour later Ahmed, Jenny, and Nick were pulling out of the farm, laden with bountiful supplies of food and drink for their journey. The grandmother had taken a particular fancy to Jenny and loaded her down with a veritable wardrobe of ancient clothes, obviously cast-offs of her daughters and maybe some of her own.

Ahmed took the road east, which wound its way through the forests of the Caucasus Mountains. Five hours into the journey he abruptly pulled over to the side of the road.

“This is where I get off,” he said, matter-of-factly indicating a rise to their left. “The border is just over that hill. You take it from here. Straight down this road until you come to the first big intersection. Turn left, and that’s the highway back up to Tbilisi. Then just follow the signs. There is a map in the glove compartment, in case you need it.”

Nick was noticing something different about Ahmed as he got out of the car and started fetching his backpack with his few belongings, but couldn’t put his finger on it.

It was Jenny who caught it. “Ahmed, where is your gun?” Jenny had climbed out and Nick followed suit.

“Gone. I don’t need it any more. I sold it. Good price for a Kalashnikov on the black market. Which reminds me.” He pulled a wallet out of his pocket and slid out a large wad of dollar bills, which he placed in Jenny’s hands. “You’ll need this,” he said quietly. “There are checkpoints ahead. A hundred should do

it, per person. Then you’ll need some when you get to Tbilisi, for getting around.”

“But Ahmed, what about you? This is your money, you’ll need some too.”

“I have more than enough,” he said briefly. “I split it in half.”

“Hey Ahmed”—it was Nick—“I don’t know what to say. Thank you. Why are you doing all this, just giving us this car and all this money?” Nick was struggling to control his amazement.

“We’re a team now,” he said, and paused, looking down and fiddling with the strap of his backpack. When he spoke he looked directly at Jenny.

“I’ve been waiting my whole life to find something that I really believe in, to find someone who really lives what they believe. I’ve been in the States and know everything it has to offer. I have been a rebel fighter and know what that is all about. The guy who died in the raid in Tbilisi was my best friend. We came here together. After that happened I started thinking, is it worth it, all that we’re doing? What’s the point of it all? The prison guards who died were somebody’s brother or husband or father or friend too. Then I started watching you, listening to you. You have true faith, not put on or made up, and your words are true words, sincere words. Now I know that this is the way I must follow. Not the American way, not the way of the fighter, the terrorist as Nick would call it—I tried both those ways and I thought that’s all there was. I had to choose one side or another. But you showed me that there was another way. The way of love, the way of Jesus, peace be upon Him. I don’t need a gun anymore. Now I only want to follow that way.”

He hoisted the backpack over his shoulder. Jenny looked like she was bursting with things to say but could not get anything out.

“If you’re ever in Palestine and you need anything, I’ll be there for you,” Ahmed added. He turned to Nick and impulsively grabbed his hand.

“Take good care of this girl here,” he said. “And yourself too. See you ’round.”

One last glance at Jenny who was smiling weakly, and Ahmed turned on his heel and was on his way up the embankment and disappearing over the ridge into the forest.

Nick and Jenny lingered for a long, silent moment, savoring the aftertaste of the unusual parting. Finally Nick looked down at the car keys Ahmed had placed in his hand.

“I guess we should get moving,” he said quietly.

Jenny nodded in mute assent, and they climbed in the car and were on their way.



The road took them to the intersection, just as Ahmed had predicted, where Nick prepared to turn left onto the highway heading southwest. He looked at Jenny for confirmation, and she nodded. Nick knew better than to try to break the silence that enveloped them. Jenny would talk when she was ready. Right now she needed quiet.

They passed through a checkpoint with no problems. Jenny’s Georgian and Ahmed’s formula worked wonders with the roughly dressed guards who waved them through with beard-framed grins.

Soon the highway was leaving the mountains and wending its way into lush farms and citrus groves that reminded Nick of the minister’s farm. For a blissful half an hour Nick reveled in the now unfamiliar feeling of freedom and the open road in front of him.

“You know, there was this Porsche,” he ventured at length. “My dream car. I idolized the very thought

of her. The first thing I was going to do with my end-of-the-year bonus was to buy her for myself for a Christmas present. I longed, I yearned for the day I would own that incredible, sexy sleek dark green piece of workmanship. Now just to be out on the road in this 1975 no-name-o-vitch is sheer bliss. I’m so thankful for this hunk of junk! I think I’ve changed, Jenny.”

She smiled warmly but offered no comment.

Rounding a bend he found himself suddenly confronted with a large truck pulling out onto the highway. He screeched to a halt. Within seconds other vehicles had pulled up behind them from side roads and the car was surrounded by half a dozen armed soldiers.

One them banged heavily on the car door with the butt of his weapon and shouted something in Georgian.

“They want us to get out of the car.” Jenny was reaching into her pocket for some bills which she had prepared for the eventuality.

“We’d better do what they say,” said Nick grimly. It didn’t look good. A sinking feeling gripped him in the pit of his stomach.

Jenny was out of the car and attempting to bargain with the most aggressive of the soldiers, obviously the one in charge. He took the wad of bills she offered him, looked at them curiously and stuffed them into his back pocket. Then, obviously unmoved by the gift, waved his weapon in the direction of one of the cars. Handcuffs were snapped around Nick and Jenny’s wrists. Nick looked helplessly at Jenny who appeared to be utterly confounded by the whole episode. She looked up at him in utter despair.

“It’s okay,” Nick said. “It’ll be okay”—although he felt absolutely no assurance of the fact.

They were roughly escorted to the car which the commander had indicated with his gun and pushed into the back seat. A soldier squeezed in beside them while two others climbed in front.

The truck ahead of them moved off the road and the car accelerated out on to the highway, the other vehicles moving in behind them in convoy. The entire maneuver had taken less than two minutes.

Jenny spoke a few words to the soldier next to her whose replies were monosyllabic.

“He says they are Georgian Special Forces. He won’t say where they are taking us.”

“Well, whoever they are, they were obviously waiting for us.” Nick was trying not to sound too despondent.

Jenny looked glumly at her handcuffed wrists on her lap. Nick guessed what she was thinking.

“Hey, don’t chide yourself. This whole trip was my idea in the first place. I’m the one who got us into it. It’s not your fault.”

“But I thought it was so clear. So clear that this was the right thing to do. I must have been really wrong. Really tripped off. God help me.” Jenny’s tone of voice betrayed the agony she was feeling.

“Don’t be hard on yourself. Nobody gets it right all the time.”

“Yeah, but what a decision to make a mistake on. This was the worst one to miff and I muffed it.”

“Come on, Jen, it doesn’t help to get down on yourself.” The consolation wasn’t working. Jenny needed a bathroom and there was none to be had.

“Well, if it’s any consolation, this is the third time this has happened to me in less than a month. I’m starting to get kind of numb to it. I thought I was supposed to be some kind of white knight in this game but right now I feel like nothing more than a pawn,

totally at the mercy of the unseen players and with no control over my own destiny. If this was a movie I would probably start criticizing the script writer for being overly repetitious. But then who am I to say? When I stop worrying about it it’s kind of a pleasant feeling in a way, like I can’t do anything about my fate so I just flow with it, wherever it leads. It almost makes me laugh.” Nick managed a chuckle. Jenny looked up at him blankly. Nick shrugged.

“Okay, I’m talking too much. I’ll just shut up for a while. But isn’t this when you’re supposed to say something like, “The Boss will take care of it’?”

Jenny looked down at her lap again.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. That’s what I’m supposed to say.” She turned her face away to the window. Nick had absolutely no idea why he was the one doing the consoling, but he gave it one more shot.

“Hey, at least we’re alive. Better than being, you know ... like dead or something.”

“Please, can we not play the glad game right now?” she said wearily.

A limit had been reached and Nick knew it. He left the subject. Jenny would bounce back in a while.

An hour and several checkpoints later the car turned off the main road. Nick was a little surprised by that, assuming that they would head back to Tbilisi, and probably for him to prison.

Something familiar in the way the road wound through some orange groves and through a white gate caught his attention.

“Hey, I know this place, I’ve been here before.”

Jenny was suddenly alert, looking at Nick curiously.

“This is the minister’s place. This doesn’t look good. He’s the one who I talked to and who I guess ordered my arrest.”

Instead of turning into the main house as it had done last time, the car continued past the gate and down a side road, eventually pulling into a driveway that led down a ramp to a set of impregnable-looking steel doors.

At a radio command from the driver the doors slid open and the car pulled in. The doors slid shut menacingly behind them, closing with a thud of disturbing finality. Nick's former optimism dissolved and his stomach turned with the thought of what awaited them.

The soldiers quickly exited the vehicle and gestured for Nick and Jenny to do the same. Nick was able to take in the surroundings momentarily. They were in a well-lit garage with bare cement walls. The only exit other than the gates through which they had entered was a metal door at the far end to which the soldiers began to propel them. The door opened from the inside as they approached. They stepped into a long hallway, which led in front of them for at least 30 meters with doors lining both sides. The soldiers led them down the hall to a door at the far right which once again opened and they were ushered in to a room.

Nick had been half expecting a cell or a torture chamber but he was at least relieved to find himself in a normal-looking sitting room complete with couches and a table strewn with magazines. *More like a dentist's waiting room*, Nick thought. *Maybe just to ease the pain of anticipation.*

At the soldiers' prompting, the two sat themselves down on the couch. *At least they didn't separate us*, Nick thought, still trying to play the glad game. The officer produced the key for the handcuffs and unlocked them. *Welcome relief.* The soldiers left the room and locked the door behind them.

Jenny was still looking despondent, rubbing her wrists and looking down at her lap.

Nick wanted to talk but realized that their conversation would probably be monitored. Jenny looked up for a moment, a knowing glance confirming that she was thinking the same thing.

"I wonder if there's a bathroom," she said.

"Try that door there," said Nick, indicating a door in the corner of the room. Jenny was on her feet in an instant and to her obvious delight the door opened to reveal a plain but clean bathroom.

"Thank You, Jesus!" She sighed audibly as the door closed behind her. Nick chuckled to himself as he started sifting through the magazines. Most were in Georgian or Russian, but Nick was pleasantly surprised to find a two-weeks-old copy of *Time*.

WHAT PRICE FOR PEACE? was the blaring red headline on the front cover, replete with a picture of a Palestinian child with a slingshot confronting an Israeli tank. Nick opened and read the lead article which discussed the growing international and particularly Russian demands for an international force to be deployed to enforce the "Jerusalem Agreement" which seemed to finally be close to signing after years of unresolved conflict.

Flipping through the rest of the magazine Nick let out a gasp as he found himself face to face with a picture of himself. "The Spy Who Went Out in the Cold" read the caption above the half-page article. Nick read with incredulity the article which detailed his history as a CIA operative posing as a financial consultant.

The director of the CIA declined to either confirm or deny Stratton's status, but the lack of support and assistance from the agency or the U.S. administration indicates that he was

acting independently or at least overstepping the mandate of his mission.

“Never again,” he breathed, “will I believe what I read in these things.”

The bathroom door opened and Jenny emerged, looking much more an approximation of her usual quietly radiant self.

“Take a look at this,” said Nick, holding up the magazine.

Jenny grabbed it out of his hand and read it still standing up.

“You gotta admit, they’re very good at what they do,” she said. “Anyone reading this wouldn’t even question the facts.”

“And now the whole world believes this total fabrication about me, including my mom, all my friends. Jenny, my life is totally ruined.” Nick paused for a moment’s reflection. “Why don’t I care any more? Why don’t I even want my stupid life back?”

“I guess if what I believe’s going to happen actually happens, then a lot of people’s lives are going to be very badly disrupted.” Jenny was thoughtful. “Then what will matter will be the important things, and you have those now. No matter what happens to us, we know the truth, Nick.”

The door opened and two of the soldiers entered. They appeared to be preparing the way for something, checking the room. One of them indicated to Jenny to sit down.

A few moments later two more soldiers came in, followed by the minister. Nick’s stomach turned inwards remembering the upshot of their last conversation.

But the minister appeared surprisingly relaxed.

“Sorry for imperfect welcome,” he began, pulling up his trouser legs boyishly and sitting down opposite

Nick and Jenny. “After our last conversation I thought we should meet here in my bomb shelter, where no one can eavesdrop on us.”

Nick opened his mouth to attempt to answer, but couldn’t find a suitable response, so closed it again.

“Not bad, huh?” he said, raising his hands as if to show off his pad. “I had it built during Cold War, but I keep it working, ’cause you never know. You never know.” He turned to Jenny.

“So you are Jenny Sanchez?”

“Uh, sorry I didn’t introduce you,” Nick stumbled. “This is Jenny Sanchez, and Jenny, this is Minister Tamaridze, Minister of Finance.”

Jenny smiled and offered her hand, which the minister shook, Nick thought a little too warmly.

“You haven’t been readink your newspapers I see. Now I am Minister of Internal Security.”

“Oh, uh, congratulations ... I mean, on your promotion.”

“This is how I can arrange our little meetink like this.”

Nick was not able to conceal his utter bewilderment at what was transpiring. The minister laughed, obviously enjoying his confusion.

“Now I will interrogate you,” he said, his manner changing to sternness. He pulled a book out of his pocket. Nick recognized it as the one Jenny had given him on the plane.

“This was found in your apartment. It is your book?”

“Well, I guess so, yes.”

“Where did you get it from?”

“It was given to me, by ... a friend.”

“What friend? Where, here in Georgia?”

“Actually, yes.”

“I need name and address of this friend.”

“I’m sorry. I can’t help you with that.”

“You can’t help, huh?” He nodded to one of the guards who raised his gun and pointed it at Nick’s face. Nick blanched.

“I gave him the book,” said Jenny coolly. “It was originally mine.”

“I see,” said the minister, and nodded to the guard who lowered his gun.

“I have read this book,” he continued gravely, “and it contains very interestink information. Important information. I want to know more.” He turned to Jenny. “Do you understand about this book?”

“I think so,” she said uncertainly. “Most of it.”

“Can you teach me?” he said, suddenly as humble as a child.

“I ... I can try,” stammered Jenny, obviously overwhelmed.

“And you, Nick Stratton”—he turned to Nick—“I need you to tell me what you know. Everything you know. I know you are not CIA spy. I know you think that I ordered your arrest, that this whole problem was my idea. But no, I did not support this idea. It was carried out by others, on orders of these people that you told me about. They somehow monitored our conversation. They find out that you were going to talk to press. Don’t worry, this place is proof from eavesdroppink. We can talk here. They could see you wanted to expose them, so they ordered our internal security to conduct this operation. I could not come to see you in prison, but I thought very much about your words and I wanted to know more. I realized you had spoken truth, you wanted to help, but what could I do? Then came prison raid. The Minister of Internal Security lost his job from this news. So I am chosen in his place. It is like”—he turned his palms skyward—“like miracle. So we followed you, tried

to find you. I am tryink to protect you, but others, these masters, are tryink to kill you. So they send fighters—not from our air force, from Russian, but we have to comply or...” He made a gesture of a knife across the throat and rolled his eyeballs significantly. “But how did your rebels shoot these planes? What technology do they have? We did not think they have these capabilities. Do you know?”

Nick and Jenny shook their heads innocently.

“I say”—he lowered his voice, as if not entirely sure of the bomb shelter’s listen-proof facilities—“good shot! Serves Russian bastards right. Oh, sorry,” he murmured apologetically to Jenny. “So we follow you on the satellite linkup. Then you drive your jeep into the lake. Very clever. Whose idea?”

“Well, all of us really, we kind of decided together,” said Nick.

“All of you? There were more?”

Nick hesitated. “Just the two of us.”

“And they gave you jeep to escape? Why I don’t believe you?”

Nick was silent. Jenny too.

“So you have friends in these rebels and you want to protect them. Okay, this is fair enough. So we go to lake and pull out jeep, but it takes three days and is very dangerous because of rebels in area. Only then we find out you’re not there. So this saves your neck, this idea.

“Then I realize that rebels that we shoot at that day and car we try to destroy is you. And I thank God for stupid pilot who missed. ... My soldiers tell me one was dead or wounded. Who is that?”

Nick cleared his throat. “I was ... er ... wounded in the leg.”

The minister’s brow furrowed. “You look good to me. Where is your wound?”

“It’s a little difficult to explain, but it’s kind of a ... miracle. You see, she”—he pointed to Jenny—“prayed for me, and God healed my wound.”

“Huh. Amazink!” The minister paused for a moment, looking searchingly at Jenny, who fidgeted uncomfortably. “After that,” he resumed, “we do security operation, find you in farmhouse. You sit on porch like old Georgian man.” The minister shook his head and clicked his tongue as if berating a child for foolishness. “Then you leave. We follow car with satellite. Then I have my men pick you up today because in 30 more kilometers you would have driven into big roadblock, who had your pictures. You would have been taken by Internal Security. Yes, I know I am minister, but it would have been public knowledge, and I would have to imprison you again. I cannot be seen to be harborink you. This is very small operation, only a few of my most trusted men know of this. That is why I keep you here now in bomb shelter. Sorry it is not perfect accommodation, but you will be safe and we can talk freely. So instead of beink prisoner, you will be my guest. But I am sorry, you must stay inside this shelter for your security and mine. And you must teach me everythink you know, about plans of these masters and about words of this book.” He held up the book and looked questioningly at Jenny, who nodded to affirm her willingness.

“Mr. Minister,” she began a little timidly, “can I ask what happened to my colleagues, from the Family community? We saw on CNN that they were under investigation.”

“So sorry, but for now we had to close down this work you are doink. You know I look at it and I think it is very good work. You are helpink our children. But there is public opinion against foreigners, and there is investigation of rebels. There are rumors about your

links. So we closed this work and we asked your people to leave. But it is not deportation order, just invitation to leave. I hope”—he raised crossed fingers—“that one day again we can start this project. Next time maybe I can help you. We set it up better than before. Also now it is not safe. Tbilisi is crazy, so much trouble on streets. Better for them to leave.”

“Do you know where they went?” There was a tremor in Jenny’s voice.

“Some to Europe, some to Moscow.” He paused and there was a hint of sympathy in his next words that surprised Nick. “You want to see them again, I imagine. Don’t worry, we will work this out for you, but first you must teach us these thinks.” The minister looked at his watch.

“Now I must leave. Tomorrow mornink I will come and meet with you again. Until then my men will take care of you. Mr. Stratton, all your possessions are with us. We will return them to you.”

“Oh, thank you. That’s certainly a surprise. I never expected to see them again!”

The minister looked at Jenny quizzically, regaled as she was in her recently inherited peasant dress, and chuckled.

“You look like you will be needink some new clothes. This we will arrange. Now my men will show you to your rooms. Anythink you want, just ask.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Jenny. “You are so kind. If I am to teach you, I will need a Bible.”

“That is no problem. We have whole library here. There is Bible there, and also mini theatre with latest DVDs for your relaxation. You are very welcome. We want to show you *real* Georgian hospitality, not just peasant hospitality!” With that he spoke a few words to his soldiers and departed. The soldiers followed him out.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Nick and Jenny looked at each other in awe for a moment before speaking. Nick was first.

“So the Boss was right after all, and you were right on His channel. I knew I could trust my personal guru!” Nick was triumphant.

“Phew, what a test,” breathed Jenny. “I thought for sure I’d flubbed that one!”

“Kid, you’ve got the goods, and don’t ever let anyone tell you otherwise, even yourself.”

Nick’s accolade was interrupted by the return of two of the soldiers who proceeded to show Nick and Jenny their rooms. The plain-looking white metal doors which led off the main corridor were deceptive in their simplicity. Behind one of them Nick found himself in a bedroom that was approaching luxurious, replete with a commodious double bed, private bathroom, air conditioning, and television.

“So this is how the elite planned to escape the nukes,” he muttered, trying the springiness of the mattress.

Soon they were shown to a spacious dining room where lunch was served. Jenny suggested that they take some time to prepare for the meeting with the minister in the morning, a proposal Nick agreed with. On her request, the guards showed them the library,

a facility that once again surprised them, concealed as it was behind another anonymous-looking white metal door.

Jenny studied the Bible for a while and then asked Nick to be the guinea pig for her class, which he found fascinating. For all her protestations to the contrary, Jenny was a surprisingly thorough scholar of the Scriptures, and an adept and enthusiastic teacher.

They also discussed their plan, Nick proposing to tell the minister of his idea to penetrate the Nexo offices, to which, after prayer, Jenny concurred.

After dinner the two decided—in the interest of relaxation, which had become an almost foreign concept over the past month—to avail themselves of the mini theatre.

“They certainly know how to survive a nuclear strike in style,” said Nick as they were escorted into the theatre. The small but luxurious theatre had about two dozen seats, a 12-foot screen, and a DVD projector. The attendant showed them to a rack of DVDs.

“Oh goodie!” exclaimed Jenny, flipping through the selection. They have *X-Men 3*. It just came out. I haven’t seen it yet!”

“Okay, that’s cool,” said Nick. “It’s a long time since I saw a movie. My corporate lifestyle didn’t leave that much time for such indulgences.”

“Are you sure you’re okay with that one?”

“Well, it’s going to be a bit tame after some of the stuff you’ve been doing lately, but, I guess it’ll do.”

“Oh stop it,” said Jenny in mild displeasure.

Jenny was forwarding through the shorts of other movies when something caught Nick’s attention.

“Hey stop, let me see this short,” he said.

Jenny rewound to the beginning of the segment. The creamy Hollywood voice boomed out, over footage of chaotic scenes on a nuclear destroyer.

“A nuclear destroyer ... a worst-case scenario. ... A decision only they could make ... and only minutes left to make it. ... Dreamworks pictures presents ... Tom Cruise, Denzel Washington, Kate Beckinsdale, and Gene Hackman. AFFIRMATIVE ACTION. Coming soon to a theatre near you.”

“Wow, that was quick!” breathed Nick, almost in awe. “So they went with the destroyer.”

“What?” Jenny was mystified. “What are you talking about?”

“You aren’t going to believe this, but I think I was there when the idea for this movie was conceived. But it’s impossibly quick, only three months ago. Wow, they must really be on the move with this.”

“What are you talking about?”

“While I was talking to Ron, he gets on the phone to this guy called Steve. Like, Steve?” Nick raised his eyebrows suggestively. “And gives him this idea for a movie about this destroyer, exactly this plot, the underlying theme being that it’s okay to take over the world in order to save it from destruction.”

“Wow, and they’re already done?”

“I guess so ... at least the shorts are.”

“I guess it’s all part of the conditioning.”

“You are so right.”

With that, they started the movie, which Nick had to admit he enjoyed. Never having been a particularly avid *X-Men* fan before, he nevertheless couldn’t fail to see a strange sort of parallel with the unusual young lady beside him. Maybe that’s why she enjoyed it so much. At one point toward the end of the movie he attempted to slip his arm around Jenny’s shoulder. She gently removed it and he figured it wasn’t worth pushing the point.

After the movie they found themselves alone in the dimly lit theatre.

Nick was quiet and withdrawn as Jenny made a few comments about the movie.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” she queried. “You’re all quiet suddenly.”

Nick shifted uncomfortably.

“I just wish I knew a way in through this emotional firewall you have up around yourself.”

“I’m sorry. It’s just too hard to explain.” She looked down. “Maybe give me some time, and I’ll think of a way.” She stood up and excused herself.

Nick followed her out of the mini theatre. In a way he was satisfied with the faint glimmer of hope provided by the lack of an outright denial. On the way to his room he began asking himself what he would do if there was no resistance. Maybe Jenny was right about the male hormones, and it wasn’t fair to trust his growing feelings for her in such an extreme situation. The fact that they could die at any time did add a definite impetus to his desire for reciprocation, but if the circumstances around them were to suddenly change, he wasn’t sure how he would follow through. *Wise girl*, he thought a little ruefully as he entered his room.



The minister greeted them warmly as they were escorted into a meeting room the next morning. Jenny was looking very good in some new clothes that had been procured for her. Nick had also been reunited with some of his clothes that very morning and felt good to be dressed well again. He had felt a little strange as he looked himself over in the mirror. The outer shell was a definitive revisiting of the former Nick Stratton, but something within had definitely changed, as if some foreign or alien presence had permanently been infused into his psyche, and he was now an agent for

an external intelligence source. He had chuckled at the thought. *Too much X-men.*

“Come, my friends.”

The minister beckoned them to sit down.

“I trust that you have been enjoyink your stay so far.”

“Absolutely,” responded Nick warmly. “Thank you for everything.”

Jenny concurred. “It’s all way too much. You really shouldn’t have gone to all this trouble.”

“It is nothink, nothink!” replied the minister emphatically, slapping the mahogany meeting table with his down-turned palms. “Now, if you don’t mind, I have only short time so we must make business. Mr. Stratton, at our last meetink you informed me of conspiracy. Now that I see situation in this country, I believe you. Tell me more about these plans.”

Nick looked at Jenny briefly and received a confirming nod before launching out. This wasn’t exactly the scenario they had prepared for, but they could roll with it.

“As I was beginning to explain to you the last time we talked, about four months ago I was recruited into Nexo, but more than that, into a shadow conspiratorial organization which is, to put it simply, preparing to impose a supranational governmental hierarchy on the nations of the world. Their excuse will be security, freedom from the threat of war and terrorism, and economic stability; in light of which they will propose and quite probably impose a new economic system on the global village. In order to achieve their goals they must either create or allow sufficient social and economic upheaval as to make states willing to cede their sovereignty—at the very least economically, but ultimately also politically and militarily—to the international governing body. Jenny?”

She placed the open Bible in front of the minister. “In the book of Revelation, the prophet John foresaw such a system, likening it and its leadership to a great and awful Beast. It says here that all the world should wonder after the beast.” She pointed out a verse, which the minister eagerly glanced at. “And further on in the same chapter it says that this Beast would enforce a global credit system, ordering that all should receive a mark in their right hand or forehead, without which no one would be able to buy or sell. This we understand to be a prophecy concerning chip implant technology, which you are probably familiar with.”

The minister nodded. Nick picked up.

“Initially the plan will seem very good, a workable and even brilliant solution to the problems facing the world. A truly global solution. The environment will be an important policy lynch pin, together with economic stability and political security. Religious freedom and tolerance will also be preached, although registration and surveillance will be increased, purportedly to obviate the dangers of extremism and fanaticism. A key agreement will be a solution to the Middle East conflict, which we understand is now on the table. A pivotal point will be the fate of the Temple Mount—as it stands, one of the world’s hottest pieces of real estate. I believe Jenny has some more information on that.”

“Yes, Minister,” she continued. “Amazingly enough the Bible, more than 2000 years ago, was already identifying this particular piece of ground as a prime catalyst in the events of the last days, the time before Christ’s return—which is the period we believe ourselves to be now living in. The prophet Daniel, in approximately 2500 B.C., foresaw what we understand to be the rebuilding of the Jewish temple and resumption of the Jewish sacrificial worship. Whether this will be literal or fulfilled in some other way remains

to be seen, but it is obvious that orthodox Jews are heading in this direction. Jesus himself spoke of a great abomination which would be placed in what He called “the holy place”—which, according to the terminology of His times, we interpret to mean the holiest site to the Jews, or the Temple Mount. Exactly how or when this will happen is still a mystery, but it is certain to cause great controversy, especially throughout the Muslim world.

“Then Paul, the apostle, describes the coming of a great apostate leader, who we usually refer to as the Antichrist, who will defile this holy place and proclaim that he himself is God.” She deftly turned the Bible to Second Thessalonians chapter two and showed the verse to the minister.

“Along with the advent of this leader, who will initially appear as a savior of the world, we are also warned that there will be a time of ‘great trouble’ such as was never seen on the earth and will never be seen again. I think Nick has more on that.”

Nick cleared his throat and began. “During my period of recruitment, I accidentally came across a document which shocked me deeply, describing one of the goals of this organization—basically to trim down the earth’s population by several billion, in order to preserve the resources of the planet for the elite. They’ve already started with some of the ‘expendables,’ using means that have included AIDS, famine, sanctions, war, and other introduced diseases. An array that makes your everyday ‘ethnic cleansing’ look like a Sunday school picnic by comparison.

“More than anything else, it was that particular document that caused me, in all good conscience, to be unable to fulfill my mission here, and motivated me to want to meet with you and warn you of the unseen agenda.”

The minister sighed deeply.

"Now I see why they want to kill you so badly. You are very dangerous man. Or very valuable one."

"What do you mean?"

"There is pressure, much pressure to locate you ... or at least your remains, since they think you may have died in air strike. But don't worry. For now you are safe with me. If it gets too bad, we may have to relocate you. We have contingency plans. You need not be afraid."

Nick's face fell, the realities of his situation confronting him once more.

"Now, do not be discouraged," continued the minister. "You have important message and I personally feel it is my duty to protect you." He paused, deliberating his next comment. "But in light of what we have heard today, we must decide how to act. What are your recommendations?"

Nick and Jenny exchanged brief but knowing glances before Nick answered.

"I personally think it would be very beneficial for us to know more about their immediate plans."

"I agree," seconded the minister. "And how do you propose to accomplish this?"

"I am in possession of access codes to their security system. I could find out a lot if I was able to log in."

"No problem. We can provide you with hardware, with internet connection."

"There is *one* problem. Logging on from an outside source would be dangerous, alerting them to my presence. The same goes for my laptop, which is equipped with a direct satellite linkup. They would instantly know it's me, and possibly be able to trace me."

"So what are you suggestink?"

"That I personally infiltrate the Nexo premises, and gain access through one of their workstations.

It will have to be soon though, as they change codes every three months."

The minister's reaction was not as negative as Nick had anticipated. He nodded his head gravely.

"Dangerous, but possible." He hesitated, counting the cost before continuing. "Can I trust you with this information?" He looked deeply at Nick and then Jenny. "I don't know why, but I trust you. We have surveillance underway at Nexo. After your comments to me I ordered this. We infiltrate through janitor services and pest control company that Nexo subcontracts." He chuckled. "We kill some bugs, and we plant some bugs. In a few days we have again pest control appointment. We can put you in as one of our agents. You will need good disguise, but this we can do."

"How many agents do you put in?"

"Usually four. Why do you ask?"

"I would like Jenny to be on the team also."

Jenny looked at him in surprise. That hadn't been part of the plan.

"Why?" The minister also seemed surprised.

"Because we work as a team, and she has ... certain skills that I think will be very useful to the operation."

The minister turned to her. "It's possible. What do you think, Jenny?"

Jenny appeared to be thinking, formulating a response. Nick knew exactly what she was doing.

"I'm not used to these type of operations, but I'm willing to be involved," came the measured response. "Will there be some practice, some training?"

"You will have to learn how to kill bugs."

"I have plenty of experience at that," she answered. "I lived in India for five years."

"Good! Tomorrow I will send my agents. They will instruct you both, make the plannink."

“One more thing,” added Nick. “I’ll need uninterrupted access to a workstation for ideally 30 minutes or even more.”

“I think we can arrange that. I can set up meetink between one of my officers and that German woman they sent to replace you. I can pretend to need more information about you. We can schedule pest control visit for same time. That way you can use old office you are familiar with.”

“Excellent.” Nick thought for a moment. “I’ll also need the personal password of that German woman. Can you get that for me?”

The minister raised his eyes suggestively, and let out a characteristic chuckle.

“What is this your Bible says? ‘Ask and you shall receive, knock and it will be opened’? We shall open for you.”

“Good, I’ll leave it to your expertise.”

“Now I must leave. Thank you for your very interestink information, and you”—he turned to Jenny—“thank you for your excellent teachink. I hope to learn more. Tomorrow my men will be here for your trainink.”



“Trainink” took place the following day as scheduled. Two agents arrived in the morning and instructed Nick and Jenny in rudimentary use of the pest control equipment, so their disguise would look somewhat convincing. They were fitted with orange boiler suits complete with little caps bearing the company emblem.

In the afternoon a disguise expert arrived and worked to give Nick a graying beard and gray hair. Into the night the team went over the plan for the operation, as well as all the possible expediencies and contingencies.

Word arrived from the minister that the meeting had been set up for 11:30^{AM} the next morning with Miss Gloria Reiner, the German woman. He couldn’t guarantee more than 30 minutes, as the security ministry was only five minutes away from Nexo’s offices and they could only stretch the meeting so long. Nick was also handed an envelope which contained Miss Reiner’s personal computer password, obtained through some unknown means that Nick decided it wasn’t worth wanting to know about.

At 10:30^{AM} the following morning the orange truck pulled into the compound of the high-rise building, and proceeded to an underground parking lot.

Nick, his gray beard already covered with a mask, cap pulled tightly over his head, and wearing thick black-rimmed glasses, caught sight of himself in the truck’s rearview mirror as they disembarked, with considerable satisfaction at the quality of his disguise. Jenny also fitted the part well; her rather Eurasian features could have easily belonged to a variety of local ethnic groups.

“You look cute in the boiler suit, kid,” whispered Nick as they entered the elevator. Jenny’s response was an uncompromisingly stern look that said, “This is heavy stuff we’re going into, so stop messing around.” Nick looked for some sympathy from his two male companions but there was no compromise there either. Their minds were obviously totally on the job.

Arriving at the Nexo offices, which occupied the entire 13th floor of the building, the team split into two pairs and began spraying skirting boards and underneath carpets. The staff would evacuate each area for half an hour as the procedure continued. The timing was carefully orchestrated so that Nick and Jenny would enter Miss Reiner’s office at precisely 11:30. At that time one of the agents went back down

to the truck to be ready for a quick departure if necessary, while the other worked in the area outside Miss Reiner's office.

All was proceeding smoothly and at 11:30 Nick entered his former office. Jenny followed him, carefully closing the door behind her. Within moments he was at the computer. Jenny began by spraying the skirting boards and carpets to keep up appearances.

Nick pulled a flash drive from his boiler suit pocket and inserted it into the computer. The password worked and Nick was into the system.

"They've changed all the access codes," he said tersely after a minute or two of trying. "It's no use, I can't get in. Let's go."

"Wait," said Jenny, pausing, spray can in hand. "There must be some reason we're here, something we can get from this. The Lord got us in this far. Surely He has something for us." She put down the can and joined Nick at the screen.

"Try all her private folders. Maybe there's something there she's left unencrypted."

Nick shrugged and began looking through random folders, but everything was encrypted.

"Try her inbox."

Nick entered the inbox and tried opening some of the messages. All were encrypted.

"Save them to disk anyway. Maybe the minister's security can decrypt them." Jenny was trying to sound hopeful.

"I really doubt it, considering the level of encryption they use. I'll do it anyway." He saved the files to disk. "Okay Jenny, let's split. It's over."

Jenny was not giving up without a fight.

"Wait, try the network. Maybe some of her non-German colleagues aren't as strict with the security rules."

"Okay, if you insist." Nick began checking the network shares. Everything bore the standard lock icon. Nick looked up at Jenny helplessly.

"Wait! Look, look!" Jenny was suddenly animated. "What's that? Unencrypted files appearing on someone's drive."

"Someone's opening this stuff from another computer."

"Quickly, save them to disk."

Three files had appeared, opened. Quickly Nick dragged them to the flash drive icon, and the LED on the drive flashed to life. He was just in time as the unseen operator moved the files.

"Phew, talk about timing!" breathed Nick. "Okay, game over. Let's split. There's nothing more here for us."

Suddenly there was sound as the door handle moved. Miss Reiner was back ten minutes early. They both froze. Something behind her must have distracted her attention for an instant, because the door didn't immediately open. It was just the advantage they needed.

Without a moment's hesitation Jenny leaned against the desk, pulled Nick around toward her, pushed up his mask and began kissing him passionately. The door opened. Jenny unplugged the flash drive which was hidden behind her bottom, and slid it into Nick's pocket with her right hand, while she caressed his hair wildly with her left hand.

The woman at the door cleared her throat loudly. Jenny turned toward her with a little scream, and sprawled backwards in feigned shock, also managing to hit the power button of the computer on the keyboard.

"I beg your pardon, but what on earth is going on here?" demanded the woman stiffly in an accent

faintly tinged with German.

Jenny covered her face in well-simulated embarrassment.

“Sorry, sorry,” she cried out with a Georgian accent, and ran past the plump but smartly dressed middle-aged woman into the corridor.

Nick endured her withering gaze in sheepish bewilderment for a second before straightening his little orange cap, knocked askew by Jenny’s passion, replacing his mask, grabbing the spray can and following her. As he left the room he was aware of its indignant occupant moving toward the phone, presumably to call security.

They made it out into the corridor safely. He caught up with Jenny at the elevator. Their third team member was already in the lift. As the door closed behind them they could vaguely hear the raised voice of Miss Reiner.

The other agent said nothing but shrugged, indicating he had done what he could to stop her. Down, down, 13 floors and the elevator seemed to be moving way too slowly. All were silent. At the parking lot no security was evident. They headed for the waiting van. The agent who was already there started revving, and the other one joined him in the front, while Nick and Jenny climbed quickly into the paneled back section.

“Do you think she suspected anything?” whispered Nick, as the van pulled out.

“I don’t know. ... I guess we’ll hear about it, probably our last day working for De-pest Cleaners.”

Nick managed a grin. The van stopped, and they could hear the security guard at the gate talking to the driver.

“What’s he saying?” asked Nick.

Jenny was listening intently.

“Something about security wanting to question them. Oh no!”

The driver started shouting angrily.

“He just said some words I’m not supposed to know. Wait a minute ... they’re trying to bluff their way out.”

The guard’s voice was shouting something unintelligible.

Suddenly the little window at the front of the van slid open.

The driver turned and let loose a volley of angry curses at Nick and Jenny, who sat and listened silently. Nick could tell that Jenny was praying desperately, though she sat stone-faced. The guard couldn’t see them, but they could hear his voice adding to the cacophony. The little window closed again, and the other agent continued speaking. The curses exploded into fits of laughter. Jenny was suppressing a smile.

The guard’s hand then slapped the side of the van, and through the open partition Nick glimpsed the barrier in front of them moving up. With one more parting gibe and another fit of raucous laughter, the driver pulled out through the gate.

Nick and Jenny eyed each other momentarily and uttered a huge sigh of relief in perfect unison. Nick looked at Jenny quizzically.

“What was all that about?”

“Well, I didn’t get it all, but the guard was I think on the phone to someone. He was shouting something about what were you guys doing kissing the girl in Miss Reiner’s office. That’s when our guy got angry and shouted at us about our ... unprofessional behavior. Then he turned back to the guard and explained that we had another job, and that if he had a problem, to file a complaint with management. The guard was wanting to hold us up right there, saying that Miss

Reiner wanted to see us. So the other agent says something like, ‘Tell her that we’re very sorry but we have another job right now, and if she’d like the ‘extra services’ too, she’ll have to book in advance.’ That’s when they all laughed. Then the guard at the gate was asking how much are the ‘extra services’ from the girl. That’s when they laughed the second time.”

Nick smiled wryly at the humor.

“They don’t know what they’re getting themselves into, asking for you. I don’t think anyone could afford that kind of money.”

“Oh, stop it.”

Nick looked at her deeply. “Jenny, that was brilliant. ... How on earth did you think of that?”

“Oh, I don’t know, it just came to me. ... I think I saw it in a movie rerun when I was a kid. You know, the guy and the girl are running away from the police for some reason, Cary Grant and whoever, and suddenly a London bobby comes around, so he pulls her into a doorway and starts kissing her. Then the bobby kind of looks embarrassed and says, ‘Oh ... er ... are you alright, miss?’ and she says ‘Oh yes, sir, I’m perfectly fine,’ or whatever, so he tips his helmet and leaves them, and they manage to get safely away.”

“Oh right, and thus begins the great romance that’s been brewing.”

“Yeah right ... except in my case I’ll have to report the encounter to my teamwork if I ever get back home. I guess I should be thankful it isn’t P.E. anymore.”

The van lurched as they rounded a corner a little too quickly. As they both regained their balance Nick looked at Jenny oddly.

“Uh ... I’m sorry, did I miss something there? I thought you said P.E.”

Jenny looked flustered.

“No, it’s nothing. I don’t want to talk about it.”

“It’s okay,” said Nick. “Really, you shouldn’t feel bad about that.”

Jenny remained silent, but Nick was still looking at her oddly.

“What is it?” Jenny was obviously a little peeved.

“You know, I really don’t want to pry.” He hesitated. “But what you just said challenges everything I ever thought I knew about female physiology.”

“What?”

“Well, I guess I thought that was a problem that only guys had.”

“No way, José. Not where I come from. I know plenty of girls who’ve gotten it.”

Nick was in over his head.

“Wow ... I mean ... maybe I shouldn’t even be asking, but ... I guess I just don’t see how it works.”

“Works? Like I said, I really didn’t want to get into all this, but we have rules and I have to abide by them. I’m sorry.” Jenny looked away.

“Rules? ... I’m a little lost here. Are we talking about the same thing?”

Jenny looked at him helplessly.

“I don’t know ... sex with outsiders. There used to be a rule that if you even kissed someone outside our group, you’d be partially excommunicated, thus P.E. Now the punishment isn’t that drastic anymore, at least not for just kissing. But it’s still something that isn’t supposed to be done. I know it’s probably hard for you to understand rules like that, but we initially did it because of the AIDS scare, and it worked because our group is basically totally AIDS free.”

“Oh ... I see.” Nick was laughing.

“What’s so funny?”

“See, when I was growing up, P.E. was an acronym for a peculiarly male phenomenon, you know ... premature e...”

Jenny suddenly blushed. “You mean all that time you thought I was talking about *that?*” She let out an exasperated sigh which managed to morph into a laugh. The front window slid open and a curious agent peered into the gloom trying to ascertain the reason for the humor. Jenny shrugged helplessly as if to say it was too hard to explain, and he replied with a smile—the first they had seen from him. The window slid shut.

Jenny’s countenance changed.

“So now I’ve gone and spilled the beans and you probably think it’s really weird.”

Nick thought for a moment.

“No, actually, I think it’s just being street smart. And if you’ve kept AIDS out of your group, then great, more power to you.” He paused for a moment. “I don’t have it—you know, HIV.”

“Good.” Jenny acknowledged the information with a simple nod. She smiled suddenly as a pleasant thought seemed to flit through her mind.

“Like my dad used to say, ‘the only time that it’s good to be negative is when you go for an HIV test.’”

“That’s good. Sounds like a cool guy, your dad!”

“Yeah, he was.”

“Was?”

“He died of cancer last year.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

“Hey, it’s really nothing to be sorry about. He had a great life. It was his time to go, and now he’s in Heaven.”

“You sound like you’ve dealt with it pretty well.”

“I must confess it was quite rough at first, seeing all he went through, but he was so incredibly brave. He never complained about the pain, and up to his dying day he was telling people about Jesus. I admired

that so much. That example is what keeps me going sometimes when things get very hard.”

“You must have had an amazing dad, to produce such an amazing daughter.”

Jenny went quiet, obviously quite uncomfortable with that comment, while Nick castigated himself for his clumsiness.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Back at the minister's home they were ushered into the same meeting room where they had met two days previously. Minister Tamaridze was sitting there with several other men.

He rose to greet them as they entered.

"Ah, they did a good job with you, Nick," he said with a chuckle. "I myself did not recognize you at first. So tell me, how was mission?" He gestured for them all to be seated.

Briefly, one of the agents explained the sudden end to the mission and the scene at the gate.

"Ach." The minister waved his hand dismissively. "They will complain to pest company, and we will tell company to let Nexo know we fire those employees. It is not problem. This is good idea you have, Jenny, very good idea. I am sure Mr. Stratton thinks this was excellent idea."

Nick blushed a little and smiled self-consciously.

"So tell me," continued the minister, obviously wanting to get down to business, "what were you able to get?"

"Unfortunately," Nick began, "all the codes have already been changed, so I wasn't able to access the information. Miss Reiner's computer was heavily secured so we weren't able to access any of her data

either. However, at the last minute, what I would call miraculous timing, we were able to grab some files that were being decrypted from another computer. So at least we have those, although I have no idea what they contain.”

“You have them on disk?”

“Yes.”

“Then let us look at them. Here is computer.”

The minister indicated a computer at the far end of the room, to which all the inhabitants of the room duly moved.

Nick looked nervously at the other two men, whose identity he wasn't sure of. The minister caught it.

“I did not yet introduce you to my chief security advisor, Eduard—you can call him Eddie—and Agent Razik of International Affairs.”

The two men acknowledged Nick with cursory nods. Both had about them the dark brooding intensity of men who had seen much that they would prefer to forget, but were condemned by their profession to retain, probably to the end of their days.

Nick produced the flash drive from his pocket and handed it to Agent Razik, who had seated himself at the keyboard. He inserted it into one of the machine's empty USB ports. There were three files on the drive, which he proceeded to open.

The language was terse and unflowery, the kind of communications Nick remembered well from those who were in the know and did not need to waste words.

The first message read:

Pilot. Op “rest is silence” ready for activation Oct 1st. Hamlet already in place in RU011. Confirmed all media and LE in place. See you there. Ski

The second was a normal email.

*Mr. Graham Sanders,
Senior Advisor
Nexo Consultants*

Dear Mr. Sanders,

We are delighted to inform you that your yacht Mermaid's Dream is now completed and ready for delivery. Please inform us as to when you will take delivery of her, as well as your preferred method of payment of the remaining amount.

*Greg Shaw,
Blue Wave Shipbuilders, Inc., New Jersey*

The third sent a shiver down Nick's spine.

Knight presumed taken out in op “Pest Control.” Please confirm or deny. Photographic or forensic confirmation needed. Grand Master.

He turned to Jenny, and there was a note of panic in his voice. “Knight. You know who that is, don't you?”

She nodded thoughtfully. “Well, one good thing is that they think you're dead.”

“Yes, that's very comforting,” he said with more than a tinge of sarcasm.

“So can you decode these messages for us?” asked the minister after a short pause.

“I suppose *Pilot* must be this Graham Sanders. I don't know who he is. *Ski* is Tom Levinski, head of Nexo Consultants. *Grand Master* is most likely Ron Arens, who has considerable authority in echelons of

power. I guess it's obvious what operation 'Pest control' is. Highly appropriate."

They all chuckled. Nick didn't.

"So what is operation 'Rest is Silence'?" asked Razik.

"That is what I don't know." Nick pondered for a moment. "Rest is Silence. That's a strange name, but a familiar phrase. Now where is it from?"

"The rest is silence," Jenny said quietly. "Hamlet's last words."

"That's right, after he takes the poison. So what does it mean, 'Hamlet in place'?"

"What is this RU011?" asked the minister. "Is it a flight number? Perhaps this is hijacking?"

"I can check," said Razik. In seconds he was in a program dealing with flight information. "No airline has this code ... must be something else."

"Well, there's one thing, but it's probably not it." Jenny faltered a little as she spoke.

"What's that?" asked Razik sharply. All eyes were on her.

"Well, in our group we give each Home in an area a number. RU011 would be one of our Homes in Russia, probably Moscow, as it's a smaller number. But that couldn't be it, because how would they know?" Her tone betrayed more than a little uncertainty.

Razik was typing furiously, logging on to a web site, entering some names. "Okay, what do we have? ... Here it is: Mr. G. Sanders, booked Aeroflot first class on 30th September to fly from Tbilisi to ... Moscow."

He looked meaningfully at Jenny.

"Nick, what is this? What's going on?" Jenny was obviously upset.

Nick was trying to control the dark cloud of turgid emotion that was struggling to find expression inside him. His voice betrayed restrained anxiety.

"I know this much. When I was there in Guam, Levinski said he had something in the works. He said it was about ... religious groups, and Arens talked about this too, how direct suppression hadn't worked so they were trying a different tack, something about discreditation. And then he talked about ... My God! Do you realize what this is?"

"What?"

"What's the last scene of Hamlet? It's a mass suicide. Do you see what they have planned? They've planted someone in one of your places in Russia, and they're going to stage one of those cult suicides. This is monstrous."

Jenny was beginning to lose control. Tears began to flow as she spoke. "We can't let this happen. We have to stop it. Minister, we have to do something. These are innocent people."

"Stay calm, Jenny. Let's talk about everything you know. Is there some way to contact them? Do you have number?" The minister's reassurance seemed to calm her.

Jenny thought for a moment. "I don't know any numbers there. I don't have my phone book ... everything I had with me was lost at the prison. I don't even know their email address. I can remember some public email addresses, but I don't have an encryption key or anything to send things closed."

"It's dangerous," said Razik. "If these people have this much power they could easily be monitoring email, and if we tip them off, they could be pushed to move more quickly. Phone is also dangerous, more dangerous."

"Do you know the location of your centers there?" asked Eddie.

"I'm not so sure ... I think I might be able to find one of them. I was there three years ago."

“Can’t we just alert the police there,” asked Nick, “tell them everything we know?”

The minister looked at his two security experts gravely, and they shook their heads in unison. There was no need for further comment. After a further brief silence it was Razik who spoke.

“I believe the LE in the message refers to law enforcement, or perhaps one of their contacts within it. God only knows what agencies are involved in this. I think our best bet is personal contact. Today is the 29th. We have two days. We can get you to Moscow, if you think you can find the place.”

Jenny thought for a moment.

“Actually, there’s a P.O. box number I know, and they check it every day. We could wait by the post office and meet whoever comes there. That way there would be less chance of blowing our cover by turning up at a location which, if any of this *is* true, they are probably watching.”

Razik looked at the others with raised eyebrows. “A bit old-fashioned, but it could work.”

“Do you know anyone by sight? And more important, would they know you?” asked Eduard.

Jenny’s smile returned briefly, as a reminiscence seemed to warm her.

“Those guys at the Service Center and I, we go way back! Plus, by now I bet everyone in the Family’s been praying for me like crazy for the last month or so.”

The minister spoke next. “So we must act quickly. We can fly you to Moscow tonight. We can arrange you some travel documents, new ID, even diplomatic, to save you hassles at airport. Okay, Razik?”

“You got it.”

“We can get you to Moscow,” the minister continued, “but we can’t really operate there. Once there, you’ll be on your own. Maybe we send Razik to monitor

things, but he can only monitor, otherwise could be big stink. Who else can we send?”

“I’d like to go,” said Nick.

“What good will that do?” said Razik. “You’re a wanted man. You’ll be more trouble than you’re worth.”

“But I know Levinski, and he’s going to be there running things. Besides, what else am I going to do, hide out for the rest of my life?”

“Besides which,” Jenny added, “we work as a team, and he has certain skills which I think would be useful to the operation.”

Nick was caught off guard by the comment, and turned to Jenny with a half grin.

The minister shrugged. “Okay. We can arrange some documents for you too, and some disguise. But don’t open your mouth, or you’re dead. At least Jenny speaks Georgian.”

“And Russian,” added Nick. “Along with Arabic and a bunch of other languages.”

Razik was immediately interested. He looked at her quizzically, then said, “If you ever need a job, you know the spy market is going through the ceiling these days. I think you have good potential. A little bit of training needed perhaps. After this operation, look me up and we can discuss details.”

“Mr. Razik,” said Nick petulantly, “with all due respect, I saw her first.”

“What, CIA? No way! You guys are losing your touch—all technology, no real spy craft any more.”

Nick was indignant. “I am *not* with the CIA.”

“Okay, cool down,” said the minister. “We have many things to discuss, and before you go, Mr. Stratton, I have many questions to ask you, and you also, Jenny. You two must be my guests for lunch. Maybe you can help me save this country from this disaster.”

Something was troubling Nick, something he had to ask.

“Excuse me, Minister, one more thing. Do you know of Yakov Shibley?”

“The activist? We arrested him two days ago. He was ringleader of riots.”

“What will happen to him?”

“He is charged with ... how do you say, seduction?”

“I believe you mean sedition.”

“Yes, yes of course, sedition.”

Nick struggled inwardly before asking the next question.

“What is the punishment?”

“Firing squad.”

“My God!”

“Why, is he friend?”

Nick shook his head.

“Can you...” Nick was on unfamiliar ground.

“Yes, ask me anything.”

“I happen to know he was deceived, coerced by the masters. I witnessed this myself. They promised him things and now they have betrayed him. Please give him a chance.”

“I will see what I can do.” Tamaridze smiled warmly and left the room.



At 8:30PM Nick and Jenny were seated in first class on a Georgian Airlines Airbus bound for Moscow. Razik was in the seat behind.

Nick thought back on the events of the day.

The lunch with the minister had gone well. His questions had been deep and searching, and his receptivity to Jenny’s answers seemingly unlimited.

To Nick’s great relief he said he had made a call about Shibley, and that a lenient sentence would

be passed. One less wound to afflict Nick’s already smarting conscience.

The afternoon had been a melee of preparations, briefing, planning and at least on Jenny’s part, praying. Disguise experts had worked with both of them, giving Jenny a makeover and dressing her in a chic business skirt suit that fit Nick’s taste to the tee, and transformed her into the likeness of a high-echelon Baltic diplomatic secretary. Nick’s gray hair and beard were touched up, and clothing styles similarly altered to fit the part.

As the plane taxied onto the runway Nick looked at Jenny with a half smile. She returned it quizzically.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” Nick began.

“If it’s ‘this is quite reminiscent of the way we first met,’ I guess I am,” she responded.

“So ... what does that mean to you?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Like, is that a pleasant memory, or semi-pleasant, or less than pleasant, or positively unpleasant? Scale of one to ten.”

“Exactly what are we fishing for here, Mr. Stratton?”

“I’m not really fishing. I just want to know if you’re thinking what I’m thinking.”

The plane began accelerating for takeoff.

“Sorry,” said Jenny, “can we postpone the remainder of the conversation for a few minutes? I find it a bit difficult to discuss interpersonal relationships during takeoffs and landings.” She closed her eyes and began mouthing a prayer.

“You got it.” Nick realized she probably also needed time to think.

Safely in the air a few minutes later, she turned to him bright eyed.

“Which is?”

“What?”

“You asked if I’m thinking what you’re thinking, which is?”

“Oh, okay.” Nick took a deep breath. “I guess I’m thinking that once we’re in Moscow, I probably won’t be able to say much to you, since I’ve been instructed to keep my mouth shut anywhere we might possibly be under surveillance. And then I was thinking that tomorrow or the next few days might be a bit intense. I mean, it’s not exactly a done deal how this whole scenario’s going to play out. We’re up against some pretty ... heavy dudes. So in a worst-case scenario, I guess that maybe there is a chance that this is my last chance to say some things that maybe I feel I should say.”

“Well it’s not exactly what I’m thinking, but go ahead.”

“I ... er ... how am I going to tell you this?”

“Just tell me. I won’t die.”

“But you might kill me.”

“No, I promise I won’t kill you. Nothing beyond grievous bodily harm. I swear on the Bible!” Jenny smiled mischievously.

“Phew, that’s a relief. So the thing I wanted to say is that ... remember a couple of nights ago, when we were in the grandmother’s farm house, and I was sleeping by the fire?”

Jenny nodded.

“Well, I had this amazing dream that we were”—he lowered his voice instinctively—“we were making love. And it was so ... what’s the word? Cosmic. It was like a spiritual experience, but at the same time it was warm and sexy and loving. I don’t know how to say it, but it was like God was there. Then I woke up and it was just a dream, but I lay there for hours afterwards, just kind of soaking in the experience.”

Jenny was staring at her lap.

“I guess I realized then,” Nick continued, “that I’m in love with you. I’ve never met anyone like you, and I’ve had some pretty nice girls in my time. But I can’t imagine anyone better than you, Jenny. Maybe it will never work out, but if there was a way that that dream could come true, I’d do almost anything for it.”

Jenny turned and was looking out the window at the receding lights of the city.

Nick guessed she was fighting back tears.

“Hey, sorry, I didn’t mean to...”

“It’s okay.” She turned to face him. He had guessed right.

“I wish it was that simple,” she managed, with a tear trickling down her cheek.

“What do you mean?”

Jenny took a moment to compose herself. “Let’s say that we emerge from the next few days alive. You know I’m part of a group. It’s more than a group. They’re my Family, my life. I’ve grown up with them and worked with them and what’s more, I believe in what they’re ... what we’re doing. I believe it and I want to keep doing it until the day I die.”

“Hey, that’s great,” said Nick. “I would never want to stop you from doing what you believe in.”

“But it’s not like I can be your girlfriend and still be a member of my group. It doesn’t work that way. I know that might be hard for you to understand, but that’s the way it is. So if we wanted to date, or even get more serious than that, either I’d have to leave the group, or...”

“...or I’d have to join.”

“Yeah, and...”

“And what?”

“Well, I know how hard it is. It’s a difficult life. And I know it’s not for everyone. It’s a total commitment.”

Nick thought for a moment, then smiled briefly.

“That which is impossible with men is possible with God.”

“What?”

“Isn’t that what Jesus said to His disciples after the rich young nobleman walked away?”

“Yes.” Jenny was cautious.

“So I’ve been reading the Bible these last days.”

“And...”

“Pretty cool book. ‘Specially liked Luke. And I figure I have one advantage over the rich young ruler guy.”

“And what would that be?”

“I don’t have anything left to go back to.”

Jenny was looking pensively at the back of the seat in front of her. An air hostess came with drinks. After she served them and moved on, the conversation resumed.

“But Nick, I have to be honest with you. If you’re just doing it for me, it won’t work. It has to be more than that.”

“I know that.”

“Plus, you don’t really know me, and it’s not fair to judge a relationship by the kind of thing that develops in these sort of circumstances.”

“That’s true. I don’t mind giving it time. As much time as it needs. Something this good is worth waiting for.”

Jenny looked at him with a mixture of curiosity and skepticism.

“This good? I just don’t see how you could think I’m good. I mean, you’re this major MBA or whatever, driving a Porsche, or at least planning on it, probably dating millionaire’s daughters, on the fast track to fame and fortune—or at least, you used to be—and now you’re interested in an un-degreed, penniless volunteer like me?”

“Hey, who cares about degrees? Who pegged the line from Hamlet?”

“Yeah, well, that was a fluke. I just happened to remember it from the movie. It sort of stuck out to me. Like, what exactly did it mean, ‘the rest’? The remainder, or was it a play on words, like finally Hamlet was going to get some rest from all the pain and torment he’d been through. And...”

Nick was grinning broadly.

“Whatever.” Jenny concluded her literary criticism abruptly.

“Why did you stop? It was good!”

She looked at him self-deprecatingly. “It’s okay. You don’t have to try to be nice. I long ago came to terms with my lack of intellectual abilities.”

“Simple truth miscalled simplicity,” said Nick quietly.

“What?”

“It’s another line from Shakespeare, from one of the sonnets, I think. There’s nothing wrong with knowing the simple truth. I know plenty of highly educated but totally miserable people. Give me the truth expressed simply, even poorly any day, rather than erudite, eloquent, brilliantly put lies.”

“Yeah but...,” began Jenny, and then remained silent.

Nick sipped his drink for a moment before turning to her decisively.

“Jenny, I’m not saying this lightly, because I paid my dues to get where I am ... well, was. I worked my little Texan butt off to get into Yale, and to achieve the high-flying career I was just beginning to enjoy. I learned how to think, analyze, predict, make risky decisions confidently. How to cream your opposition. How to look good when everything’s bad. How to lie, how to buy, how to sell, how to cheat and not break a rule. How to

make money. Lots of it. But for the last three months every skill I've ever learned has been utterly useless to me. If it wasn't for your help—and God's—I don't believe I'd have made it. I would have been creamed. But you, you had all the skills needed. You know how to care for people, to feel, to heal, to love, to serve, to pray, to work miracles. I can honestly say that if I could cash in my MBA just to get what you have, know what you know, and to be able to do what you can do, I'd do it ten times over. A hundred times over!"

He paused, watching Jenny formulate her response.

"And if you say, 'It's only Jesus' once more, I'll scream."

Jenny grinned impishly, covered her ears and opened her mouth.

"It's only..."

Nick was saved from having to scream by the hostess, who brought dinner.

After the meal, which they both ate in silence, Jenny spoke again.

"I have an apology, and a confession."

"Okay."

"First, I've been a very bad example to you, putting myself down like that. I should be so grateful to the Lord for all He's given me. I guess I just always feel like such a nobody and nothing. But that's no excuse for denigrating myself. It's wrong and I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I forgive you."

"Secondly, a confession. That night ... the dream ... I asked the Lord to do that, I mean ... to show you somehow that He loved you and that I love you, to show you how I feel, and how sex isn't this big evil thing that God forbids. I would ... you know ... like to make love to you. But circumstances being what they are ... I can't. So I guess He did it anyway."

"He certainly did."

The hostess came and cleared the food trays.

Nick looked at Jenny tenderly.

"Would it be considered acceptable, as in, within the parameters of your treaty of rights and limitations, or whatever it is, for me to hold your hand?"

Jenny breathed deeply.

"I guess so, under the extenuating circumstances." She slipped her hand into his, and nestled up against him, leaning her head on his shoulder. They spent the rest of the flight in various configurations of the same position, few words passing between them.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Upon arrival in Moscow, Nick and Jenny were ushered briskly by Razik through the diplomatic channels. A car with diplomatic license plates was waiting for them at the airport.

Razik must have observed Nick and Jenny's intimacy on the flight, for on the way to the car he whispered to Nick, "You understand, that in the interests of security, you and Miss Sanchez will take separate rooms in the hotel, and must not converse in English within the rooms."

"Understood," replied Nick.

It was battle conditions, and he and Jenny both knew it well. A few knowing glances passed between them but that was all. He was glad he'd taken the opportunity on the flight to say what was on his mind.

The evening was spent uneventfully at the Kempinski Hotel. The service was a pleasant surprise even to Nick, who was used to the best, as far as hotels went.

At 10:00 the next morning Jenny and he were situated in a coffee shop opposite the post office. Jenny guessed that whoever would check it today would

check it in the morning, and she was right.

At 11:15 she leaned across to Nick, who was lost in an *International Herald Tribune* and whispered, "They're here."

She immediately left the table while Nick fumbled about with some rubles for the bill.

He caught up with her on the curb as she was about to cross the street, bracing herself against the biting October wind.

As they crossed the road, a young man wearing jeans and a leather jacket, scarf and a black woolen hat pulled over his ears emerged from the door of the post office. Nick guessed he was about 20.

"It's Brad," said Jenny. "I guess he was on the team that moved to Moscow."

Brad took a left and began walking briskly down the street, presumably toward a parked vehicle somewhere.

Jenny was half walking, half running to catch up with him. Nick followed close behind.

As Brad turned into a side street she reached him and tapped him on the shoulder.

He turned in surprise, obviously not immediately recognizing her.

"Brad," she whispered.

Brad did a double take.

"Jenny? Is that you? Whoa man, like major NDE! I can't believe it! I mean, praise the Lord, you're alive! When we heard nothing after your last phone call, we thought you might be—"

"Brad, is there somewhere we can talk quietly, privately? It's quite urgent."

"I have the van down at the end of this street. Leon's there waiting for me."

Jenny looked at Nick briefly, his frown confirming her feelings.

"Not good. Will he miss you if you're gone a few extra minutes?"

"Probably not," Brad answered.

"Okay, let's step into that bookstore over there. We can talk in the back."

Brad looked at Nick questioningly.

"It's okay. He's a good friend."

Brad nodded.

Jenny was already partway across the street. Brad and Nick looked at each other and prepared to follow, waiting for a passing van.

"Uh oh, ICBM at 3 o'clock!"

Nick jumped nervously.

"Oh sorry, did I startle you? I was just talking about her." Brad was genuinely apologetic as he pointed out a leggy blonde in a leather miniskirt emerging from a battered mini across the road.

"Sorry, I've had a few reasonably close encounters with missiles recently, but why ICBM?"

"Oh that's one of our acronyms: Incredibly Cute and Beautiful Maiden."

"I see. You people seem to have quite a penchant for acronyms."

"Funny you should mention that, I'm actually a founding member of a secret society known as A.C.R.O.N.Y.M., the Association for Creating Redundant Obsoleteisms to Numb Your Mind. Do you realize that psychologists have isolated a new social disease called 'acrophobia'—fear of abbreviations?"

"Oh, I see," said Nick politely, trying to get used to Brad's sense of humor, who obviously hadn't quite grasped the seriousness of the situation.

They made their way into the back of the shop, and began browsing through magazines.

"So what's all the big secrecy deal?" Brad looked at Nick with a "who's this" expression.

“This is Nick Stratton,” said Jenny as nonchalantly as she could.

“Nick Stratton, *the* Nick Stratton?” Brad seemed excited.

Nick was unsure how to react.

“*The* Nick Stratton,” he replied uncertainly.

“It’s an honor and a pleasure to meet you, sir,” said Brad with a broad smile and an outstretched hand. “Tell me, you’re not CIA, right? It was a setup, right?”

“Right,” said Nick, even more uncertainly.

“I knew it! Leon owes me five dollars. I knew it was a frame-up. You must have done something right. Well, any thorn in the side of the New World Order is a friend of mine.”

“Brad,” she said with controlled urgency in her voice, trying to dampen Brad’s over-effusiveness, “we shouldn’t talk for long. Either one of us could be being watched. I don’t have time to explain everything right now, but Nick was previously working for ... you know, the ACs, but now he’s with us, and we’ve uncovered a plot that we think they have in the works. As far as we know, they are going to try to pull off some kind of a staged mass suicide in one of our Homes, we think through poisoning, but then making it look like a suicide. We think it might be RU011. Is that where you’re staying now?”

Brad nodded, wide eyed.

“Okay, as far as we know it’s going to happen tomorrow, October 1st. We think there’s a plant in the Home, maybe a live out or new disciple, it’s impossible to know exactly. You have to be very careful, because if they know we know, they might try to pull it off sooner. Tell whoever you’re sure about, who you know you can trust. The media might be tipped off to show up as well. Is there any way you can get secure messages

out to alert people? You can’t use the phone, because it’s probably bugged.”

“Yeah, and definitely no email,” Nick added.

“Right,” Jenny continued. “You absolutely can’t do anything to alert them that you know. They also don’t know that we’re here. Hopefully they think that we’re dead.”

“Okay, so what do I do now?” Brad was obviously overawed by it all. All vestiges of flippancy were gone. Jenny was trying to be calm and matter of fact.

“Go home and let the sheps know, securely somehow, look as natural as you can. Do it outside, away from any bugs. I’m staying at the Kempinski, room 1437. But don’t contact us there unless you have to. If you want to meet before tomorrow it’s possible, but be very careful. Also, can I have your address and phone number?”

Brad pulled a card out of his shoulder bag and scribbled the address and phone number on the back. He handed it to Jenny.

“Thanks. We’ll be praying for you.” She looked at him meaningfully.

“You too. Wow, this is like ... heavy.”

“The Lord’s going to get us through it. It’s a total miracle we found out about it. I’ll tell you about it later. Now we’d better split. You leave first, and we’ll go the other direction.”

“Yeah. See you later. Nice to meet you, Nick. Hope I can catch you later.”

“I’ll look forward to it,” replied Nick as warmly as the situation warranted.

Brad put down his magazine and left the shop.

Nick turned to Jenny. “NDE?”

“Near Death Experience.”

“Oh.” Nick flipped the pages of his magazine for a second. “Do you think he caught it all?”

“Brad is very smart, despite outer appearances. A total computer whiz, and good with security matters. He was in Tbilisi when this all started, so there’s no way he could be the plant himself. I trust him.”

“Okay, I guess we’ll just have to. Now what?”

“Let’s go back to the hotel.”



Agent Razik caught up with them as they entered the lobby. He had been monitoring the encounter.

As they went up in the lift, Jenny explained to him in Georgian what had transpired. He seemed satisfied, and whispered some instructions to Jenny.

On the way from the elevator to the room she spoke quietly to Nick.

“Razik says he wants to go out to the Home and check out the situation, see if there’s anything he can do. He thinks we should stay here and I agree, but we arranged two alternative outside rendezvous places in case we need to meet out for some reason. I’m just going to spend some time praying about it all, okay?”

“Sounds good. Guess I’ll see you at lunch.”

“1:00?”

“Good.” Jenny flashed him a brief smile before disappearing into her room.

Nick went into his room and paced up and down nervously for at least half an hour before finally remembering he was meant to be praying, which he did, not without a little difficulty.

At 1:00 they met for lunch.

On the way up afterwards they stopped by the reception to pick up messages. There was a note for Jenny. She opened it and glanced at it on the way to the elevator. They had the elevator to themselves so Jenny handed it to Nick on the way up, who quickly read it.

Dear Jenny,

Hi! GBY. Thanks for getting in touch. The TW want to meet you away from the Home. Lukas will drive by the traffic light at the corner up from the hotel at 3:00PM. Be there to meet him. He knows you, and will take you to meet the rest of the TW.

—Brad

“Who are the TW?”

“Teamwork, those in charge of the Home.”

“Oh, good,” said Nick. “We should meet them.”

“Wait,” countered Jenny. “We should ask the Lord about it first, whether it’s safe.”

“What do you mean? You think it’s not?”

“I don’t know. I just get this feeling that we shouldn’t take anything at face value, but should check in about it. I don’t immediately recall a Lukas, even if he knows me.”

“Do you think it’s some kind of setup?”

“Not necessarily. It’s been three years since I’ve been there, and plenty of things can change in a Family Home in that much time, including people’s names. I just want to make sure we ask the Lord. After all, Razik isn’t here to check with, unless he calls in.”

The elevator reached the fourteenth floor and opened.

As they made their way along to the rooms Jenny whispered to Nick again.

“Okay, so we can’t talk about it in the rooms, right?”

So both of us ask the Lord what to do, then we meet in the corridor in ten, or let’s say fifteen minutes, and share what we got. Okay?”

“Sounds good.” Nick was getting used to Jenny’s authority in such matters, and he silently marveled

that the self-deprecating girl he knew pretty well by now was taking the helm of a difficult situation so confidently.

Back in his room Nick paced back and forth for a few minutes before settling down. Asking God about such decisions was certainly not his routine way of working, and thoughts tumbled through his head like sheets in a laundromat before he finally managed to quiet his inner turmoil sufficiently to hear the steady whisper in his heart that he had begun to recognize as his best friend.



“Shall we check out the swimming pool?” said Jenny as they met up fifteen minutes later. “It’ll look less weird. We can talk on the way.”

“So what did you get?” she queried as they stepped out into the elegantly terraced swimming pool area.

“I don’t know for sure. I mean, it was the same voice that’s told me stuff before and it said, ‘Go with this Lukas wherever he takes you, and then you will find out what you should do.’”

“Interesting.” Jenny paused for a moment. “I got something that seems contradictory, that ‘all is not as it seems with this message’ and that it wouldn’t be such a good idea to meet in public like they want. Also not to go without informing Razik.”

“Okay, so what do we do now?” Nick sighed as they rounded the corner of the pool and passed some tables, uninhabited due to the wintry weather. “One of us must be off, and considering the expertise level here, it’s probably me. So let’s not go.”

Jenny was concentrating hard. “Yes, but if we don’t show up, they’re going to be worried, and may come to the hotel, which would be worse. I’m sure the teamwork prayed about this meeting, and wouldn’t have suggested it if the Lord hadn’t told them to. And

they might be able to tell us more about their situation that could help us figure out exactly what might be going on, and who might be involved in this plot or not. Plus, I trust that the Lord can speak to you just as well as to me.”

“I don’t know. I’m just a rookie at this.”

“So let’s ask Him again what it means, and confirm what we should do.”

“Right here?”

“We don’t have much time. It’s already 2:15. We can do it as we walk.”

“Whatever you say!”

The two walked in silence for a few moments, tuning their thoughts upwards.

“So?” Jenny looked up at Nick with an expectant half smile.

“No, your turn to go first. I made a fool of myself last time.”

“I still got that we should inform Razik, and that we should exercise caution, but that we should obey what the Lord told you and go.”

“So how does that work?”

“Simple. We pray for Razik to call, or else leave a message at the desk for him. So what did you get?”

“I don’t know, I’m probably really off, but I got again that we should go with Lukas, and that there was a task for us to do.”

Jenny was silent for one more moment of confirmation and then nodded her head.

“Then let’s go for it.”



“Good news,” said Jenny as they left the hotel lobby 25 minutes later. “Razik called five minutes ago. We spoke briefly in Georgian. I told him in just a few cloaked words what was happening and he agreed, but said he’d be back at 5:00, and to keep him informed.

So that's a confirmation. He also gave me a cell phone number but said not to use it unless it's an emergency, as it would be easy to track and monitor."

At 3:02 a car pulled up at the lights where Nick and Jenny were waiting. There were two men in the front seats.

The one in the passenger's seat leaned out the window. He was large framed with slightly graying fair hair and spoke with a Scandinavian accent.

Jenny and Nick looked at each other, the quick glance telling Nick that Jenny did not remember or recognize the man. But an equally quick nod from Jenny affirmed that they should follow this path as the Boss had indicated.

"Hi Jenny, Nick. I'm Lukas." The man opened the rear door of the car, and Jenny and Nick climbed in.

"This is Ukrainian Timothy," said Lukas, gesturing toward the driver as the car moved out.

"God bless you," added Timothy in a strong accent. "Nice to see you."

"You too," Jenny responded. "So you're both on the teamwork?"

"Yes," continued Lukas, turning around to talk to them. "It's nice to finally meet you. I knew your dad in Amsterdam when I joined. 1973. Quite a while ago now. Then I recognized you when you were on the news from other pictures I had seen of your family over the years."

"Wow, you knew my dad way back then?"

"Yes, he was one of the ones who witnessed to me. I owe him a lot!"

"You know about..."

"Yes I heard. I'm sorry ... I always hoped I'd see him again. I'll just have to wait for Heaven. Might not be too long the way things are going now!"

"Yes."

Timothy turned into a side road.

"We've rented an apartment up here, just half an hour walk from the hotel," said Lukas.

"I hope we weren't followed," thought Jenny out loud.

"I was checking in mirror," said Timothy. "No one follow."

The car pulled up outside a better-than-average apartment block. Lukas led the way as they all disembarked and headed for the front door.

"Whatever happens, don't worry," Nick overheard Lukas saying quietly to Jenny as they walked. "The Lord is in control of everything." He pressed a buzzer and spoke his name into the microphone. The automatic door clicked open.

The elevator took them to the top floor and Lukas led them to a large wooden paneled door. It swung open to his knock and he ushered Nick and Jenny in. The door closed behind them.

They found themselves in a plush penthouse office suite. Nick looked around nervously at the dark-suited, large-framed Russian who had closed the door behind them, and suddenly resembled a bouncer. Across the room from them was a large desk and a black leather armchair that faced away from them toward a picture window which yielded an impressive view of the city.

Nick looked at Jenny, who seemed suddenly confused. The armchair swung around.

"My God!" Nick gasped.

Jenny was looking at him in consternation, obviously not recognizing the immaculately dressed gray-haired man before them.

Nick took a deep breath. "Jenny, this is Ron Arens."

Ron stood up.

“Hello Nick. The beard suits you,” he said with an icily benevolent smile. He turned to Jenny. “You must be Jenny.” He stretched out a hand indicating a sofa. “Please, make yourselves at home.”

Nick looked around in panic.

The bouncer had been joined by an equally substantial friend. There was obviously no exit the way they had come in.

“Nick, what’s happening?” asked Jenny, her voice trembling.

“Don’t worry, Jenny,” answered Ron. “There’s absolutely nothing to be afraid of. I merely wanted to talk to you both, and I thought it unlikely that Nick would accept my invitation. So I arranged this little meeting, with Lukas’ help.”

Nick looked helplessly at Jenny. “We walked straight into it,” he muttered despairingly.

He turned to Ron.

“Mr. Arens. I don’t want to be here. I am an American citizen and you have no right to detain me against my will. Miss Sanchez and I are going to leave now.”

He turned and the two bouncers closed ranks at the door.

Ron laughed. “I’d like to see you get past Oleg and Ivan.”

Nick looked at Jenny again, who met his gaze with a subtle shake of her head.

“At least join me for coffee. Don’t worry.” Ron chuckled sardonically. “It won’t be poisoned.”

He pressed a button on the intercom on his desk.

“Three coffees please.”

Nick and Jenny looked at each other again and sat down on the sofa.

“Small world, isn’t it?” Ron was frighteningly casual. “So what brings you to Moscow?”

“Jenny’s planning to hook up with the rest of her team who had to leave Georgia after everything that happened.” Nick was trying to match the casual tone.

“Ah yes. Very interesting group, this Family of yours. I’d like to learn more about you.”

Nick didn’t think Jenny would be deceived by Ron’s smoothness, but he involuntarily turned to see her reaction. She smiled pleasantly and nodded.

“I’d be very happy to tell you about our work.”

“There’s someone here who’d like to see you, Nick,” Ron continued, indicating a door behind him to his right. “Why don’t you step in there while Jenny tells me something about her organization.”

Nick didn’t move.

“Don’t worry,” said Ron. “I’ll send your coffee in.”

Everything inside him was crying out against leaving Jenny alone, but Ron nodded to Oleg who came and stood behind him.

“Oleg, show Mr. Stratton into the lounge.” Ron’s voice had all the creaminess of a seasoned host entertaining guests, but Nick flinched at the deadly barb concealed underneath. He glanced round at Oleg who stood impassive but tense as a crouching tiger about to spring on its prey. Noncompliance would obviously be unpleasant.

He rose shakily to his feet and proceeded without any coercion toward the door. It opened into an elegantly appointed lounge room. Sabrina rose to meet him as he entered.

Nick gasped. She looked more stunning than ever, blonde hair cascading over her spaghetti-strap-lined shoulders, clingy black mini-dress revealing her perfect body. Nick turned helplessly and looked at Jenny for a split second. She was gazing at him and her eyes seemed to be reaching out to him, as if invisible

beams of light were piercing his soul. Oleg closed the door firmly.

“Hi, Nick.” Sabrina smiled lusciously. “How are you, babe? The beard’s cute. Have you aged or is it just a disguise?”

Nick took a step back toward the door. He turned the handle but it was locked.

Sabrina approached him from behind and put her arms around his shoulders.

“We’ve been a naughty boy, haven’t we?” she chided, letting her body melt into his back.

Nick rested his head against the door.

“Sabrina, stop.”

“Hey, let’s talk about this, babe,” she cooed.

He turned to face her, pushing her away from him.

“I don’t want to talk about anything,” he said defensively.

Sabrina looked at him, shaking her head unbelievably. “Why did you do it, babe?” she said with rising emotion in her voice. “I told you not to try to play the maverick. You threw it all away. You were a rising star. You had everything. All you had to do was to play the game right and you would have won. We would have won. We could have had everything, but you threw it all away.”

“Maybe I did. But maybe I got something more precious in return.”

“What, that?” She gestured toward the closed door. “Little miss missionary? I mean, is she giving it to you? Does she even know how to do it?”

Nick was quiet.

Sabrina laughed incredulously.

“You don’t mean to tell me, three whole months and you two didn’t do anything?”

“Nothing.”

“What, is she a nun or something?”

“No.”

“Poor little religious freak probably doesn’t know how.”

Anger surged up in Nick’s voice.

“Don’t you say anything bad about Jenny. She’s a better person than you could ever dream of being.”

“Oh my, the great white knight defends the poor maiden.” Her tone was biting but still playful.

She turned and sat down on a sofa, crossing her legs alluringly.

“You know,” she said engagingly, “Ron wants to give you another chance.”

“I don’t want one.”

“I begged him to, partly because I think you still have great potential and partly”—she sighed—“because I missed the pants off you. Think about it, Nick. Just stop and think about it for a minute. You are totally, totally ... for want of a better word ... screwed. The Americans have washed their hands of you. The Georgians would probably like to kill you. The whole world knows who you are. We can give you a new start, a whole new identity. Your salary might not be quite as attractive as the previous offer, and the boat might take a bit longer to get, but you’d still be on the team. Think of it, you’d never have to worry about money again as long as you live. As long as you’ve learned your lesson and don’t blow it again.”

Nick was leaning with his back against the door, his sweating palms pressed into its mahogany surface.

“What about Operation Scrooge?”

“Operation what?”

“That night, the first night we were together, afterwards I went into Tom’s office and there was this document on his desk. All about this ‘Operation Scrooge’ to decrease the surplus population and stuff

like that.”

“Oh my God!” Sabrina laughed out loud. “You didn’t fall for that, did you? That was just one of Tom’s stupid practical jokes! It was a set up! I take you up to the roof, leave suddenly, on the way down he leaves his door open, curiosity gets the better of you, you read the thing on his desk. It’s like one of his college days pranks. He was laughing afterwards about how you tried to come in with your camera and then pretended to be photographing the ocean! You know Tom, he loves scams like that.”

“You mean it was just a practical joke? The whole thing?”

“Of course! What kind of crazy megalomaniacs do you take us for? No one in their right mind would do stuff like that.”

Nick sighed deeply.

“Well, I suppose I should be relieved. You have no idea what I went through over that. Where is Levinski, by the way?”

“Oh, he’s around. You’ll see him soon. Especially if you come back to the fold.”

Nick was struggling.

“Hey babe, chill for a minute. Come and sit down, think about it.” Sabrina was purring like a kitten.

Almost mesmerized, and against all his sense, Nick obeyed.

Sabrina put her hand on his arm and slid a bare thigh against his leg.

“Most of all, babe, we’d be together.”

Nick was gritting his teeth as he felt his passion rising.

“It must have been really tough, all that you went through.” Sabrina’s tone was suddenly sympathetic as she slid her arm around the back of his neck. Nick breathed deeply and looked at the ceiling.

“Don’t worry, babe, it’s going to be okay.” Suddenly she swung her leg over him and sat on his lap facing him. Her dress slid up way past her g-string and she started kissing him passionately, rubbing herself against him, as his hands found her breasts.

As if an electric shock coursed through his body Nick suddenly catapulted himself off the sofa, leaving the astonished Sabrina in an undignified heap of exposed legs, designer underwear and ruffled blonde hair.

“I can’t do this.” He strode to the door and started banging on it heavily.

“Let me out!” he shouted.

“You are an idiot!” screamed Sabrina. “Why the hell are you doing this, throwing it all away?”

Nick didn’t answer but continued pounding on the door.

“Has the stupid bimbo got you hypnotized or something?”

“It’s not just her!” Nick yelled in response. “It’s God, it’s the Lord, it’s ... it’s ... Jesus!”

The door swung open just as he shouted the last word.

Ron was looking at him with eyes like dark glowing coals as the word cut like a hurled dagger through the suffocatingly tasteful decor of the office.

Jenny was staring at Nick open-mouthed, her coffee poised half way to her mouth. Oleg stood motionless with the door held open, ready as ever to administer unnumbered bruises. A mortified Sabrina was rearranging her clothing on the couch like a cat nursing a wound.

There was a long silence. Ron broke it, chillingly polite as ever.

“Coffee, Nick?” He gestured toward the table.

Nick was breathing heavily.

"I don't want any coffee. And I don't want to be a part of this madness. What I want is to walk out of here and never see you or hear of you again."

"Oh, I'm sure that could be arranged."

Ignoring the sinister undertone, Nick went on. "I just want to go away from this whole mess, and love people the way Jenny does, and serve Jesus the way she does."

Ron leaned back in his chair. Suddenly his demeanor changed.

"A noble idea indeed. I'm highly impressed by Jenny's altruism, humility and energy. A remarkable young woman indeed. If the rest of her group is like her I think they will go far. As I was just saying"—he turned to Jenny warmly—"there are many ways we can work together."

Nick was looking around, stunned, helpless.

"You mentioned, Jenny," Ron was continuing, "that funding is a constant struggle for you. Well, I must say in all honesty that it isn't for us. I'm sure that with the right backing your group could fly ... to incredible heights."

Nick looked at Jenny in confusion, who seemed to be drinking it all in. She spoke with almost unreal composure.

"That's very kind of you, Mr. Arens. We would be most appreciative of any help, and it would be an inspiration to work together."

Ron nodded his head warmly.

"Perhaps we can arrange some kind of meeting, your leadership, and ours. Brainstorm ideas, create a synergy of ideals, goals, concepts. Fresh new answers to stale old problems. The world needs this breath of fresh air." He pointed out of the window to the smog-softened Moscow skyline and chuckled. "In more ways than one!"

Nick dazedly walked over to the couch where Jenny was sitting, staring at the untouched cup of coffee.

"Nice of you to join us," said Ron, smiling. Jenny looked at Nick knowingly and smiled.

"The coffee's good, Nick, just how you like it."

Suddenly black clouds of crushing doubt caved in around Nick. Jenny was part of it too. He looked at her narrowly. She was a part of the whole awful conspiracy. His heart was beating like thunder.

"Jenny, if you'll excuse us," said Ron. "There are some details I'd like to discuss with Nick. Perhaps we could have a car take you back to the hotel and then Nick could join you there later?"

"That would be fine," she said without hesitation. "Except I'd rather walk. It's not too far from here and I'd enjoy the fresh air."

"As you wish. Oleg can show you out."

"If it's all the same with you, I'd rather go now too," said Nick. "I'm quite tired from all that's happened and feel I could think better tomorrow. Maybe we could meet again then."

Jenny looked at Nick for a second. Suddenly her glance was a shaft of light piercing the clouds of confusion. In that split second Nick could suddenly hear her voice as clearly in his mind as if she was speaking out loud.

Go with the game. I don't know what's happening but the Lord's going to work it out. Don't try to fight it. He'll deliver us. Don't worry about me. I haven't gone over to them. The Lord said to just play along for now.

Suddenly he found himself replying.

If anything happens, I just want to thank you. You've saved me. We'll be His forever if I don't see you again in this life.

The reply came back clear as crystal.
Don't worry. We'll see each other again.
 End of transmission.

It had all happened as quickly as a high-speed data transfer. The others in the room were obviously unaware.

"So I'll catch you back at the hotel, then?" said Jenny.

"Okay, I guess," answered Nick, "probably about an hour, hour and a half?" He looked up at Ron, who nodded in response.

"It was a pleasure to meet you, Jenny," said Ron, rising to his feet and extending his hand.

"The pleasure was mutual," she replied with a smile. With one more knowing glance at Nick she allowed Oleg to escort her to the door.

As she left, Sabrina entered from the lounge room, slowly returning to her normal state of self-composure, and sat down in a chair across the room.

Ron scrutinized Nick for a moment before speaking.

"So I take it that you weren't ready to accept the offer Sabrina made and join with us again?"

"I just need time to think about everything," replied Nick. "The last few months have been ... quite a ride."

"But of course. I fully understand. But I do want to ask you, Nick, because I really don't understand. Why are you trying to stop us from saving the world?"

"Saving the world? For whom?" Nick couldn't hold it in. "For yourself? For your own future?"

"For all of us."

Nick shook his head slowly.

"I'm sorry, I can't do it. Even if Operation Scrooge isn't real, I just don't think I can put my heart into doing what you all do."

"Operation what?" Ron turned quizzically to Sabrina, who had been watching the whole conversation in silence.

"Nothing," she replied dismissively. "Just one of Levinski's cock-ups."

"So you won't join us?" Ron looked up at him with a going-once-going-twice expression on his face.

"No."

Ron leaned back in his chair.

"You realize, of course, that that means I'm going to have to kill you."

"I don't see how that necessarily follows," replied Nick with an evenness that surprised even himself.

"You know much too much and unfortunately seem to have developed quite a conscience, and might I add religious fanaticism, which is, in our books, a very inappropriate combination. Equally unfortunate, the same criterion applies to Jenny."

"Don't you lay a finger on her, you bastard," said Nick angrily, gripping the arms of his chair. Oleg and Ivan stiffened noticeably in their posture.

"When I said how much I admired her altruism, I wasn't lying," Ron continued unperturbed. "She is a remarkable and dedicated person. But I can't allow my personal feelings to cloud my judgment. She knows too much and in her misplaced idealism would be all too ready to upset our plans, which by the way, your actions have already considerably hindered. I don't think it's possible for you yet to understand my altruism, which is developed and refined enough to divorce itself from sentimentality and misplaced charitability in order to achieve the highest possible good for the human race."

"What kind of twisted logic can justify the killing of an innocent young woman who is doing a tremendous amount of good for the human race, in order to

supposedly save the human race?”

“I don’t expect you to understand. But don’t worry about Jenny. It will be quick and painless. Another drive-by shooting, another poor innocent victim of Moscow’s terrible crime wave.”

“Another innocent victim like Shibley.”

“Who?”

“The activist guy in Tbilisi,” Sabrina interjected, a trace of anger still smoldering in her voice. “He’s charged with sedition, will probably get the firing squad.”

Ron looked at Nick as if bemused by his concern.

“Plans changed. We had to let him go. But why let it trouble you? Those student leaders are our expendables. There are millions of others like him. Intellectual flotsam and jetsam.”

“You are obscenely evil.”

“Oh, you think that’s evil?” He laughed. “Wait until we take out the USA. Think of all the poor innocent Christians who are going to die then. But it has to be done. It’s the only way. The world needs to be purged of their arrogance. And we can kill two birds with one stone by getting rid of a few hundred million Christians at the same time.”

Nick looked at him in disgusted incredulity.

“I’m sorry to have to tell you this,” Nick said, “but you are going to burn in Hell.”

Ron laughed heartily.

“Well, maybe I’ll see you there then.” He pressed the buzzer at his right hand.

“Alexei, could you and Lukas take Mr. Stratton on a tour of the river?”

Nick could not contain himself. Words started to rise up in his throat, strangely, suddenly independent of his own thoughts.

“There is a judgment coming, you know. God is real. And He will judge you for your actions. Every single one.”

Ron was laughing again, but his laughter was suddenly empty, hollow. Nick glimpsed fear beneath the cracks in his composure.

The door opened and the man who had been introduced as Timothy entered, with Lukas behind him.

Nick was undeterred. “There is a better world coming, a world of truth and righteousness, but it will not be achieved through the evil contrivance of men such as yourself. God Himself will establish His Kingdom and Jesus will be the King. The Antichrist, whom you serve, will be cast into Hell, and you along with him.”

Ron suddenly exploded, trembling with rage. “Get him the hell out of here!” he screamed at Alexei and Lukas.

“It’s still not too late!” shouted Nick as Oleg and Ivan grabbed his arms. “Jesus can still forgive you if you stop now. I know!” He was being dragged out of the office. “He forgave me and saved me and He can do it for you too. It’s not too—”

A heavy blow struck the side of his head and he passed out.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Nick came to lying in the back seat of a moving vehicle. Lukas was leaning back over the front seat pointing a gun at him. Nick started to raise himself up on one elbow. His head was throbbing excruciatingly.

“He’s waking up,” said Lukas. “Let’s do it under this bridge up ahead.”

Nick’s heart sank. So this was going to be it. The end of his life.

“It’s too close in,” replied Alexei in perfect English. “Ron likes us to take them further out.”

“Let’s get it over with,” replied Lukas, “not prolong the poor guy’s misery.”

Nick raised himself up enough to see out of the car window. Lukas watched him carefully. Alexei was pulling off the road before an upcoming bridge, onto a side road that passed back under the bridge and ran alongside the river.

He stopped the car under the bridge. Cars were passing overhead but the stretch of riverbank was deserted.

“Get out,” said Lukas.

Nick complied, still holding his head from the pain. *At least that will be over soon*, he thought with a strange sense of calm.

Alexei was pointing a gun with a silencer at Nick.

They each took an arm and walked him over to the concrete embankment which held back the turgid swirling waters of the river. Nick gazed numbly into their black icy depths.

“Let me, Alexei,” said Lukas. “I’ve been waiting for this for a long time.”

Alexei handed him the gun.

Lukas raised it up and pointed it full in Nick’s face.

Beyond his comprehension, Jenny’s words were ringing in Nick’s ears, the words she had somehow projected into his mind. They were as clear and as sure and as bright as the smiles that flashed out through her dark eyes. *Don’t worry, we’ll see each other again.* So why was it now suddenly going to be over? Did she mean in Heaven?

He turned and looked Lukas in the eyes. What kind of traitor was this who would turn so awfully against the people he had once served God with. Something wasn’t right. Something in Lukas’ eyes wasn’t evil enough.

Suddenly Lukas swung the gun around and pointed it at Alexei.

“What are you doing, idiot?” shouted Alexei.

“It’s over, Alexei. You have a choice. You can die, or you can have a new life.”

“What are you talking about? What the hell is this?”

Still training the silencer on Alexei, Lukas handed his other gun to Nick.

“Help me,” he said. “I’m with you.”

He reached inside his coat pocket, pulled out a long white envelope, and spoke to Alexei.

“In this envelope is a new chance for you. There’s an air ticket to Oslo with a Norwegian passport with

your photo in it, and a new identity. There’s a cash card worth 20,000 dollars. Get yourself a life with it, for God’s sake, and get out of this awful mess we’re in. The plane leaves in three hours. You can make it easily. If you don’t want the envelope, you get the river. It’s your choice.”

Alexei was hesitating.

“How can I trust you?”

“Look in the envelope.”

He handed it to Alexei, who opened it and examined the contents.

“The envelope or the river?”

“I’ll take the envelope,” said Alexei quietly.

“And if you go back to Arens today, or contact him or anyone in any way, I will find out about it and will personally blow your brains out tomorrow. Got that?”

“Got it.”

“Now go.”

Alexei turned and walked away toward the road that curved up onto the bridge.

Nick was standing stunned, with his mouth half open.

“We need to move it,” said Lukas.

Still in a daze Nick followed him back across the road to the car and climbed in the passenger’s seat.

In a few seconds they were roaring up onto the road. They passed Alexei who was climbing into a taxi. Lukas tooted the horn and waved, and Alexei responded with a strange half grin.

“We have to get to Jenny,” said Nick. “They’re planning to kill her.”

“Right,” said Lukas.

“What’s all this about? Why are you doing this?”

“I’ll explain it all later, but for now let’s just say that maybe ‘I am come to the kingdom for such a time

as this.' Here, use my cell phone." Lukas handed it to Nick. "Call the hotel and find out if Jenny's there yet."

Nick took the phone, checked a card he had picked up at reception, and dialed.

"Kempinski Hotel. May I help you please?"

"Room 1437."

The number began ringing. No answer.

"Sorry, sir. The guest is not in. Would you like to leave a message?"

"No message, thank you." He turned off the phone.

Lukas was obviously thinking about as fast as he was driving.

"She left about half an hour ago, right?"

"I don't know. I was out cold."

"Oh yes, sorry about that. Oleg is a trifle heavy handed. How is it?"

"Well, the left half of my brain hasn't rebooted yet but the right half seems to be working okay."

"Is that the emotional side or the reasoning side?"

"I can't remember, so that probably means it's not the reasoning side."

"I think it's been about 25 minutes, so she's probably close to the hotel by now. We're nearly there, so I'll take the road that leads back to Arens' place and hopefully we'll get to her before they do. Oh Jesus, please help us."

Nick looked at Lukas in surprise at the last utterance.

Lukas caught his glance.

"Do you know how to pray?"

"I'm learning."

"Then pray now, if you want Jenny alive. These guys are deadly."

"I know that only too well," said Nick ruefully.

A few heart-tearing, accelerator-flattening minutes later they rounded a corner near the Kempinski. The lights changed to red at the corner where Nick and Jenny had been picked up only hours earlier. All too slowly they changed to green. Lukas floored the accelerator again.

Only a minute later, Nick spotted Jenny.

"There she is!" he shouted. She was walking on the other side of the road toward them, her dark hair flying loose in the breeze that cut through the falling dusk. Good. It was only a matter of a hundred meters up the road and they would be opposite her.

Then Nick saw the motorcycle, the two leather-clad figures. It was coming the other direction, almost level with Jenny, slowing down.

"No!" he screamed as he glimpsed the gun barrel protruding from the pillion rider's jacket.

"Jenny!" There was no way she could have heard him. He suddenly focused on her. She was so unaware, so simply beautiful in that instant that Nick wanted to drink in his last sight of her alive.

Shots shattered the autumn air. Jenny did not fall as Nick expected. Suddenly the motorbike was spinning crazily across the road, and the two black riders were tumbling over each other helplessly in a tangled cascade of limbs. Jenny turned in shock.

Nick was searching the gloom for the source of the shots. A dark, ghost-like form was hastily retreating into a line of trees bordering the road. Nick caught his last glimpse of it scaling a wall.

"Must be Razik," breathed Nick, but there was no time for speculation. Jenny had turned and was walking slowly toward the prostrate forms on the ground.

Nick wound down his window as the car pulled up opposite her. "No! Jenny, no!" he screamed.

She was already bending over the bodies, but looked up in surprise.

“Nick,” she shouted back, “come and help! These guys just got shot.”

“Jenny, no! Get back. They were trying to kill you!”

Frantically, Nick got out of the car and ran across the road toward her. Something seemed to be checking him and he slowed down to a walk as he approached her. A crowd of onlookers was beginning to gather. Jenny was kneeling down beside one of the men who was writhing in pain. Nick could hear low moans coming from him.

He never forgot what he saw next. The man who had just been about to shoot Jenny was looking up into her face as a mortal might look at an angel.

She was speaking to him softly in Russian, holding his gloved hands.

She looked up at Nick.

“We need an ambulance,” she said softly.

“Jenny, this guy was about to kill you.” Nick’s whispered tone was approaching frustration.

“The guys are hurt bad and they need an ambulance,” she replied, and began speaking soothingly in Russian again to her failed assassin.

Lukas had come up behind Nick, who turned to him.

“Can you call an ambulance on your cell phone?”

Lukas nodded his head and complied.

“Okay Jenny, an ambulance is coming. Now we have to leave.”

Jenny seemed totally absorbed in praying for the man, and did not respond.

“Jenny, it’s not the time to be charitable! Your life is in danger, and we have to go now,” whispered Nick

more forcefully.

Reluctantly, Jenny ended her prayer, and laid the man’s hand down gently on the asphalt. He groaned softly as if in protest at her leaving.

Nick took her by the arm as she stood up and began escorting her to the waiting car. Jenny started visibly when she caught sight of Lukas, who was starting the car.

“Don’t worry.” Nick anticipated her question. “He’s with us. I don’t know why or how, but he’s changed sides.”

“Oh.” She still seemed unconvinced, but allowed Nick to lead her to the back door of the vehicle.

“I suppose I owe you some explanation,” said Lukas as the car began to move up the street away from the gathering crowds of people. Jenny was still looking at him askance. He didn’t wait for a response.

“I was really with your dad in Amsterdam. He did witness to me. We even worked together later in Colombia. I knew you when you were about two years old. In the late eighties I left, backslid. I was ... upset by some things that didn’t go my way, bitter about some people. I got involved in the anti-cult groups, became a trusted member.

“Then something happened. I realized I’d been so wrong and that I wanted to get back to the Lord. I started to fellowship again, but secretly, because I was in with the ACM. Then I was recruited by Arens, who was looking for people to work against NRMs. I didn’t know what to do, but the Lord gave me the story of Joseph and Esther and told me to play along with it, like a double agent. He told me He had a specific task for me, that He would use even my mistakes and backsliding for His glory. So I posed as an anti-cult expert all these years—good way to get lots of archived Word!” He chuckled.

“Then I heard about this operation. They trusted me with some information, but not all. The Lord told me in prophecy that this was the time He’s been preparing me for all these years. So now you know. I am sorry I had to betray you and take you in. But there was no other way. I had to prove myself to them, and buy time, because I still didn’t know all the details of the op. If I had not picked you up then, my cover would be blown and all I’ve worked for these years would be lost, and the Family would be in mortal danger. They are now, but we can help them.”

“How did they know we were here? How did they pick us up?” Nick asked.

“They have cameras monitoring that post office box. You should have seen Arens’ face when he found out you were still alive. It was almost ... almost admiration.”

“Oh no! Then what happened to Brad and Leon? Are they okay?” Jenny was suddenly animated with concern.

“They’ve been taken to a safe house. Unfortunately, I don’t know where.”

“So they never made it back home?”

“No.”

“So the Home is still unaware of the threat?”

“Yes.”

They pulled up by a traffic light. Lukas sighed deeply. Nick could sense he felt deeply burdened by it all.

There was a sharp rap on the passenger side window.

Nick turned in surprise.

Lukas was pulling his gun. “It’s them!” he shouted. “We’ve been followed.”

Nick was staring at the dark-clad figure outside the car who rapped again frantically on the glass. Lukas was about to fire.

“Stop!” yelled Nick. “It’s Ahmed.”

Jenny opened the passenger-side back door.

The light turned green. Ahmed collapsed into the back seat gasping for breath. A chorus of horns rang out behind them. The door slammed shut.

“Go Lukas, it’s okay,” said Nick.

The car lurched into motion.

Jenny was incredulous. “What are you doing here?”

Ahmed was panting heavily, sweating profusely, unable to speak.

“Who is this?” Lukas was obviously not prepared for the development.

“Ahmed is a good friend. We were together in Georgia. He’s with us.” Nick turned and looked at him. “Presumably.”

Ahmed managed a nod.

Something suddenly clicked. Nick looked at him sharply.

“Was that you back there, who blew away the drive-by shooters?”

Ahmed managed a second nod.

“How did you...?”

Ahmed raised a weak hand, begging for a temporary stay of the questioning.

“Wow!” was all Jenny could say.

“Can somebody tell me what’s happening?” said Lukas.

They were still driving, heading none of them knew exactly where. Just putting distance between themselves and the scene of the shooting. Silence fell for a moment. A wave of horror, followed quickly by relief, swept over Nick as he remembered the ugly swirling grave that he had almost been sent to, and then visualized Jenny’s body riddled with bullets lying on the dusk and blood-stained sidewalk. They were

alive. Lukas had somehow been there for him, and Ahmed had somehow been there for Jenny. There was a plan, a conspiracy that was far greater, far more powerful than that conceived by Arens and his ilk, that was overshadowing them, delivering them. His heart suddenly burst into a conflagration of silent praise to his Deliverer and he started crying.

Ahmed had recovered his breath enough to start his tale.

“About 20 minutes after I got out of the car in Georgia, I knew I was going the wrong way. It was like God speaking in my heart telling me to turn around. I got back on to the road and got a lift with a farmer, then made it to the highway. I got another lift and made it to a roadblock where they showed pictures of you, asking if we had seen any such persons, and giving us a number to call if we did. After that, using some well-placed bribes, I managed to find out where you *weren't*. Then I began my search, and with the help of, perhaps, a still small voice, picked up your trail. I followed you to the airport yesterday and then here later that night. I found out your hotel, so easy. These agents are so unprofessional. That Georgian agent is crazy, leaving you alone. These donkeys have no idea how to run an operation. No idea!” He clicked his tongue and shook his head deprecatingly for a moment before continuing.

“So I bought myself a gun on black market. Couldn't get a Kalashnikov for a good price, so I had to make do with this stupid Uzi.” He opened his leather jacket momentarily to reveal the offending object. “Never thought I'd stoop to using this Zionist crap, but it still worked, *al hamdullillah*.” He stopped for a second and looked at Jenny.

“I just went for the legs, you know. I knew you wouldn't want me to kill them.”

Jenny was unable to speak.

Lukas turned the car into an empty parking lot and pulled up under some overhanging trees. He switched off the headlights.

“I need to call,” he said. “Everyone please be quiet. They will be expecting a report on the op.”

He pulled his cell phone from a jacket pocket, thought for a moment and dialed.

“I finished with the river tour,” he said. “All taken care of. Alexei left us also. Same destination. I'll explain when I return. See you then.” He folded the cell phone and returned it to his pocket.

“You're going back in?” Nick queried.

“I have to. If I don't, they'll suspect something. I have to keep up appearances. Also I need to try to find out where the safe house is, see if I can get to Brad and Leon. They will expect me back in about an hour, because this op was supposed to be out of the city so we have some time to talk, and plan.”

“What are you going to tell them about Alexei?” Nick asked.

“That he turned, pulled a gun on me and I had to shoot him.”

“Will they believe you?”

“I hope so. At least I have this.” He pulled an Australian passport and an airline ticket out of his pocket. “This is a different fake identity also with Alexei's photo. I will say I found it on him, that he was obviously planning to run. I had them done together, good deal, two for the price of one, like a special summer closing sale.”

He turned to Jenny apologetically.

“Some of the business skills I learned in my ... er ... counterculture youth have also come in handy in my new life.”

She managed a sympathetic smile.

“So what next?” Nick had regathered his composure sufficiently well to speak. His head was still throbbing and he wanted to lie down, but there was so little time left. At his question, a hush fell over the occupants of the car. The magnitude of what was ahead precluded any hasty or wrong decisions, and each knew without having to say it that a power greater than themselves needed to be invoked. There was a long interval of silent communion. Jenny was the first to speak.

“Razik said he would be back at the hotel at 5:00, which is now. Should we call him?”

“I was just thinking the same thing, or at least considering it,” said Nick.

“Who’s Razik?” asked Ahmed.

“The Georgian agent that came with us. He went to check out the situation at the home.”

“Are you sure he’s with us?”

Jenny and Nick looked at each other for a second.

“Well, these days you can’t be sure of anything,” Nick said, hesitating.

“So far he seems to be okay,” Jenny added.

“Let’s hold on calling him until we’ve decided what we are going to do,” said Lukas. “He can wait. I only have a few minutes and we need a plan. First of all, what do we know?”

“From what we know their operation is planned for tomorrow,” said Nick.

“Right, but there’s a whole new factor,” countered Lukas. “Brad and Leon. They will be expected home. When they don’t come back it will put the Home on alert, which is exactly what Arens doesn’t want to do. But they had to pick up Brad and Leon because of the risk of them ruining the op.”

“But do they know that we know about the op,

and that we told Brad?” asked Nick. “How could they have even found that out?”

“They may not know but they suspect it. It’s very likely that they’ve tried to interrogate Brad and Leon as well. Whatever happened, the point is that they may be forced into doing the op tonight.”

“So we need to move quickly?” asked Jenny.

“Yes. But the danger is that we alert them and force them into doing something. They’ve had this in the works for months or years now, and they certainly don’t want it spoiled at the last minute.”

“Excuse my ignorance,” said Ahmed, “but what is the op that they are planning and who are ‘they’?”

Jenny answered. “They’re the same people who Nick used to work for, the ones who tried to kill him and me today. They are planning to stage a mass suicide at a community of the Family, that’s the group I work for. We think they have an agent planted in the Home and are possibly going to use a poison.”

Even the normally stoic Ahmed seemed shaken by Jenny’s matter-of-fact statement.

“The point is,” said Lukas, “how are we going to let the Home know about it? If we call, the phone is likely bugged. They think Nick is dead, which is best left that way. If they see Jenny turn up there, it’ll be a dead giveaway.”

“I’ll go,” said Ahmed. All turned and looked at him.

“That might well be our best bet,” said Lukas.

“Do you realize who you’re up against?” said Nick. “These guys are professionally evil.”

“You think I trained all those years for nothing?” Ahmed was beginning to bristle again. Nick thought it wise to discontinue the line of questioning.

“So you go there.” Lukas was thinking it through. “How do you get in?”

“Front door,” replied Ahmed. “Just like a normal visitor.”

“Right,” added Lukas, “because the place is probably tightly watched. So trying to get in clandestinely would be worse.”

“Right. Then I somehow get someone in authority and take them aside, explain the situation.”

“Write it down so you can’t be picked up by any bugs,” said Jenny.

“Jenny can tell me who I should talk to, and also some key things that could identify me as her friend—help them believe that it is actually a message for them, from her.”

“Sounds good,” added Lukas, “but I’ll have to leave you with the rest of the details, because I need to go back now.” He pulled a second cell phone out of his pocket and handed it to Jenny.

“Here. Take this and that way I’ll be able to contact you, if I find out any more information. Don’t call me, I’ll call you. One more thing, what about the Razik guy? Are you going to contact him?”

“I’ve been praying about it,” said Jenny, “and the Lord confirmed, to me at least, that he’s okay to trust. I don’t know what everyone else thinks. I just feel we could really use his help.”

“The Georgian guy?” said Ahmed, rolling his eyes. “What do we need him for? He left you both totally exposed.”

“Well, for one thing,” said Jenny a little more timidly, “at least he’s a bit trained. Otherwise Nick and I are the only backup you have.”

“I suppose you’re right. But I trust you more than him any day.”

“I think it’s okay,” said Lukas. “I know most of the people that are involved in this op, and his name definitely isn’t on the list.”

“Which reminds me,” Nick said, “who is Graham Sanders—the guy coming up from Tbilisi?”

“Oh, he’s this so called expert on cults who’s been giving some free advice to the Georgians and now he’s coming up for this gig,” replied Lukas. “They have him on hand to give statements or interviews. Now I really have to go. I can drop you somewhere, then you can get a taxi or something.”

“Can I use this mobile to call Razik?” asked Jenny.

“Okay, just keep all calls shorter than 30 seconds—just in case someone’s trying to trace you. It makes it a lot more difficult.”

Lukas turned the key in the ignition and eased the car into reverse. Within minutes he had dropped Nick, Ahmed and Jenny on a main road.

Jenny dialed Razik on the cell phone. She spoke briefly in Georgian and after awaiting a short response hung up.

“We had two possible places prearranged as rendezvous so we wouldn’t have to give details over the phone. I said we could meet at point B which is a subway station near to the Home. We meet there in half an hour.”

Nick was already flagging down a taxi.

After ascertaining the taxi driver’s inability to speak English, Jenny spent the 25-minute taxi ride updating Ahmed on all that had transpired since they had parted, then letting him know as many details as she could about the Home RU011. Nick’s head was throbbing and he tried to rest. Jenny noticed him gingerly feeling the side of his head and prayed for him.

As they neared the subway station, Ahmed muttered, “So now I’m supposed to work with a Georgian Internal Security agent? These guys have been my

sworn enemies for the past four years.”

The taxi pulled up and they alighted.

Razik met them at the bottom of a flight of stairs that led into the station.

“Who’s this?” he said shortly, looking Ahmed up and down.

“A good friend,” said Jenny.

Razik eyed Ahmed suspiciously, particularly the bulky leather jacket.

“A good friend from where?” he asked.

“We knew each other in Georgia,” said Nick bluntly. “Ahmed was the one who helped us escape from the rebel camp after the air strike.”

That didn’t help Razik at all.

“Perhaps we can discuss our ideological differences later,” said Ahmed, mustering hidden resources of politeness. “Right now I believe we’re on the same team for tonight’s operation.”

Razik looked at Jenny and Nick with some trepidation.

“Okay, let’s get moving,” he said with an “I hope you know what you’re doing” tone in his voice.

“I have a rental car out in the parking lot at the back,” he said as they began moving through the crowds toward another exit.

Once in the car, Razik continued. “I have rented a furnished apartment almost opposite the Family apartment. It has a back entrance from an alley so that you can come in unobserved from the main street. I have been observing the apartment for several hours now. Nothing unusual, but I have spotted at least two surveillance teams watching the apartment.”

“A lot has happened today, which we need to tell you about,” said Jenny, and proceeded to do so as succinctly as she could. Razik breathed heavily as he digested the information.

“So according to this Lukas,” he said, “they may do it tonight?”

“Yes.”

“Then we need to move.” Razik started the car.

“Wait!” said Jenny. “What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know, but time is running out.” His voice betrayed impatience, frustration.

“We have an idea,” said Jenny.

Razik looked at her coldly. His authority was being challenged and he wasn’t going to yield easily.

“Go on,” he said.

“We assume that the phones are being tapped, so if we call that could alert them and force their hand to go ahead with the op.”

“Right.”

“So we need to go in personally. I would absolutely love to, but if they see me go in it’s a dead giveaway. Same for Nick, obviously.”

“Right.”

“So it’s between you and Ahmed. What do you think would be best?”

Nick’s pounding headache didn’t take away from his silent marveling at her tact. Razik was thinking hard.

“I think I should go in,” he said. “I have more experience in these things.”

Ahmed was silently bristling, but Jenny coolly continued.

“So what does everyone else think of that?” The silence was deafening.

“Pros and cons?” said Jenny after a few seconds. More silence.

“One pro,” offered Nick, “is that, as Agent Razik said, he is well trained.”

“The guys I used to work for are terrified of you,” said Ahmed, getting the point.

Razik looked at him coldly, but with more than a hint of pleasure.

“My only fear is that we need a real professional to...” Jenny was searching for the words.

“...direct and oversee the operation?” added Razik.

“Exactly.”

“I see your point,” he conceded. He looked at Ahmed darkly.

“You have training in poisons?”

“No self-respecting terrorist would be without it,” came the response. “Strychnine, arsenic, rhubarb leaves, anthrax, cancer implants—you name it, I know it. I also do bio-terror, except on Fridays, when I go to the mosque.”

Razik apparently missed the sarcasm.

“I’ve filled Ahmed in on all the details I know about the Home,” said Jenny, rescuing the situation. “I have a suggestion that he calls ahead of time, from the station here, and says he is a friend who Brad met or something and wants to drop by, and meet the Family. That way the Home knows, and also the surveillance teams know he’s coming so they don’t suspect something else.”

Razik nodded, and continued, “We will go to the apartment. I’ll give you our number there. Perhaps if you can meet the leader of the group, and give him the number, he can step out to the grocery store down the road, as if to buy something, and call us. There is a phone at the back. The lines will be clean and we can talk freely. If he talks to Jenny, he will trust you more, also.”

“Good,” said Ahmed. “And I will keep an eye on things and investigate. Now I’ll go and call. Anyone got some rubles?”

Nick and Jenny shrugged in response.

Ahmed looked at Razik who ungracefully yielded up a few coins. After he had gone, Razik shook his head.

“I sure hope this is going to be okay. How can we trust this man?”

“Ahmed’s good, very good,” said Jenny, and ran out of things to say.

Lukas’ mobile rang. Jenny answered it.

“Yes ... yes ... okay ... got it.” Over in less than 30 seconds.

“That was Lukas,” she said. “Brad and Leon are okay. He’s trying to find out where they are. The op is definitely on for tonight. He talked with Sanders who has something to do with media liaison which is planned for 9:30. So that means they must have something planned to start very soon. Jesus please help us. We claim Your power of the keys.”

“The power of what?” Razik queried, his interest aroused.

“The keys,” Jenny answered. “In the Bible Jesus gave His disciples the keys of the kingdom of Heaven and Hell, to bind all the power of Hell and loose all power of Heaven, and on Earth too. By claiming the keys, a prayer becomes more powerful.”

“You can claim this power? Just like this? Isn’t that too easy?”

“Jesus said we can if we obey Him and use this power to help others, to do His will.”

“This can be a very useful power to have, especially in my job. Teach me how to do it. I think we need this tonight.”

“I’d be happy to teach you what I know, which is kind of the basics, but...”

Ahmed came back from the phone.

“I called,” he said as he got into the car. “Spoke to a guy called Steve.”

“I know Steve. He works on ABM-related stuff,” said Jenny.

Ahmed shrugged and continued.

“First of all he was hesitant, wanted to meet tomorrow. He said Brad wasn’t there, had called in and said that the van had broken down. They were trying to get it fixed.”

“Probably forced to say this at gunpoint,” observed Razik.

“But I said I am a Jordanian student living here and I really want to know about your group. I am here at the subway, and can I please come tonight. He said they are having a birthday party for someone, but I’m welcome to join in.”

“We heard from Lukas,” said Jenny. “They said some media meeting is planned for 9:30, so they are definitely going to do something tonight, and soon.”

“So I’d better get going,” said Ahmed. “Uh ... could you please hold this for me?”

He pulled the submachine gun from under his jacket and handed it to Jenny.

She took it clumsily.

“Don’t worry, it’s not loaded.”

Ahmed looked at each of them searchingly for a moment, as if seeking some moral support.

Jenny spoke a few words in Arabic, which Nick understood to be a blessing of some kind. Then he was gone, his dark jeans and jacket suddenly dissolving into crowds of passers-by.

“I have a headache,” said Nick.

“Let me look at that,” said Jenny softly. “Oh, you poor thing, you have a huge bump and the skin is broken. You probably have a concussion.”

Razik was moving out of the parking lot. “You can rest when we get to the apartment,” he said.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

In five minutes they were there, parking in a dark, deserted alleyway. Jenny hid the empty submachine gun under the car seat. Razik led them through a vacant lot to an inauspicious brown wooden door. They followed him up a cobweb-laced, cracked-paint-adorned, musty-smelling stairwell, up three flights of stairs, and along a dim corridor to the apartment he had rented.

He indicated a bedroom to their right as they entered.

“That room has the best view of the apartment. We will use it only for observation. At no time will we turn on the light in that room. The blinds will be closed at all times in the other rooms. If you want to rest, Nick, you can use this bedroom on your left. Oh, by the way, I checked out of the hotel earlier, brought your bags. They are in the room.”

“Thanks. I’ll just rest on this couch here for now if you don’t mind.” He sat down heavily, suddenly feeling very tired.

“If you are okay, Jenny,” continued Razik, “we can take shifts watching the house for any activity. Half an hour at a time for maximum concentration. Report all movements. Your group occupies the ground-floor apartment of the building to the right of the one directly

opposite. There is one window into a living room where I have been able to observe some movement, but nothing unusual.”

“I can take the first shift,” said Jenny.

“It’s unfortunate that I don’t have my usual surveillance equipment with me, so we just have to use our eyes, and our senses. And ... those keys.”

“Exactly.”

Jenny left for the next room.

A few seconds later she called out.

“Ahmed just arrived by taxi. He’s gone in.”

Nick must have drifted off to sleep. He awoke to the sound of the phone ringing. He glanced up at a clock on the wall. It was 7:35.

Jenny picked it up.

“Hello ... yes this is Jenny. Steve? ... So great to talk to you. ... Yes I’m good ... by a miracle, or a string of them! ... Ahmed. Yes he’s very definitely a friend. ... So he told you what’s happening. ... I know ... I’m really desperately praying for you. So far we only know that your Home is involved but you’d better get ‘timelies’ to everyone else. We’ve been trying to get messages to you all day. We couldn’t call because, you know. We met Brad at the P.O. Did Ahmed tell you? ... We heard from this friend who’s helping us on the inside that they’re okay. He’s trying to get them out. ... I know. It’s totally bizarre. We don’t know everything, but definitely something’s supposed to happen tonight. I know it sounds crazy. So there’s someone there who’s a plant. Any ideas? ... Two new Russian disciples? Could it be one of them? Who’s that? ... What’s his name?”

Razik had come in from the other room and was listening. He looked at Jenny with his finger suspended above the phone’s speaker button. She nodded her consent. He clicked it on.

“*What was that click?*”

“We just turned on the speaker for the other guys to hear.”

“*What other guys?*”

“Friends who are helping.”

“*Okay, I trust you.*”

“Sorry this is all so sudden and so weird.”

“*Well some of us had warning dreams and prophecies about being on guard, but we just didn’t know what it was all about.*”

“Thank the Lord, He’s exposed it to us.”

“*So there’s this guy Phillip. He’s a live out. We’ve known him for about a year. He’s a student here. Wait a minute. Someone had a really weird dream about him a few weeks back. We didn’t know what to think because on the surface he seems the sweetest, sheepest guy, at least initially. Seems very interested in the Word. But it’s funny because we have had strong checks about him from time to time, especially recently, but didn’t have anything substantial to go on. He was planning to go on a trip back home in a few days so when he came back we were going to talk to him, see if anything would come out.*”

“Where’s he from?”

“*Denmark.*”

“Hamlet!”

“*What?*”

“His code name is Hamlet. Hamlet was Danish.”

“*Okay, I guess it’s possible.*”

“So you’re having a party tonight?”

“*Yeah, it’s actually for Phillip’s birthday. His birthday’s tomorrow, but he got a call today from his mother who got sick suddenly so he has to travel tomorrow rather than the day after. So he asked if we could celebrate tonight instead. We prayed about it and got an okay even though the kids went for a sleepover at another Home. For some reason the Lord told us to*

have them go ahead to the sleepover and have a few of us adults and SGAs there for the party. I guess now we know why."

Jenny looked up at the others. Razik nodded.

"I think that might be your man. What time's the party?"

"8:00."

"What refreshments?"

"I think there's cake and punch. I came out to supposedly get ice-cream."

"Okay, you'd better get back. There's probably something with the refreshments. Be careful!"

She covered the mouthpiece. "Anything else?"

Razik spoke. "Try not to do anything unusual to alert them. There may be a backup plan."

"Steve? They may have a backup plan so don't do anything unusual that might alert them."

"Okay."

"Trust Ahmed and work with him. He's very solid. ... Okay, I'm praying for you. Power of the keys!"

"Thanks."

The phone clicked into silence.

Jenny sat for a moment staring down into her lap. She looked up at Razik.

"I need to go there. Now."

"Sorry Jenny, you can't. It will spoil everything." Razik was firm.

"But what if they get it wrong? What if it *isn't* this Phillip guy? What if it's not the punch, the birthday party? What if it's something else? What if Ahmed misses it? What if Steve doesn't get there in time?"

"Jenny, if you walk in that front door, it will be very, very dangerous."

"I don't care. I need to be there to help them. Those people—there are parents of little kids. What if anything happens to them? You have to understand.

They are my family." She was in tears.

"The best way you can help them is to stay right here, out of sight." Razik was still adamant.

She turned pleadingly to Nick. "Nick, tell him about the fighter jet, about the Georgian girl Lala, about your wound. I can do it now. I know it's not me, just a gift the Lord gave me. But I think He wants me to go now and help. Tell him."

Nick looked at her, shaking his head slowly.

"I don't know much about it, Jenny, but I think Razik is right in this case. I know you want to go in. I would if I were in your shoes. But I think it's about the worst thing you could do right now."

Jenny was staring into space, her jaw set, tears drying on her cheeks.

"Hey, have you asked the Boss yet?" Nick's tone was suddenly gentle.

A moment's pause. "Well ... not really."

"Maybe you should, you know ... visit the bathroom?"

Without answering Jenny stood up and went straight to it.

Razik looked at Nick questioningly.

"She has this thing with bathrooms and God."

The Georgian raised his eyebrows in a less than confident acknowledgement of comprehension.

"I'd better get back to my observation post," he said and left the room.

Jenny was back a few minutes later.

"Okay, you win—or I suppose the Lord won. He said I should wait."

"Just like that, easy as that," said Nick.

"I'm supposed to have been practicing for this for years now. I should be way better at it than this."

Nick knew it was pointless to attempt to compliment the girl any further.

“Uh, should we ... like ... pray?” he offered uncertainly.

“Absolutely.”

So they prayed, taking turns, Jenny with simple impassioned eloquence, Nick stumbling through jumbled half sentences and badly remembered Bible verses.

After 15 minutes Razik put his head through the door.

“Someone just left the house. I didn’t recognize him. It wasn’t Steve. He just came back 10 minutes ago.”

“What did he look like?”

“From what I could tell, tall, fair, European.”

Jenny was silent for a second.

“I think it was him, the one. I just have that feeling.”

“Maybe,” said Razik.

Jenny pushed past Razik and went into the darkened room. Razik followed her in and Nick went after them, closing the door behind him.

The three crowded around a crack in the curtains, each straining for a view of what was happening. Pale streetlight bathed the front of the apartment block where the Home was located. The living room curtain was closed, but there was a light on inside. It all looked almost unbelievably normal.

A car was moving off down the street.

“Strange,” said Razik. “That was one of the surveillance teams. Why are they leaving?”

“Maybe their job is done,” said Jenny.

Razik looked at her sharply. Then back out at the street.

“The other van’s going too. They’ve been there most of the day.”

“Which means...,” added Nick.

The distant wail of a police siren seemed to complete his sentence.

“My God! It means they’ve done it,” said Razik.

The siren was getting louder. Within seconds a police car rounded the corner of the street, followed by another.

The door slammed behind them. Nick turned. Jenny was gone.

“Jenny, no!” shouted Nick.

Razik was already running toward the door. The apartment door slammed.

Nick ran after Razik, out through the apartment into the corridor, down three flights of stairs, out into the lobby of the apartment, out into the street opposite the home. Jenny was already halfway across. The street was filling with onlookers, police cars, an ambulance. Nick glimpsed a fair-headed man talking with the police, gesticulating wildly, leading some officers into the apartment. Out of nowhere there was a camera crew walking behind them, filming. Jenny was just behind the camera crew. No one seemed to see her.

Nick ran impulsively across the road, he was vaguely aware of policemen setting up a tape barrier, shouting something at him, but he ignored it. Jenny was disappearing into the apartment’s front door. As he gained the front door, he could see that the first door on the left was open. The camera crew was filming, moving into the room. Jenny was at the door, staring into the room with a look of horror on her face.

“No!” she screamed.

Nick caught up with her at the door. The room was brightly lit, balloons on the walls, and a tattered but colorful Happy Birthday sign. He could see one figure, a middle-aged man, sprawled out on a couch, a cup dropped on the floor from lifeless fingers. Horrified at what he would see next, Nick moved further in, gently touching Jenny’s shoulders with his hands. She didn’t

react. Nick counted three, four, five, six, seven bodies, discarded plastic cups, a half-empty bowl of reddish punch on the table in the middle of the room, ice blocks gleaming eerily on its frothy surface.

The police were quietly taking in the scene, the tall, fair-headed man still talking to them. He was picking up a paper off the floor, showing it to them, a printed page neatly laid out with a dark header.

Jenny turned for the first time and looked at Nick.

“We were too late! God help us. We were too late.” She was too dazed to cry.

Nick was grasping for something to help him comprehend what was happening. It was a moment frozen in time. The cameraman was still filming, a young dark-haired, jean-clad woman beside him whispering instructions. The police were listening intently to the fair-haired man, who was speaking to them in Russian. Nick would have restrained Jenny if he could have, but without warning she walked over to them and broke into the conversation, also speaking Russian and gesticulating toward the blond man who began to shake his head and argue vehemently. The police were looking at each other in confusion.

All in the room suddenly froze as a ripple of life ran through the bodies on the couches and the floors. In a second all were on their feet.

“It’s over, Phillip,” said a middle-aged man who Nick had first seen prostrate on the couch. Nick recognized his voice as Steve’s. “It didn’t work.”

Phillip looked around, recoiling in shock. His face was suddenly white as a ghost. The room was exploding with life. The police were drawing weapons, pulling out handcuffs, the reporter’s whispered instructions were turning to barked commands. Jenny was looking around in amazement.

Steve walked over to the officer in charge.

“Jenny, translate for me,” he said authoritatively. She nodded.

“In the bathroom behind the kitchen you will find the drink that this man was intending for everyone to drink. I retrieved these from the waste disposal.” He produced a plastic bag containing three small empty glass bottles. “I believe you will find them to contain traces of either arsenic or strychnine. I believe you will find this man’s fingerprints on them. In his personal belongings you will find a floppy disk with an original of the document that he is now holding, that he is probably claiming to be literature originating from our group.”

Phillip was looking around in near panic. The officer was looking at him in consternation. The officer spoke commandingly in Russian. He nodded to Jenny, who had somehow assumed the role of translator.

“He wants everyone to sit down and be quiet so that the investigation can be conducted in an orderly fashion.”

Nick noticed a subtle movement to his right. The cameraman was gingerly ejecting a tape from his camera and handing it to the reporter who slipped it into her handbag. He replaced the tape with another from his camera bag. Nick looked back at the officer. In the confusion he hadn’t noticed the switch. There was a faint whir of a tape fast forwarding, then the camera was back into record mode.

The reporter was slipping behind Nick’s back out of the room. Nick pretended not to notice. The room began to calm down, policemen guiding people to seats. Nick felt a tap on his elbow. It was Razik, beckoning him. A last glimpse of Jenny sitting down next to Steve and bubbling with whispered questions, and Nick was being escorted by Razik out into the cold night air.

Razik flashed a pass at a policeman who was now guarding the entrance. He nodded as they passed out into the crowd of onlookers who were gathering. The reporter passed them on her way back in, giving Nick a brief but knowing look.

“Stay in the crowd, and don’t speak to anyone,” said Razik. “I’ll get a taxi. We can’t leave here on foot.”

“What about Jenny?” whispered Nick.

“She’s with her people now. She’ll be okay.” Razik departed, his last comment leaving Nick feeling suddenly empty.

He attempted to melt into the crowd of busily chattering spectators, obviously exchanging explanations as to the nature of the operation. Suddenly he became aware of the presence of someone next to him.

“Hello Nick.” The voice was all too familiar.

“Levinski!” Nick turned in shock. Tom was standing beside him almost nonchalantly, his hands plunged deep into the pockets of a gray overcoat.

“How did you do it?”

“What?”

“Pull off this whole rescue deal?”

“It wasn’t me, believe it.”

“Then who?”

“I guess you’d have to ultimately give the credit to God, and a number of so-called coincidences which I’d prefer to call miracles.”

“So you’re a believer now? They got to you?”

“Yeah, they sure did.”

“And what am I supposed to say? Coises, foiled again? You have no idea what I put into this op.” Tom’s tone was one of suppressed anger.

“Yeah well, they’re a pretty tough bunch to take on. Don’t feel too bad you failed.”

“I should kill you right now.”

“The feeling is mutual.”

“Except I have a gun and you don’t.”

“There is that side to it.”

“But I’m not going to kill you.”

“Thank you. I appreciate that.”

“Ron thinks you’re dead. I don’t really know why I’m doing this, but I’m prepared to leave it that way. But I have some advice. If you want to stay alive, stay dead. Just go away, disappear. Don’t ever be seen or heard from again. Change your name. Go to the Cook Islands or Bolivia or somewhere. Not the States, never the States.”

“Okay.”

“It’s your only hope. And one more thing.”

“What?”

Tom hesitated and his voice shook slightly as he spoke. “Pray for me.”

“What?”

“I’m screwed, man—totally lost. I’m in way too deep. I suddenly saw it tonight. These people are God’s children. I’ve been fighting them, and He’s going to burn me.”

Nick had never seen vulnerability in Tom before.

“It’s never too late,” he began.

“Not for you, maybe, but for me it is. You only went through the first part of stage one. The first assignment. You never even got to the initiation.”

“Which is?”

“After you prove yourself, your loyalty, you complete your assignment well, then comes the initiation rites. Pledging allegiance to the masters ... to the supreme lord.”

“Who?”

“Why the hell am I telling you all this?” Tom was trembling, almost shaking.

“Just tell me one thing. Operation Scrooge: Is it real, or was it a joke?”

Tom looked at Nick, as if hungering after one moment of truthfulness.

“It’s real as they come. I set it up for you to find out about it. It was part of the test. I had to let you know what you were getting into. I thought you had come through. Passed. Obviously I was wrong. Or maybe you passed better than I will ever know about.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Nick saw a taxi pulling up.

“I have to go now. Uh ... thanks.”

“For what?”

“For not killing me ... and I will.”

“Will what?”

“Pray for you.”

“Just never let me see you again.”

Nick nodded. Levinski was already walking away through the milling crowds. Razik was beckoning him. He took one last look back toward the apartment, wanting to catch a glimpse of Jenny.

The reporters were being ushered out by the police, who were arguing with the cameraman. A policeman pulled out a revolver and began brandishing it in his face. The cameraman complied, ejected the tape and surrendered it, even as the female reporter let loose a volley of abuse.

Smart girl, thought Nick and turned toward the waiting taxi.

“Who was that man you were talking with?” asked Razik as the taxi pulled away.

“I don’t know. Some guy.” He was suddenly too tired to explain.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Back in Razik’s rented apartment, Nick sat down on the couch. Strangely his headache had gone, but he was very tired.

Razik went into another room. Nick heard his voice and presumed he was making a phone call.

Shortly afterwards he emerged.

“I spoke with Minister Tamaridze. He was glad the operation was successful and sent his congratulations.”

Nick nodded.

“He also extended an invitation to you to be his guest for this time, until things have blown over. He would appreciate further information on the strategies and policies of your former employers. You will also have a chance to rest and recuperate. He feels it would not be safe for you here, and I agree. I think you should leave Moscow as soon as possible. If you are agreeable, there is a flight at 6:30AM. I still have your papers and will return with you.”

“I need a bit of time to think.”

“Of course.”

“I...”

“Yes?”

“I want to see Jenny.”

Razik sighed heavily. “Yes, of course this is under-

standable. But difficult. Very difficult.” He thought for a moment. “I will try to arrange something. Perhaps now you should rest.”

“Yes I think you are right ... uh ... thank you so much for all you are doing.”

“It is nothing,” said the Georgian dismissively.

Nick went into the other room and lay down on the bed.



The overwhelming emptiness that had begun with Razik’s comment about Jenny had been growing steadily for the last half hour. As he closed his eyes it seemed to morph into a huge chasm of pain and longing that dwarfed any worries about the future or regrets about the past. Without really knowing why, Nick started crying. He suddenly knew he was not merely longing for Jenny, but yearning for God. His whole soul seemed to fill with an almost unbearably intense desire to be united with his Creator. He lay in that state for several minutes. Somehow the intensity of yearning was becoming pleasant, almost pleasurable. His mind, his thoughts, his entire being began to fill with an uncanny sensation of lightness, an ecstasy unlike any he had ever experienced. He was laughing and crying at the same time. A peace that could not be comprehended in human words or thoughts or labeled by any emotion he could name was ebbing into him and flowing out of him. Even though he could not remember ever consciously experiencing anything of the sort, he was utterly comfortable with it, almost familiar with it. For long delicious moments the sensation undulated, and cascaded through his entire consciousness.

“Jesus, Jesus, Jesus,” he began whispering desperately, fervently, incessantly.

He must have fallen asleep in that state, for he was

awoken by a knock at the door. He started up from the bed. The door opened. It was Razik.

“Some people are here to see you,” he whispered.

Nick arose groggily, trying to make out the dial on his watch in the darkened room.

“What time is it?”

“3:30AM.”

A faint headache combined with the euphoria of his dreamlike state enveloped him as he walked toward the door.

Jenny was sitting on the couch, Steve next to her. She looked tired but radiant.

She rose and greeted him with a warm hug.

“Hey Nick. How are you? How’s your head? Let me see?” She examined the bump on the side of his head as he mumbled a reciprocal greeting.

“You know Steve?”

“By sight only. We never met.”

“Hey, it’s good to meet you, Nick,” said Steve and hugged him. He smelt faintly of cologne and baby formula.

Razik was quietly busying himself with something in the corner of the room. Nick looked his way in an acknowledgement of thanks. He nodded briefly in response.

The three sat on the couch.

“So tell me, what’s been happening?” said Nick. Jenny and Steve looked at each other and laughed.

“Quite a night,” said Steve. “Why don’t you tell it, Jenny?”

“The police finally left about an hour ago,” Jenny started. “They searched the whole place, questioned everyone. They took Phillip in, as they couldn’t deny the evidence.”

“Though if you ask me, there was definitely some complicity there,” added Steve.

“Undoubtedly. You know they confiscated the tape from the cameraman?” said Jenny.

“Yeah, that was bad news,” continued Steve, “as the whole reason that we ... that the Lord showed us to do it that way, you know, the whole fake thing, was that we could get the media to record it and lessen the chance of any cover-ups. That was Ahmed’s idea, by the way. Smart fellow, that one.”

“I think I have some good news for you, in that case,” said Nick.

“What?” both of them replied.

“They swapped out the tape. You know that reporter girl?”

“You mean the cute one?” said Steve.

“Yes, the cute one. I saw her do a switch on the tape and I think she went and hid it in her car.”

“She was around afterwards and I talked to her for about fifteen minutes,” said Jenny. “I told her basically the whole story.”

Nick was looking at her questioningly.

“Except the part about you, of course!”

“So tell me what happened?” Nick urged.

“Well,” Steve continued, “Ahmed came, as you know, and took me aside and informed me about it all, wrote it all down. Phew, that was the shock of a lifetime. Then while I was out calling, he was sort of snooping around as best he could. That’s when he found the bottles in the waste disposal. It was supposed to all get crushed, but for some reason it hadn’t been done yet—oh yeah, because it’s Brad’s JJT, and we all forgot to do it, so that was a miracle. So he guessed it was in the punch. We suspected it was Phillip.

“Then we had all these party games planned so we did this whole blindfolding game, etc., and of course Phillip had to play along. So Ahmed slipped up to

his room and in his stuff he found this fake letter, supposedly from the Family leadership with this whole ‘The world is too evil, let’s end it all’ message on it. It was awful, if in a brilliant sort of way—all these misquoted verses about the Rapture, totally aimed at discrediting any believers in the Endtime prophecies. Phillip left it in the living room after the so-called suicide. Anyway, God bless Ahmed, the guy’s sharp as nails. He found a disk in Phillip’s things that had the original file. So he made a copy of the file and took pictures of the original disk and printout for evidence.”

“Then we had to quickly decide what to do, and we went for swapping the punch and doing the whole fake scene to get the media on our side. Thank God we had those two identical punch bowls. That was a miracle in itself. And while I was at the shop making the call the Lord had told me to buy extra ice and cordial and lemonade ... phew boy. Thank the Lord for prophecy.”

Nick laughed.

“So what happened to Ahmed?”

“Once he was sure everything was okay,” said Steve, “he just kind of disappeared. God only knows where he went.”

“Knowing Ahmed, he’ll take care of himself,” said Jenny.

“And Brad and Leon? Any news from them?”

“Oh I totally forgot!” Jenny exclaimed. “They turned up about a half-an-hour ago. Lukas got them out somehow. I haven’t heard the whole story yet.”

“And Lukas?”

“They said he just dropped them somewhere, gave them money for a taxi, and drove off.” Jenny shrugged. “What a sweet guy. Lord, please take care of him wherever he is ... probably on the way to Australia or somewhere.”

Nick cleared his throat. Steve and Jenny obviously sensed his intention to say something significant, and paused in their narrative.

“So Steve, are you the guy that works on the treaty negotiations, and all that?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I mean, if you don’t want to discuss it, it’s fine. I understand. I’m just trying to establish if you have some type of position of authority in the group.”

Steve looked at Jenny and shrugged quizzically.

“Well, not really. I mean, we don’t really have that kind of a structure. But I definitely don’t um ... usually ... or ever, really, do treaty negotiations.”

“Like I said, I totally understand that you don’t want to discuss it. I mean, I understand that it’s probably sensitive, you being a member of a religious group and also involved on such a high level.”

“What are you talking about, Nick?” said Jenny, her brow furrowed.

“Well earlier on you said something about Steve working on ABM stuff—you know, the Anti-Ballistic-Missile treaties ... negotiating or interpreting or whatever.”

At that Steve and Jenny dissolved into fits of laughter. Nick looked at them in bewilderment. Jenny was laughing so hard she was wiping away tears.

“Sorry, sorry,” she eventually managed to gasp. “It’s not personal. It’s just that ABM stands for”—further paroxysms of mirth—“for area business manager.”

Nick let out a sigh of exaggerated exasperation before joining in with the laughter.

“I definitely need to get a better handle on all your acronyms,” he managed.

“I needed that,” said Jenny after she had pulled herself together sufficiently. “These last few days have been so intense.”

Nick obviously still had something to say. Steve

and Jenny got a hold of themselves once more and assumed listening position.

“So the point I was getting to here, Steve, is since you’re the Area Business Manager ... er ... where do I apply? Like do you have a human resources department? Do I submit a CV? Do I do an interview? I mean, how does it work?”

“Sorry, I don’t quite follow,” Steve replied.

“I mean, do you have open positions? Are you in need of personnel? I’ll do anything—drive a van, KP, I can type. Whatever you want. I also have a degree, but I understand that probably doesn’t count for much.”

“Nick got his MBA at Yale,” added Jenny quietly.

“Yeah whatever,” Nick continued. “But the main point here is that I want to do what you all do, whatever that entails. I mean, if the rest of you are anything like this lady here, I want to be a part of you. Today. Every day for the rest of my life.”

“Well, that’s great,” said Steve with a trace of uncertainty.

“It’s okay. I know it’s not for her. It’s for Jesus. It’s all for Him. I just know now that’s what I want to do. Live for Him.”

“That’s just fantastic.” Steve’s tone, though encouraging, still betrayed some questions.

“Yes, I know that I’m a very controversial figure, and it’s not like I would just be able to move in. Obviously you all probably have some selection, some screening procedures or whatever. I understand that, but I want to know how to begin the procedure, how to apply to become a member.”

“Usually there’s a time period where we’d get to know you.”

“Okay,” explained Nick, “here’s the thing. Agent Razik has worked it out for me to go back to Georgia for a while until things simmer down. Maybe you can

pray for me about that, but it seems wise to get away from the action for a while, and your community here is likely to be pretty high profile right now.”

“Right.”

“But in time I want to work with you. Anywhere, really.”

“Do you have anywhere in mind?”

“I don’t know. Do you have communities in Bolivia? The Cook Islands?”

“Bolivia maybe, the Cook Islands, I don’t think so.”

“I always wanted to pioneer the Cooks,” interjected Jenny, her eyes sparkling.

Nick thought for a moment more before continuing.

“See, the masters think I’m dead, and it’s probably better I stay that way. I’m going to have to change my whole identity. I don’t ever want to do anything that would incriminate all of you. So if I’m too hot a potato...”

“I’m sure that the Lord has a way to work it out.” Steve spoke with the simplicity of a faith that had weathered many storms.

“So where do we go from here?” asked Nick.

“We have to leave for the airport in about 15 minutes,” interjected Razik, who had been quietly listening, “that is, if you want to go.”

“Can we pray?” said Nick. “I don’t know what to do.”

Jenny prayed, asking for guidance, and all were quiet for a few moments.

Nick looked around expectantly.

“What did you get?” asked Jenny. “After all, it’s your decision.”

“I don’t know, but I feel it’s safer to get away from here now, and this is a good opportunity.”

“I got that too,” said Jenny, “but we should decide on a way to stay in touch.”

Steve was nodding. “I got that verse about fleeing to another city when they persecute you in one.”

“So I go. But give me an email address or a number or something, and I’ll write. I’ll use a code name. I feel like a ‘brand snatched from the burning’ so I’ll be Brand ... Brandon.”

Jenny wrinkled her nose a little. “Not exactly my favorite name, but it can pass for now.”

Steve was scribbling an email address on a piece of paper.

“Just be careful what you write,” he said. “Here’s snail mail too. Might actually be safer. And you’d better call Jenny something else.”

“Okay, I’ll write to you as ... Vanessa.”

“Vanessa?” Jenny’s nose wrinkled again. “Can’t you think of something better than that? Oh, okay, don’t worry. Leave it for now.”

Nick was fidgeting with the paper uncomfortably.

“Could I ask for just a moment alone with Jenny?” he blurted out.

“Fine with me.” Steve shrugged.

Jenny nodded and followed him into the other room. He closed the door after she entered and leant against it. He breathed deeply before speaking.

“I had ... an epiphany.”

“A what?”

“Like a spiritual experience.”

“When?”

“Just a few hours ago. I suddenly knew ... that ... God loves me. I don’t know why or how. I know that He’s called me for something.”

“That’s wonderful.”

“How does it work?”

“What?”

“The whole thing. I just can’t fathom the mercy in it. I was recruited by some of the most evil people on the planet and went into it with almost totally selfish motives, and somehow God took it and turned it into this victory. If I hadn’t gone for it...” He paused. There was no need to enumerate the alternative ending.

“It is amazing.”

“You know, I saw Levinski—the guy who recruited me.”

“Really? Where?”

“Outside your apartment. We talked for a few minutes. So many things suddenly made sense. I’d always wondered why they trusted me so quickly. Suddenly I saw how they had me profiled so accurately they knew how I would respond. The only thing they couldn’t have predicted was you. You were the king’s pawn, the one factor they had no control over.”

Nick paused as if summoning courage.

“So?” said Jenny.

“I don’t know what’s going to happen with my life. But if it ever was to be possible...” He sank down on to one knee and looked up at her.

“Would you marry me?”

“Why?” There was no sarcasm in Jenny’s response, only genuine curiosity.

“Because I’ve never met anyone like you ... and because you are everything I want in a woman, and because ... because you’re the only person I know that I’m sure isn’t part of some kind of a conspiracy.”

She looked down at him for a second, then spoke into her wristwatch.

“Lion King, this is white pawn. We have captured white knight, repeat, we have white knight, over.”

“Okay, very funny. Now don’t change the subject on me.”

Jenny looked him straight in the eye.

“Ask me again in six months.”

“Why? I want to know now.”

“Why? One: because it’s 3:45AM, which is a traditionally bad time of the day to propose. Two: because we’ve only known each other in near-death circumstances, which isn’t a very solid basis for a relationship, and three: because you need to join the Family and wait six months.”

“Okay, but you didn’t say no.”

“No, that’s true. I didn’t.”

Nick stood up again.

“I don’t know if I can do this without you,” he said.

“Nick, I know it’s hard ... but I need my Family now. I’ve been away so long and I need to ... get re-connected.”

“I wasn’t seriously thinking of you coming with me. I’m just telling you how I feel. I need your ... simplicity, your strength, even your fragility.”

Jenny put her arms around him. They held each other for a long moment.

There was a gentle knock at the door.

“Can we pray?” Nick asked.

Jenny nodded, meaning, “You pray.”

Nick struggled with his thoughts for a moment before closing his eyes and plunging in.

“Excuse me God, uh, that is, Jesus, I don’t know exactly what Your timeframe is. I don’t have a copy of Your itinerary, and I’m not aware of Your schedule or whatever other pressing matters You have to attend to, but I wanted to suggest, if You are indeed thinking of coming back, that is returning, that You might want to consider doing so ASAP. Things are getting quite confusing down here right now, and in light of certain information that I have recently become privy to, it

seems that they will only continue to degenerate.

“My personal conviction is that Your return at this juncture would indeed be a highly appropriate move. Of course, at the end of the day that’s a decision only You can make and I don’t want to pressure You, but I’m just explaining things from my current perspective, which is that mankind is in an unprecedentedly deep amount of excrement, and You would seem to be the only one able to pull us out of it right now.

“I don’t know what more I can say at this present moment, but if You don’t mind me asking You about one last point, please take care of Jenny and also let us meet again, because I don’t think I can do the rest of my life without her. But even in that, You know what’s best so please ... whatever.” He faltered and turned to look at Jenny, thinking she would probably be chuckling at his theologically inept ramblings. But she was looking at him with an intense reverence, and an unattended tear was rolling down her cheek. There was a stronger knock at the door.

Nick opened it as Jenny wiped her eyes.

“Time to go,” said Razik.

Ahmed was sitting on the couch, talking with Steve.

He looked up at Jenny and Nick as they entered the room.

“I came to get my Uzi,” he said. Almost as an afterthought he added, “and to say goodbye.”

“Ahmed will come with us to the airport,” said Razik, “and take the rental car back. I was wondering how I was going to do that until he showed up.”

“At least I’m useful for something. Maybe I should go back to Amman and be a taxi driver after all.”

Razik ignored the comment. “We can talk more on the way,” he said. He turned to Jenny and looked at her searchingly.

“If we can arrange for you to visit Tbilisi again, can you give training courses in these keys? They work very well. I think my men need to know about this.”

“I’d be honored to, whenever it works out,” said Jenny.

“Speaking of keys, I rented this place for a month, now I won’t use it. You are welcome to use it. It’s paid for one month. Turn in the keys when you are done.” He pulled the keys out of his pocket and handed them to Steve. “Maybe you’ll need somewhere to get away from the action a bit these days.” Razik smiled, one of the first Nick had seen from him.

“Let’s go.” Razik grabbed his suitcase and proceeded toward the door.

Nick followed suit. Jenny walked beside him all the way down to the car.

In a space of time that was way too short for Nick, the car was pulling out of the underground carport and Nick was waving goodbye, straining his eyes for the last glimpse of Jenny’s face. She waved breezily and smiled. Nick wondered whether she was not particularly sad at his departure, or merely steeling herself and hiding her feelings very well. He chose to believe the latter.

Ahmed was driving. Razik, utterly exhausted, had taken the back seat and was lying down. After a few minutes Ahmed looked at Nick with an unmistakable trace of sympathy.

“You like her, don’t you?”

Nick nodded. “And you?”

Ahmed nodded. After a pause he added. “But that’s okay. You can have her.”

“Thank you. That’s most kind of you.”

“I don’t think she likes me in that way,” Ahmed said pensively. “Besides, tonight I met the most incredible girl at their apartment. I think her name is Shane or Shanie. Just like Jenny, same spirit, but blonde.”

“Hmm,” said Nick, looking at Ahmed playfully. “I hadn’t fancied you as a ladies’ man. I thought you were perhaps too dedicated to your cause.”

“I am dedicated, and it’s been a long time. But there must be time for other things. When I was a student in America I had many girls. For example this girl I knew at UCLA...”

“You went to UCLA?”

“Yes. Anyway, I had this girlfriend there. She always used to rate my performance, like a professor or something. One time she gave me an A, said no one had ever gotten an A before.”

“No, you’re kidding? Her name wasn’t Sabrina was it?”

Ahmed looked at him narrowly.

“It was, actually. It’s an Arabic name.”

“Well, the girl I’m thinking of wasn’t Arabic. She was blond, blue-eyed, and American as apple pie.”

“Sounds like Sabrina. She had Syrian parents. But blonde as they come.”

“What was her second name?”

“Al-Jadwali.”

“Well, the girl I’m thinking of was Brookes, Sabrina Brookes.”

“Hmm ... a brook is like a small river, or a stream, right?”

“Right.”

“That’s what Jadwal means in Arabic.”

“It couldn’t be the same girl, could it?”

“Why?”

“Because this girl Sabrina Brookes told me exactly the same thing.”

“Sounds like her.”

“When did you see her last?”

“Two years ago in Geneva. She gave me a briefcase with two million dollars in it ... for our ‘cause’.”

Nick looked at him in incredulity.

“That’s impossible. It can’t be the same girl.”

“Why not?”

“Because she’s a die-hard member of the guys I was with, who are earnestly seeking to cream your lot.”

Ahmed’s coal black eyes searched Nick’s for a moment before turning back to the road. “At this point,” he said unemotionally, “nothing surprises me any more.”

“You mean they actually support extremists as well? Play both sides against the other?”

“It would make sense. I sensed it at times, wondering where all the money was coming from. It sure wasn’t all Saudi billionaires.”

“What are you saying?”

“People need enemies. Some countries’ main import is support and assistance with their security situation. Anything to keep the money flowing.”

“Phew, this stuff goes pretty deep, doesn’t it.”

“Deeper than we’ll ever know,” sighed Ahmed. “Which is why I don’t want to be a part of it any more. I’m sick of being somebody’s well-meaning, dedicated, deluded pawn. I just want to be free.” He hit the steering wheel in a gesture of pent up frustration.

“So what are you going to do?”

“Hang around Moscow for a while. See if there’s some work. Maybe drive a taxi. Maybe visit the Family.”

“Get to know Shanie,” said Nick teasingly.

“Maybe study the holy books together.” For once Ahmed was laughing with Nick. A rare moment and one Nick savored in spite of himself.



At the airport, after a farewell to Ahmed that was more emotional than Nick had planned, he and Razik sailed through immigrations once again on

the strength of Razik's expertly faked documents. As soon as they were on the plane, Razik went back to sleep.

After they had taken off, Nick turned on his mini TV screen and found a BBC world news broadcast.

"A faint but promising light was seen at the end of a very long tunnel today in Sharm el Sheikh, Egypt, where a draft agreement of the ground-breaking Jerusalem agreement was approved in principle by both the Israelis and the Palestinians. After years of bloodletting on both sides this represents a major breakthrough. The main substance of the agreement consists of a seven-year interim plan for the complete withdrawal from occupied territories of Israeli forces and the setting up of a Palestinian state. Although there are many issues still to be addressed and it is likely that a significant period of time will still pass before the on-the-ground implementation of the interim period, today's accord still represents substantive progress."

Memories of the Bible verses Jenny had read with him flooded back into his thoughts. It was coming true before his eyes. The final movement of the great symphony of history was beginning and he was watching it, the events unfolding like long stirring majestic chords resolving from the dissonance of mystery to the harmony of fulfillment. All doubt was gone from his mind. It was going to happen.

Another brief news item suddenly caught his attention.

"In a bizarre incident in Moscow, police apparently foiled the attempted poisoning of members of a religious sect. A European man has been taken into

custody in relation to the incident. Police described him as a disaffected member, who has a history of mental illness. Claims by some members of the group of conspiracy in the incident were dismissed by law enforcement officials who said that the man acted alone. It is expected he will receive psychological treatment."

The item was accompanied by footage of the apartment living room, the police questioning Phillip. Nick saw Steve, and for a split second before the film cut, he glimpsed Jenny's face as she translated. A surge of emotion ran through him at the sight of her. He turned off the display and leaned back in his seat.

As he closed his eyes a picture flashed into his mind as if projected against the inside of his retinas. He saw Razik's rental car disappearing around the corner of the apartment's carport, Jenny's composure suddenly dissolving as soon as the car was out of sight. Steve was trying to comfort her, arm around her shoulders. In a single empathetic instant, Nick suddenly felt her heart, and sensed at least a fragment of all that it had cost her to become what she was.

Intruding on the fragrance of the moment, he became aware of questions lining themselves up in his mind like so many tired, sweaty passengers at the immigration counter of a third-world airport. When would he see Jenny again? Would he be able to attain the same dedication to the goals she served? What awaited him in Georgia? Where would he go after that? Would Levinski keep his word or would he tell Arens he was still alive? Would they try to track him down?

Suddenly he was strangely excited by the fact that he had nothing left to go back to, nothing to depend on, no future security to lean on. There was also

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nothing from the past that could limit him, restrict him, define him. Nothing left but to be driven by an unfathomable destiny wherever it might lead him. Suddenly he wasn't worried any more. He closed his eyes and decided to go to sleep. He knew. The Boss would take care of it.

EPILOGUE

(Five months later:)

From: Brandon

To: Vanessa

Subject: Re: Something I got for you

Hey Vanessa, thanks so much for the email, it was incredible to hear from you. Your poem was totally awesome. I loved the line about

*You were the dream I deleted
from my hard drive
The unrecoverable file
That suddenly one day was there again*

Great stuff, you should do something with it. Hey what am I saying, you are doing something with it! You're giving your all to the Boss and He's using you incredibly.

Thanks for letting me know about the trip down to where we met. It's fantastic to hear that you and Steve and Brad were able to go down there and hear how well everyone's doing. Our friend "R" and his obsession with the keys is so funny. I mean, has he figured out how to use them yet?

Thanks again also to you and Steve and everyone for working out my safe transferal out here. Everyone is so amazingly sweet to me and tolerant, as well as encouraging me to take each baby step at a time. After experiencing all the hell I went through I can honestly say this is the closest thing to Heaven on Earth!

Speaking of which, I wanted to tell you something that happened today. I can laugh about it now...

About 10:15 Joel, the guy I room with, you know the 22-year-old guy who says he remembers you from Poona. Anyway he's on the TW so he comes to me all chipper and says, "Hey Brandon, how'd you like to do lunch today?" And I thought, "Cool, I haven't been out for a while, should be a nice change." So he's on the way out the door to do some shopping or something, and says meet me in the kitchen at 11:45 and I'll explain. And I'm thinking explain??? What's this all about? Maybe some big surprise appreciation at a provisioned restaurant, you know how people are always being so sweet to me. I keep telling them I am not a special case!!!

So anyway I thought I'd better wear a tie and all, probably a big deal and I don't want to look underdressed ... and you know since I forsook all I don't exactly have my Saville Row stuff any more! So I go round the whole Home looking for a shirt and tie and finally Phil has one, you know the business TW guy, and it's not exactly Pierre Cardin but hey ... we're serving the Lord, right?

So there I am in the kitchen, immaculately attired at precisely 11:45 all ready to go out and "do lunch" with Joel ... and he walks in carrying

these 5 cans of tuna and a loaf of bread. I'll never forget the look on the poor guy's face. I mean I admit I did feel kind of humiliated, but I really tried to cover it up and laugh it off for poor Joel's sake.

So I now know how to ... (drum roll) ... make tuna salad.

Which reminds me, the day before yesterday I stuck my foot in it again. I was in the kitchen making myself some coffee and I overheard two of the girls talking about their kids' education, and one of them was saying I'm going to write the FED and ask for some help on it. So the rest of the afternoon I was thinking hey, cool, that's really like reaching the rich, but if we're going to be hitting Alan Greenspan for some baksheesh, then we'd better go about it the right way. So that evening I went to Phil all serious and asked him if he felt that the girls maybe needed a little help in their strategy, because approaching the Federal Reserve for a donation, you know there are certain procedures and conventions that would need to be observed, etc.

Eventually after some confusion, explanation and hysterical laughter we got it all sorted out, but I was thinking of writing to the GV about maybe starting a language course for new Family members. Especially those who are used to obscure, out of the way places with strange dialects like L.A. What do you think? Brad could do the section on acronyms.

I am rambling.

I've been working through the basic course. Every day is like discovering a new treasure. Dad was amazing, the way he saw everything that was going on. Such incredible insight. I

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love the guy to pieces, I'm only sorry I wasn't around while he was still alive. What am I saying? He's more alive than ever. I can never thank you enough for being the one that helped me find these riches.

I miss you every day, but I'm working on not missing you too much. I know that it's all going to be worth it in the end. As you said, we have to leave it on the altar and if it's His will, He'll work it out. I can't tell you how incredibly much I admire that in you. I guess that's why you are where you are, and who you are, and used the way you are.

But I still can't forget what ... we started in a certain ... er ... office space in those orange boiler suits! It's hard to believe that's the only time I ever kissed you. If there was ever a chance to complete what was so rudely interrupted by that terrible German woman ... but, whatever it takes. It's in His hands!

Stay in touch, babe. You're still my guru!

*Love always,
Brandon*