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Printed in the United States of America

First Printing, 2011

ISBN 0-9000000-0-0

Watson A. Nayme Publishing
58 Ash St.
Nashua, NH 03060

Edited by Sally Felgate Talbot

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Prologue (mid-summer 2092)

The young couple sat tired and frazzled, yet anxious and excited, on a well-worn, ancient log which had long since been stripped clean of any bark. Its surface was worn so smooth, one might have thought that it had been carefully, and lovingly sanded smooth by a skilled carpenter taking great pains and laborious effort to produce a fine piece of furniture. It had the unmistakable feel of solidness and durability that only time and nature can impart upon an object, much like the man whose story they had traveled so far to hear.

Forty three days they had hiked, with nothing more than sleeping bags and frame packs. Surviving on nuts, trail mix, and what little the inhospitable land could offer. They had passed through harsh desert landscape, and ruinous cityscapes, through dry riverbeds and over rocky, barren mountains. A veritable wasteland created by the apathy, indifference and hatred of those who had come and gone. There were few people left now much older than themselves, but they knew this had not always been the case. Even as they knew that it had been the

14 Other Ways to Die / 3

hatred, apathy and paranoia of those who had come and gone that had destroyed a once great culture.

Countless millennia of knowledge, art, and culture had been left to decay, wither, and rot; as their elders had rioted, ravaged, and harangued each other for the carrion that had once been a vibrant society. Driven by nearly maniacal obsessions of self-entitlement and greed, they had become enamored with the pursuit of trinkets, trifles, and toys to the exclusion of all else, following a path lay out by men of dishonest repute and questionable motivations.

Amber and Kyle had come hundreds of miles to see a man whom many thought could never have existed. A man most thought was just a legend. It had been a forty three day struggle for survival, but they hoped that this man's wisdom might provide a model for themselves and others their own age in these new times.

These were the times of the Reformation, a word which to them seemed such a misnomer. To them, and to other young people like themselves; who still had early childhood memories of the dark days; these were times full of great hope and future promise.

They were second year college students, in one of the new colleges. Colleges created by people not much older than they in hopes of educating and preparing a new generation that would hopefully avoid the mistakes of the past. A new generation which hoped to build a much better world than the one that had come before. A world based upon creativity, cooperation and sharing unlike what had come before; a world based upon consumption, competition and greed.

Their journey had been harsh, but they had promised themselves that the dangers would be worth it. After all the man who sat before them was the stuff of great myth. They hoped that his story might inspire others and themselves; a man who had built, here in this solitary landscape, an oasis that had

survived the dark times which had ravaged the rest of society, an isolated place that had for decades been a respite from the cold callousness of a society that was in decay; a place that for these two young people seemed to prove the model of how men could live peacefully with each other.

The man who sat before them was at least seventy years there senior. His skin was full of deep crags and wrinkles, and had a sun darkened mocha patina which resembled the very same log on which they now sat. Neither of them had ever seen a man as old as the one they now shared their pot with.

They had discovered right away the man's love of art, music, and literature, but were shocked to find that his greatest love was the weed which grew so easily here and which he shared so freely. His beard and hair grew wild and unkempt, like the tangled brush that had served to protect this hidden oasis for so many years. It was completely white and hung down several feet. His feet were bare and his once-white and threadbare sleeveless shirt hung loosely over his thin frame and his cut-off B.D.U. shorts, which he fastened with a single thin piece of rope.

He sat on the lake sands, across a fire that seemed to bridge the distance of their years, in the vastness of the night, beneath a blanket of twinkling stars. Both legs crossed and his back straight, it was easily apparent he was anxious to tell his story.

"Yes I knew Eric Mahpiya, but if you-ah he-ah to paint him as some kind of terrorist you've come to the wrong place. Eric was a good friend and a good man, and I won't have anyone talkin' shit 'bout him," The old man said passing the joint back to the pretty young lady.

"No, no, that's not what we're here for. Were college students we just want to hear the truth so that people will know," the young man quickly

responded. The old hippy wondered if it were possible that he had ever been so young. He knew he must have been, but the hope and spirit the young man portrayed seemed so alien to a man whose life had been so full of hardship and turmoil. Whenever he tried to cling to the few memories he had left from his own youth it inevitably felt as though he was remembering some movie or story he had once heard, and now only vaguely remembered.

“Well then whay-uh do I staht? The old man wondered aloud with a thick southern New England accent. “Hey don’t bogey that joint,” and so his story began.

Volume One

Chapter 1 (August 25, 2018)

Letters from home rarely ever carry good news, and this one was no different. Eric had read it over a hundred times already, but read it again nevertheless, hoping that one more time might reveal what he thought was missing.

The bus ride from Denver to South Dakota had taken over a day and a half. Eric had tried to sleep but found his thoughts conspiring against his best efforts. Instead he found himself staring out the dark-tinted, rain-spotted windows at remembrances of his youth, as memories went flashing by. Each new site bringing back visions both good and bad: hopes, dreams, and regrets, all flashing through his mind's eye from moment to moment.

The homes here were small and simple; trailers on flat tires, and small one, and two room shacks with broken roofs, and tar paper siding. Many of them made use of tin foil, cardboard, or bed sheets to cover broken and cracked windows. Blue tarps lay stretched over the roofs of a few to protect the occupants from the all too few rains and heavy snowfalls of the plains. Long uncut prairie grasses poked up through front steps and from around cracked and decaying tires. All of them nestled on gently rolling, barren, wind-swept grasslands. It

might as well have been a third world country for all of its despair and poverty. Be what it may this was home; this was the Crow Creek Reservation.

Eric had been delivered on the reservation by his Grandmother and two of the elder women of their community. The evening of his birth his Grandfather had taken note of a stunning sunset over the wind-swept horizon. He had stood in awe and amazement, under the violet, gold, and crimson skies of South Dakota, as he was presented with his perfect tiny Grandson. He and his father had decided at that, their proudest moment that the beautiful baby boy should be named Eric Wakatanka Luta Mahpiya, or Eric of Gods Red Sky.

Eric had grown into a smart, active, young boy in a rusted, old two bedroom mobile home on the Lakota Reservation that had become overly crowded by three generations of family. Love was so alive in the cramped space - despite or maybe because of the closeness off their surroundings - that it seemed to take on a life of its own. Yet just before Eric's ninth birthday, in the hope of offering their son better opportunities, Eric and his parents removed themselves to Denver and a new future.

In Denver things had been more difficult than they would have hoped. When the family had first arrived, a shortness of income and savings had forced them into a couple of small, cramped rooms in a rooming house just off of Colfax. Forced to share a bathroom and kitchen facilities with prostitutes and drug addicts, Eric's teen years had been surrealistic. Fights, shootings, and stabbings were a normal occurrence in the blacktop jungle of Denver. Eric's parents tried hard to hide the uglier side of life from him, but like too many children of the time, and circumstances, he was forced to grow up faster than his parents would have enjoyed.

As a child Eric hadn't had the luxury of video games. In fact, Eric hadn't had the opportunity to experience nearly any childhood diversions in Denver. Even swimming and frolicking

in the lakes and rivers had been lost to his generation, as more than a century of widespread pollution and inattention had left the waterways in and around Denver prone to infectious and contagious bacteria. Public swimming pools were few and far between and cost too much for his family to afford on a regular basis; and public parks, underfunded and under patrolled, had become unsafe for any but the criminally minded.

Instead his family chose to emphasize him getting an education, and so Eric found many hours of pleasure in reading. He often fantasized about paddling an old raft down some forgotten river, or discovering an old wardrobe that would transport him away from his awkward existence. Books in many ways became a method of escape for a young brain with too many questions. He had always been a very bright child and learnt to wonder, very early on, how some things could be possible.

As a child, Eric had seen how racism and class-ism - two things that were heralded by his teachers as things of the past - were in truth bubbling just beneath the surface, and for his family were an everyday occurrence. Being from Native American descent members of his family were seen as lazy, shiftless drunkards by many uneducated members of the community. Public taunts were an all too common occurrence on the rough streets of Lower Colfax.

He remembered those days in Denver when his parents had worked over 90 hours a week. Days spent fighting for work at a rundown labor hall just a few blocks from the rooming house. Often they would sit at that labor hall all day with no reward. When those days turned into several, the family would suffer.

Sundays, the only day his parents had any free time, were spent at the Laundromat, where the stench of urine prevailed and assaulted the senses; homeless people inside and out pan handled for

cigarettes and change just a few blocks from the State Capital building with its 24 karat gold dome. Drug addicts and prostitutes would smoke their crack and other substances in full view of passing police cars, plying their drug trade and peddling their flesh with complete impunity.

Eric would often look at that gold dome as a child and long for just a small piece of what could have put an end to his family's misery. He had taken the free Capital tour many times as a young boy and had stood in awe with his parents as the first black man to win as President, gave a rousing speech to over a hundred thousand people on the very same steps he and his friends regularly played on. Unfortunately, the great ambitions that man had heralded soon vanished as the cynicism of the times prevailed over the Audacity of Hope.

As Eric grew into a young adult, he, like so many others, learnt to put away those nagging questions so many have as young humans and accept what he saw as the inevitable dues of being an adult in modern society. By the time he was a teen he longed to help unburden his family and help provide for the ones he loved. If the harshness of the times had taught him anything, it was simply to mind the things you can have some control over.

Eric had started doing construction part-time when he was still just a teenager. It may have been illegal to hire minors, but there was no shortage of contractors willing to hire a strong, smart and cheap youth rather than hire a Union Man.

Just a year before he had started doing high steel work, the money was much better than anything his father had made. He knew that his father, even though disappointed by his choice to put off college, was proud all the same that his son was doing so well for himself. He and his old man had argued repeatedly about his decision to not go to college, but Eric couldn't rationalize the outrageous price of tuition. Besides he liked his job. He could look forward to buying a home someday

and offering his future wife and children more than his family had ever been able to offer him.

He was good at his job, but then he also wasn't the first Sioux man to work high steel. There weren't many people who could walk those twelve inch beams, thirty stories up, without getting queasy, but Eric was one of them. His fearlessness had served him well, even as the old men on the job had said that it was just his youth at work, and that he didn't know any better yet.

Thoughts of work were secondary to Eric now as thoughts of home and family dominated his time. He had just turned twenty and knew his parents would be asking him again about grand-kids and pressuring him to take a wife. He wouldn't be surprised if they didn't even use this visit as a means of playing matchmaker, but he had no patience for such needless interventions in his life.

It wasn't that he hadn't had girlfriends. He just enjoyed his single life, he treasured his freedom and wasn't ready to give it up yet. He looked older than twenty and found it all too easy to get into nearly any bar he wished. His good looks, dark skin, and construction worker's body kept his social calendar full.

Eric stood at nearly six feet, not overly tall or even largely built, however he had come to realize, long ago, that he had a way about him that some found charming and others found intimidating. He kept his black hair cut to just above his collar and wore the latest western-style fashions. Deep set, dark eyes, seemed to hint at deep inner thoughts and a caring passionate soul, but high cheek bones and an easy smile seemed to mark him as naive, to some. However such was not the case, Eric simply chose to try to see the best in those around him and hoped that his openness might rub off on others.

He spent his weekends competing at rodeos. Riding trains and buses as far as Nashville and

Albuquerque with hopes of someday winning a big prize and a huge buckle. The rides weren't easy and he was more accustomed to more docile animals underneath him, but riding broncs as a career, he hoped, would someday prove to be an achievable dream. For now though he settled for a decent six second time, and to be able to walk away after each ride in hopes of doing it again a few weeks later.

When not pursuing his rodeo dreams he spent his free time, as so many of his age often do, partying with friends and turning his mind from the worries of the times.

His favorite bar was a little dive near Wash Park. About ten tables on its long narrow patio, pool tables, large plates of nachos and the best happy hour in town, kept Park Tavern busy nearly every night of the week. He would save his half price chips from the first happy hour and drink for free during the second one. Sipping his Heineken and biding his time as he waited for Miss Right Now to come in. He had no interest in Miss Right.

A small place made of wooden ship-lap siding, painted white with a large green awning, and green trim, it sat right up against a shallow sidewalk. Much of Denver was this way. Businesses sprouting up in the most unlikely locations as one neighborhood or another became trendy. It had amazed Eric how the economy seemed to suddenly be rebounding all over the city. New construction was once again on the rise and his company was again busy as new businesses opened their doors where previously failed ones had once stood.

It seemed the government takeovers of the banks had worked. The newly nationalized banks were much more open to lending than the previously private ones had been. He didn't worry that some people were complaining about the interest rates. If they didn't like the terms they didn't have to sign after all did they?

The news reports didn't seem to take much

notice either of what some of the old-timers at work had said would lead to nothing but corruption. If something bad could come from all of this wouldn't the news, pick up on it, he wondered? Wouldn't the commentators try to warn people if they thought that it was a bad idea to nationalize the banks? After all wasn't that their job? Hadn't the government bailouts of the newspapers been meant to guaranty freedom of the press and an accurate accounting of the recent events of the world?

His mind often wandered when he was worried or anxious. Right now he was both as he contemplated the meaning of the short letter he had just tucked back into his Army duffel. He loved his family dearly; more than anything else in the world; most especially his Grandfather. He had worried over them for months after their insurance had been dropped.

Eric had tried to have his insurance at work carried over to his parents and grandparents, but found that it couldn't be done. He felt terrible that his grandfather had to be taken care of back on the reservation. He knew from his last visit, two years ago, just how limited the resources there were. But with the new Federal regulations, allowing Doctors to no longer have to treat the uninsured, and the threat of jail time and heavy fines for individuals who failed to carry insurance, he knew there hadn't been any choice either. Like many others in society he rationalized that some care was better than no care.

The letter said only that it had been a mild stroke. Eric wondered just how mild it could have been to warrant his father begging him to come back home.

His father had suffered a compound fracture in his right leg just two years earlier. He now collected disability and lived on a fixed income with his parents and wife. Eric had been sending back money as he could afford to, but the rent in the city was burdensome on him as well.

14 Other Ways to Die / 13

He shared a small two bedroom apartment with a friend, but electricity and other bills seemed to conspire to take an increasing chunk of his wages. It seemed so easy for others to pay their bills and to buy new cars Eric often wondered how they could do it, even as he knew many of them made less money than he did. Did they know a secret he hadn't been taught?

The bus pulled across from a run down, squat, single story building clad with rusted steel siding and topped by a protruding canopy; a building that served as general store, gas station, and watering hole. Its roof was comprised of loose and curled black asphalt shingles. Scattered around it were nearly a dozen rusted, beaten, and broken vehicles, all sitting in various levels of disassembly.

A beat up old counter and six bar stools at the back served as a saloon of sorts. The beer was always a bit warm, and there weren't many choices, but at least it was convenient for a quick beer or a shot. On Friday nights the festivities from the saloon would quite often spill out into the parking lot as the owner struggled to keep the place cool with open doors and a few oscillating floor fans, and the locals tried to drown their worries with liquid happiness.

There was a small Post Office just next door that most of the town used. It's once white wooden siding was now peeling of paint and weathered gray from sun and rain. Several of the boards were loose and hung down from the walls exposing the black underlay behind them. Security bars and thick cobwebs covered its cracked and broken windows. There was no delivery here, every family had a box and picked up there mail as time and transportation allowed.

A small brick school building and an unkempt playground with broken swings and a rusted slide - holdovers from more prosperous times - completed the picture of what was considered downtown. Eric knew

few of the children here ever made it all the way through to graduation, and even if they did, the education they received was nowhere near what was considered adequate back in Denver.

He felt an uneasiness of heart and head as the bus pulled under the long wooden canopy that served as the town's bus station. It was just long enough for a single bus with a small ticket office at one end, and had long since stopped being busy. Eric knew that the ticket office was now closed and that tickets had to be bought on-line or at the nearby gas station. It seemed to him that someday the bus station might even disappear, thus cutting off a vital link for his friends and family and the outside world. He knew it had long been just this way. The reservation system seemed to him, and many of those of his tribe, to have been just the start to an unending conspiracy to exclude and isolate his people, and their seemingly alien culture from the opportunities of the outside world.

As the bus finally came to a stop he stepped down its short steps and through the open door, carrying his heavy Army duffel over a single shoulder into the harsh, late morning sun and heat. The change from the chilled air conditioned bus to the 100 degree heat was a shock to his system. He lost his breath for a moment as his lungs struggled to adapt to a change in pressure and heat. The air was so hot and dry it seemed to leave his lungs unfilled and the ever present dust that hung thick in the air here, left him with an acrid taste in his nose and mouth. He had forgotten just how dry the reservation was at this time of year.

No ride was waiting for him, and he wasn't looking forward to waiting for one as he noticed a couple of teenagers waiting for their own bus. Eric contemplated what their story might be, as it seemed to him nearly everyone at a bus station had a story. A couple of kids seeking excitement in the big city he presumed. Even as a child, when the place had been much busier, it had still seemed depressing to him; full of those seeking either an end or a new

beginning; either way looking to run away from something or someone.

Eric crossed the street towards the gas station in hopes of avoiding the depression of the bus terminal. The station's pumps, two of them, were the old mechanical type with rolling numbers. The once brightly painted pumps were now faded and starting to rust. Hanging in front of them was a white poster board sign whose letters stated, No Gas Today. Eric wondered how long the sign had been there; the black magic marker letters were now quite faded and streaked and its corners were beginning to curl from the elements. Possibly for weeks he supposed. Gas in Denver had been \$10.32 a gallon when he had left. He knew that no one could afford those prices here.

Hadn't it been promised that oil prices would go down if they attacked Iran? Hadn't the Saudi's promised lower prices for securing them from the nuclear weapons of their former ally? It seemed ironic to Eric how easy it was for nations to be friendly until one or the other got something the other lacked. Much like many of the white men he saw in Denver struggling to keep up with their neighbors and friends; as one or the other would buy a new vehicle and the other would quickly run out and attempt to outdo it.

The war in Iran was now dragging into its third year; it seemed to Eric that during his life he had never known a time when the country hadn't been at war. He remembered the images from Iraq and Afghanistan as a kid. He knew there were still troops even there in fact. Fighting to hold back what everyone believed would be an inevitable civil war. Bases and airstrips had been built and now American men and women fought and died next to Afghans so often it rarely even made the news, it had simply become a fact of life.

Now there was talk of invading Pakistan to fight the Taliban there too. It was said that their new President was a Taliban sympathizer and nearly

every news program was calling for a final resolution to the Taliban problem. No one wanted them to have even the appearance of control over the nukes of Pakistan, but what was anyone to do? It wasn't as if Eric could stop any of this.

He had tried to enlist in the Army, but had soon found out that he was genetically predisposed to asthma. Eric thought that funny, since he had always been in the best of health. The test didn't mean he would necessarily get asthma, just that he had a higher than acceptable risk to it. At first he had been upset by being deferred, and then he had found this new job and all seemed better.

He looked down the lonely dirt road that ran towards his family's old trailer and saw a fast moving cloud of dust rising up over the road and spreading across the plains as it wound its way towards the horizon. Only one person around here was crazy enough to drive that old bumpy road so fast.

He hadn't seen his cousin in years; the last time he was here, David had been doing his internship back in Boston. Eric was now looking forward to his stay, even if he wasn't looking forward to what his grandfather's state of health might be.

Chapter 2 (August 25, 2018)

Moving never felt quite real for Nicole, until she got to the point of packing. The action of folding clothes and boxing her possessions had always reminded her of her father's leaving; the day she waved goodbye from the terminal window as his plane climbed high to the sky; feeling smaller and smaller the higher it got.

Her parents' divorce, while she was still young, had left an indelible impression on her. Her mother had fought hard for sole custody and won after a number of court appearances, the last of which she herself was forced to choose between the two, and choose she did, her Mom; not because she didn't love her father, but more so because her mother needed her. She knew her Daddy would be okay, but as the years of separation dragged on, the detachment process had begun; Nicole had forgotten

what he even looked like by the time she had turned fourteen.

Nicole had long since learned that material possessions were, fleeting, easily lost, stolen, or eventually obsolete. She no longer put much stock in collecting those items that others considered necessities. The one item that she did value however, and that could always be counted on to bring back her daddy's face, in her mind's eye, was a dog eared poem, yellowed, worn, and, ragged from time and being carried around in her pocket; a poem that had been covertly left for her one day at school. The poem was now her most valuable possession. She had often found comfort in its simple prose and seeing the writing by her daddy's own hand, during those hard years of adolescence; a poem that had given her comfort through a tumultuous and tormented childhood. A simple prose that reminded her that somewhere there was indeed at least one person who had loved her, at one time, no matter what the events of her life had taught her. The only reminder she had that not all men were bad, and that 'It' was not a fact-of-life.

'It' had started before her twelfth birthday, with a man of her mother's acquaintance. 'It' was always the way Nicole described the incident on those days she had wandered off by herself, to talk to herself; to help her find some reason for why 'it' happened. In her young mind 'it' was just something that happened to her for no understandable reason. What did she do to deserve 'it'? She asked herself that agonizing question throughout her teen years and even now into adulthood. She could never find the answer.

She couldn't remember much about him, except what he looked like, a face that still haunted her nightmares. She had tried to tell her mother of those late nights waking to the man's hands on her body and of how she would tremble each time knowing what was to come. She had pleaded on countless occasions for her mother to listen to her. However, each time, her mother simply shrugged it off as a

teen being young and naive; and besides, each time brought great fear to her in the recalling.

As she grew older the poem did not always have the desired effect she so often had hoped for. So eventually she had taken to other methods of forgetting her anguish over lost opportunities of youth and her ever present feelings of hopelessness and isolation. However each new device had soon lost its effect to wash away her misery until she had one day found herself passed out in the elevator of a cold lonely parking garage with a hypodermic lying next to her. She had come to know that night as her moment of clarity and had soon vowed to find some way to put her demons to rest.

She had found a place of safety and respite in this quiet little building near a seldom used park on the neglected side of town. A small unassuming building, surrounded by a high chain link fence perched on the side of a hill. Past the high chain link fence was the tent city. Every few days the police would come and run off the residents, and every few nights the cities lost and forgotten would return. Residents that the city and society had seemingly abandoned, but all the more Nicole had come to see as simply unfortunate.

Nicole had prepared for this day for over a month now. She had known that she would be one of the last to graduate out of the Manna Ministries Woman's Addiction and Recovery program. The program would be closing soon because of a lack of funds and public interest. A program that had been run by the local Baptist church, but shortages in donations had meant inevitable cut backs in their social service work; a program that had served many purposes for the Colorado Springs community.

On mornings the young women, who called the small brown building home, would prepare pastries, soup, and coffee for the homeless and poor; many of whom lived just past the chain link fence; next to the stone railroad bridge with the quiet babbling brook running beneath it; a service that brought

early morning relief to the bleakness of many of their lives. Clothing and blankets would be passed out, as available, and the young women would find purpose for their lives. Their acts of helping others, also down on their luck, making it that much easier for them to accept the help they needed so desperately as well. The only witnesses to their lives of helping each other were the mule deer who looked on, fearless in their perceived safety, nibbling on the low grasses of the adjacent rarely used park, all in a corner of town forgotten by the city's residents and selectmen.

"Hey Nick, today's the big day hah?" a rotund black woman said poking her head in the door. Keisha was a woman everyone at the church admired. She was kind and always had a gentle, comforting word to whomever she determined might need it. The large African-American woman, who wore her hair wrapped in a bright red bandanna, welcomed everyone with open arms and a gentle but firm demeanor.

"Yeah, I have to admit I'm kind of nervous. Nine months is a long time," Nicole said, as she carefully removed and unfolded a piece of well-worn paper from her front pocket; the folded edges now held together with scotch tape to slow the inevitable.

"You'll do fine girl. Just be sure when things get tough to work the program, and for God's sakes, surround yourself with positive folks." The two women hugged their goodbyes and then Keisha turned and walked away as Nicole read the old poem, hoping to once again absorb strength from an object that had helped so often before.

*

...and when the winter's night calls your name
settles outside your window pane,
When minutes turn to hours, hours to early morn';
Cold tears in restless sleep forlorn,
Of great ambitions,

Passions burn
An eagerness of youth,
Opening global doors,
Placing your feet on unknown floors,
Smiles and laughter, and smiles more,

Tears of joy, sorrows, over the miles,
Early hours, another dawn,
Darkness fades, light from a wand,
The magic of life, of breath and death;
Escapes of cries, but wails of relief,
Thrills of a moment,
The world is your toy.
Photograph collections, stories of you,
Pressed to hearts, for all to view;

Like the luster of gold,
Like the purity of pearl,
Always, always, Daddy's girl.

Chapter 3 (August 25, 2018)

"Hey Cuz; I heard you were back, for good this time?" Eric asked as his older and taller cousin jumped out of the old '46 Ford pickup he remembered from his childhood. He couldn't believe someone had managed to keep the damned thing running. He could remember all of the struggles his old man had just to keep it working. But now save a paint job the old clunker seemed to be running like a champ, even if it was running on thread bare and bulging tires.

David grabbed his younger cousin in a bear hug and twirled him around. Eric's feet, left swirls on the dusty road, as David swung him like a rag doll. David let him loose after a few moments and

stepped back to look at the young man with a wide beaming smile.

"Yeah stupid me; thought my education might be of more help to the tribe than to those rich pricks back in Boston. Besides they got tons of Doctors back there. Hey whatta ya say we get a beer?" David responded still struggling to get his mind around what had happened in the five years since he had last seen the young man in front of him.

David was twenty-six now but his caring responsible nature made him appear much older. He was becoming quite respected on the reservation and was regularly sought out for more than just his medical expertise. He wore his black hair in a flat-top style, cut severely short on the sides and back with about a half inch on top, cut level across. His eyes were dark brown, large ovals that seemed to hint at secrets of an unknown nature. He stood taller than his younger cousin at over six feet. Today, like most days, he was dressed in a blue scrub shirt and Wrangler jeans which covered the tops of his prized brown Tony Lama boots. On his head was a well-worn, dark brown Stetson Heritage, which cast a wide shadow over his dark eyes.

"What about Gramps?" Eric asked with some worry.

"Oh, he's fine. Like your Dad said, just a minor stroke. He'll be there when we get to the trailer. He's in bed, but you know him, yellin' at everyone to leave him alone. Same old cantankerous S.O.B. as he always was. Gotta, love the old bastard though," David remarked as both men laughed, put their arms over each other's shoulder and walked into the old saloon.

"What you having Cuz?" David asked as a pretty young Lakota girl approached the rickety old bar made from a simple sheet of plywood covered with dingy and peeling flowered shelving paper.

The stools were cracked and faded burgundy colored vinyl with broken backs and silver legs. Two taps and a couple of old stand-up Coca Cola coolers spray-painted black stood behind the bar. A small window air conditioner with a white broken grill hung from the back wall covered by dust and cobwebs, obviously having long since lost all usefulness, save plugging up a hole in the wall. The floor was covered with wood grained vinyl tile, peeled, broken, and missing in many places; exposing dirty, stained concrete wherever the tile had been lost. The walls were dark red, the color of good Italian wine it seemed to Eric, and the ceiling was black and showed the signs of a bad paint job with roller marks and 'holidays'.

Eric lost his voice for just a moment, as he swallowed a lump in his throat that seemed as large as a watermelon. The young lady seemed familiar to him but he wasn't sure. When he finally managed to get his breath back he said, "A shot of whiskey and a Heineken, Jen is it?"

"Hey Eric, wow ain't seen you in a while. Yeah it's Jen. How you been?" The young woman said, with a big smile, as she extended a hand to shake his.

Jen had high chiseled cheek bones and very large sheepish green eyes, a hint of freckles complimented her cappuccino colored complexion, skin so smooth looking Eric wanted to jump right into it.

Her great grandmother had been of Irish descent and the mix of Sioux Lakota and Irish seemed all too natural to Eric. Her hair was long and black with just a hint of a curl as it fell over her slender neck and cascaded over her bare shoulders. She wore a thin white summer dress with a floral print that hung just above her knees; a dress that seemed as though it had been picked specifically for Jen, chosen by Wankan Tanka for the work of beauty now confronting him. The material, hung from two thin straps over her shoulders and clung to her young taught body in all the right places, or so it

seemed to Eric.

"I've been good, damn you look," Eric paused. Well, hell you're all grown up ain't you?" Eric said beaming at the young lady.

"Yup, just turned eighteen a month ago," Jen said; enjoying the attention she noticed she was getting, as a provocative smile came across her face. "Sorry we don't have any Heineken. Is Budweiser OK?"

"I guess so, if it's all you got," Eric said.

"Hey come on big city boy, give us hicks a break OK."

"RRR UUU MMM, remember me?" David said clearing his throat as the young woman went to the back for two cold beers; gazing flirtatiously over her shoulder with a provocative smile as she left.

Eric couldn't help but to look at the young girl as she walked away. Wow, he wondered how time could seemingly so easily change all things. Last time he had seen her she was still wearing braces. Knobby knees and flat chest now gone, she was a knockout.

"Somethin' else now ain't she, too young for me Cuz, but for you. Hell if I was you I'd be all over that," David said, noticing his cousin's obvious attraction. "Just got her braces out a couple of weeks ago, if you're goin' to make a move you shouldn't wait. She's got the eye of just about every guy here 'bouts."

"Shit Dave, I've got a job and a life back in Denver I can't be startin' nothin' here," Eric said, offering his excuses. Eric was pretty good with the women back in Denver but somehow he suspected this one was out of his league, at the very least he wondered if they would have anything in common.

"Hell Cuz, you ain't gotta marry her."

Chapter 4 (August 25, 2018)

"To hell with y'all, I'm going out to my hammock." The old man seemed to be yelling to everyone and yet to no one at all. Eric and David looked at each other as they walked in the door and heard those few words. A smile of a known secret crossing both of their faces, same old Gramps both men thought.

The old, two bedroom trailer had an obvious tilt towards one end. The bedrooms, sitting on either side of a combination: living area, dining room, and kitchen area, were separated by simple white and yellow flower patterned sheets. The paneling was quite old and was now peeling of its wood veneer in many places near the edge of the ceiling and floor. The ceiling had a pronounced wave as the textured white paneling had become wet many times over the years and now the thin, brown plastic moldings were struggling to hold them in place; yet

the unmistakable smell of pine cleaner and oatmeal cookies quickly brought back a flood of pleasant childhood memories to Eric.

"Shit what's this?" the old man said as he walked towards his two grandsons. "Oh get out of the way Dave I see you every day. Let me hug Eric here." No one stood in the way of the old man this time. They knew that once Conze Wakiya Mahpiya had made up his mind there was no stopping him.

The man was in his mid-sixties, but many hard, lean years had lined his face with deep wrinkles. His once high Native cheek bones were now drooped, hinting at a deep wisdom hidden behind his tired and exposed brown eyes. His chest was still broad and shoulders still high even though his body was obviously very tired. He wore his black and silver hair short, and had a temperament of a jolly man even when he tried his best to be forceful.

"Hey Gramps, hell what did they call me for, you seem fine?" Eric asked the old man as he lovingly hugged his Grandfather.

"Hell yeah I'm fine was just tellin' them old nincompoops I want to go fishin'. Hey do you want to go fishin' with your old Gramps?" The old man asked playfully.

Eric looked to the young Doctor, his cousin, and noticed the slight shaking of his head before he replied, "I don't think so Gramps. At least not right now. Why don't you get some rest, so we can go later?"

The old man, now feeling tired from the exertion of walking the ten feet to his Grandson, lamented to the family's wishes and lay back on the small couch as Eric helped him down.

Chapter 5 (August 25, 2018)

The junk cars, lost tokens of his ancestor's youth, laid scattered around the family trailer, with flat tires and doors hanging on collapse. Long uncut prairie grasses grew up through their floor boards and through their lost and broken doors. The dry plains grass painted a picture of despair and poverty that was an all too accurate portrayal. Old refrigerators, stoves, and just plain junk littered itself around Eric's family home like urban statues awaiting resurrection. Yet his grandfather once told him that all that stuff wasn't junk; that everything had a use.

He once pointed out that the family dog now used the front seat of the white Monte Carlo, a left over from the days of his grandparent's courtship, as his doghouse. This was Native thinking toward the natural environment. Like their ancestors before

them, they used everything that Wankan Tanka, or The Great Mystery offered them; something very different to what the civilized world knew of.

Years ago his grandfather had told him that Native People had been stewards to the land and preserving natural resources long before the conceptual notion became popular. It was Washington bureaucrats that did the destroying, even for the white settlers in his great-grandfathers time. A European culture that had determined that all things were disposable even before the word had entered into the lexicon of the language.

His ancestors had seen it with the way they treated the land, and nearly destroyed the great buffalo herds. Conze had seen it with the way they seemed to treat even their fellow men as dispensable and disposable. A culture of waste and built-in obsolescence; too concerned with instant gratification and self-entitlement to be concerned with the future or the past. For them value was a fleeting thing surviving only as long as something was fashionable, be it jeans, stereos or even a once respected or venerated sports hero, cultural icon or document. To them anything was easily discarded, once its perceived usefulness had diminished.

Eric and the other two men approached the beaten old picnic table. It was well weathered and quickly approaching a state of rot as it leaned to one side on blistered legs that had been left on the ground instead of on the concrete pad which the opposite side lay on. Eric and David tried to offer their help to Eric's old man as he limped and struggled with his steel crutch. Eric's father would have no hearing of it however, as he shrugged off their assistance.

The oldest of the three men struggled to sit at the rotting old picnic table with the rest of the men of the family, propped his cane against the long seat and attempted with both hands to stretch out his shattered right leg. His right jean pant leg bulged obviously more than his left from the thick,

heavy steel brace he was forced to wear since his injury.

Eric's father had a soft demeanor, despite his barrel chest, and broad shoulders. Deep brown eyes framed by the same sharp nose as his son, hinted at what Eric might someday look like. The family genes were easily recognizable between the generations, for anyone looking for them. Eric's father wore his hair long these days; he had no need to cut it short anymore, since his 'retirement'. It had grown almost completely gray and gave an air of wisdom that could only come from a life of much turmoil and hardship; yet despite a tough life he still seemed to have a happiness that could only come from having a family he loved and took great pride in.

"Okay Dad, what gives? Why'd you call me here, it's more than a minor stroke ain't it?" Eric asked abruptly, he had never been particularly patient, especially when he knew something was being kept from him.

"Eric maybe your cousin is better suited to answer that," the older man said as he looked towards David with a somber expression.

"Eric, Conze has bone cancer," David said pausing for just a moment. "He's dyin' Eric. If it had been discovered earlier we might've been able to do something, but now it's too late." David said in his best bedside manner as he laid a consoling hand on his cousin's shoulder.

Eric slumped as he heard the words and struggled for a moment with the emotions. He had known a few kids, back in school, who had died, and he had even seen death before, but those had been violent deaths; not like this revelation he was now hearing. He had never lost anyone so close to himself and now he wasn't sure how to deal with it.

"Wait, how can you know for sure? Why didn't the V.A. find it? Doesn't he go to the V.A. like

every month? I would think they would've seen THAT?" Eric said his anger and confusion now apparent.

"It's true Eric. I took the biopsy myself, sent it to a friend in Boston and he ran the tests. The V.A. didn't find it 'cause they didn't want to. Hell they never even tested him for it, just told him his dizzy spells were from dehydration. Fuckin' lazy, corrupt, and incompetent pricks is what they are." David had seen all too often what happened when bureaucrats got involved in medicine and hated what was happening to a once proud calling. In David's view, calling medicine an industry had led to a breakdown in concern for physicians towards their patients, as they increasingly had come to spend more time considering profits and investments and less time consoling the sick and their families.

"So what do we do David?" Eric asked as he choked back a tear.

"Well we make his last days as good as we can for him. We enjoy what time we have left with him, and we honor him as best we can." David took a short pause to determine how to tell him the rest, "Eric, we haven't told him, there doesn't seem to be any point in it; he's going to die anyways and we want to be sure that he can enjoy havin' his whole family around him again. Especially you, he always loved fishing with you, after all you were always his special little buddy; Eric just be there for him now. If you want you can even go fishin' with him tomorrow if he's up to it." David offered all he could in the way of encouragement and support.

As an intern back at Mass General's Emergency Ward he had always hated giving bad news. Now giving it to family and friends was so much harder. He wondered if he had made the right decision to come back and practice medicine on the reservation. Would all consultations be this hard?

He had seen, soon after his return, what years of trying to offer support to those close had done to his father. A man who had at one time

hearkened memories of strength and nobility in David, and other family members, now wasting away slowly as he drank more and more each year, the memories and anguish of so many hard consultations leading him to feelings of regret and inevitably depression and hopelessness. David worried that his fate might be all too similar whenever he thought of the tribe's Medicine Man.

Chapter 6 (September 22, 2018)

Aaron stood tall for a 'computer nerd', he was 6-1 with dark wavy hair and thick dark rimmed glasses, concealing dark blue eyes. He had benefited from having a family that practiced stringent study methods. If his friends spent six hours a day in their schooling, Aaron spent nine. There had been no long summer vacations in his childhood and regular standardized testing had been considered a necessity by his mother.

"Hey guess we're sharing a room. My name's Aaron," he said with an inviting smile and outstretched hand.

The room had three narrow bunks, a shared desk, three bureaus and a table as its only furnishings. A large window at one end of the long narrow room and white and blue concrete walls hinted at the Spartan nature of the M.I.T. male dorms. It

was a place intended primarily for two things, study and sleep; usually in that order of importance.

"I guess so, I'm Michael," the young man said as he began unpacking his personal belongings. He hadn't bothered to accept the handshake Aaron had offered; he immediately seemed distant and aloof.

He had short dirty blond hair and cold dark, almost black eyes, which seemed to absorb light and hinted at nothing behind them. Eyes as seemingly lifeless as the cats-eyes marbles Aaron remembered playing with in his youth. Aaron immediately wondered if his new bunk mate ever smiled as he noticed his furled brow and stern look.

"What's your major bro'?" Aaron had always been a gregarious sort. He had been raised in a loving household that had supported his choices and supported him in his endeavor of choosing Computer Sciences and Programming. Choices they thought wise whenever they saw the young man's obvious talents for such pursuits. He had excelled at his S.A.T.'s and had been offered several scholarships. Unfortunately those scholarships had not completely covered the cost of his tuition and with a family of moderate means he knew he would have to work throughout his college career to buy any necessities.

But Aaron had a dream, a dream of building a better world by hopefully connecting individuals. He saw the internet and communications as a way of fulfilling that dream. He had been an excellent athlete in High School and had even been offered several sports scholarships at schools his classmates had envied. Aaron however had always longed for the stringent academic standards of M.I.T.

"Nuclear Physics," The young man said as he laid his bible and religious texts out on the top of his bureau.

Aaron immediately took notice in the man's

choice of personal readings. He was already beginning to worry over the nature of a man whose readings were "The Turner Diaries", "The Authorized Biography of Billy Graham", and "Mein Kampf". He knew it would be a long semester as he determined to spend as little time as possible with his new roommate.

Chapter 7 (October 27, 2018)

They sat at the end of a long, sagging wooden dock; his grandfather in a rickety well-worn wheelchair; that had been lent to them; and he in a folding green lawn chair. The sound of the waves licking at the dock made both of their eyelids heavy at times. The sounds of the grass rustling and the trees swaying brought little comfort to Eric's uneasy heart. Eric didn't really care if they caught anything. He would have been just as happy drowning worms, as long as he was with his grandfather. The only other company they had brought was an old metal cooler painted in a camouflage pattern and a six pack of P.B.R., Conze's favorite.

He stared down river towards the Big Bend Dam. A structure that had long been, for most members of the reservation, a symbol of the lies and manipulations of the white man against their people, throughout history. Central Electric had convinced the Lakota nation to displace an entire town in order to build the dam and create the new lake. They had promised to provide free electricity to the

inhabitants of the reservation, but soon their lies had become obvious.

Even in mid-winter, when temperatures regularly dropped below freezing, Central would violate South Dakota law and turn off electricity for those who couldn't pay their, highest in the nation, electric bills. Many of those who would lose their electricity had medical conditions and children that would be put into danger of freezing as they lost their power, both literally and figuratively.

Hey look you got one. Keep your line up boy," his grandfather always figured that Eric could use his advice. He still seemed to, at times, look upon him as though he were a child of eight or so. Eric didn't mind, it reminded him of simpler times. Times as a child when he needn't worry about bills or a job.

He had called to tell his foreman he would be staying while his grandfather was dying. Unfortunately he was no longer sure he would have a job when he got back. He had some savings, but in the last two months had been forced to take a few odd jobs to protect those savings. He had gone back to Denver and gotten his things so he wouldn't be forced to pay rent for an apartment he was no longer sure that he would return to. Today though he just wanted to enjoy another pleasurable day with a man he could now easily see was sliding.

"Atta Boy. Look at that baby, that's a beauty; easy three pounder," his Grandfather said proudly as Eric used the net to pull his catch onto the dry dock. The twenty inch trout wriggled and struggled for breath as it writhed and flapped its tail against the wooden dock. The sun glinted off its lateral red and blue stripes, Eric thought how there were few things as pretty as a freshly caught Rainbow Trout.

"I think we'll be keepin' that one boy. To hell with your catch n' release I want trout for

dinner," the old man laughed and then suddenly became somber. "Eric, I'm dying ain't I?" Eric was caught by surprise by the question as he saw the somber look in his Gramp's eyes. "No one wants to tell me boy, but I can tell. Just tell me Eric; am I dyin'?"

Eric choked back a tear, hugged the old man and said, "Yeah Gramps your dyin'. Gramps I'm going to miss you," Eric said as both men broke down in tears, holding each other tight, Eric trying to will his life into his beloved grandfather. They sat this way for several minutes neither man wanting to let the other go, ever; finally they separated, looked at each other wiped their tears and tried their best to feign smiles.

"Eric, you know your Dad has told me a lot over the years of religions and beliefs. I believe I like what the Hindus have to say. If what they believe is true then my greatest hope is to come back as a bird so I can soar free of want and hunger; a mighty eagle or even a sparrow as long as I can taste real freedom." Conze said in a now all too rare moment of perfect clarity.

Chapter 8 (November 5, 2018)

In a small remote village, in the deserts of Iran, sat a tiny innocuous mud-brick building; in this building sat 13 eight year old boys. Their time, for the most part, was spent in reading, writing, and arithmetic, much like any school in the world. They had lunches and recesses, and played exuberantly, as all young boys are want to do; games played with balls and sometimes sticks as they laughed and enjoyed the coolness of the late time of year.

After recesses, each day young Ali Atta and his friends would reluctantly reenter their school and watch from the dirt floor as the decades old video machine would play messages from their school's founder. They would learn of the great heroism and military wizardry of the man who had thumbed his nose at the West. The videos did little to amuse the young boys. Their thoughts would inevitably return to their games and then of course they would start to fidget and quietly taunt each

other, but soon their instructors would return them to a state of decorum.

His teacher knew how important it was for the young boys to get a proper education; to know the ways of Mohammed and most especially to know of the injustices that their people had suffered. So inattention meant staying after school, performing extra prayers, and any manner of tedious activities that kept Ali from where he wanted to be, playing with his friends in the fields. So he did his best to pay attention and stay alert so that he might grow into the type of man his parents and teacher would be proud of, so young Ali and his friends sat trying to pay attention to yet another boring tape made by a man in a cave nearly twenty years ago.

He found the man's long beard and long hair amusing though they even reminded him a bit of an American cartoon character he would watch at home. It seemed to him that Yosemite Sam had nearly the same style of speech and look as the great and mighty Osama Bin Laden.

As hard as he attempted to stay awake and watch; so that he could win the approval of his teacher; it seemed his eight year old wind-up mechanism would conspire against him. Forced to watch instead of play he found his eyes growing heavy many times through the grainy old video as he struggled to stay awake and listen. He was only able to catch bits and pieces. He hated history class.

*

"Muslims have many questions tonight. Muslims are asking, who attacked our country?

The evidence we have gathered all points to a collection of loosely affiliated infidel organizations known as the UN. They are some of the murderers indicted for bombing Islamic temples in Iraq and Iran and responsible for bombing the Iraqi Palace

America is to Crusader theology what the Mafia is to crime. But its goal is not making money. Its goal is remaking the world and imposing its Conservative Christian and Jewish beliefs on people everywhere.

The infidels practice a fringe form of Christianity and capitalist propaganda that has been rejected by Christian scholars and the vast majority of Business professors; a fringe movement that perverts the peaceful teachings of Christianity and Judaism

The American's directive commands them to kill Sunnis and Shiite, to kill all Muslims and make no distinctions among military and civilians, including women and children.

This group and its leader, a person named George W. Bush, are linked to many other organizations in different countries, including O.P.E.C., N.A.T.O. and the G7.

There are thousands of these infidels in more than 6countries.

They are recruited from their own nations and neighborhoods and brought to camps in places like Fort Polk, where they are trained in the tactics of militant-ism. They are sent back to their homes or sent en-mass to countries around the world to plot evil and destruction.

The leadership of America has great influence in Saudi Arabia and supports the Israeli regime in controlling most of that country. In America we see Conservative Christianity's vision for the world. America's people have been economically oppressed, many are starving and many are homeless.

Muslims are asking why they hate us.

They hate what they see right here in this cave, an ideology. Their leaders are without morals

and principles. They hate our values, our ideas, our strength of will and our brotherhood.

They want to overthrow existing governments in many Muslim countries such as Turkey, Jordan, and Chad. They want to drive Islam out of the Middle East. They want to drive Sunnis and Shiite out of vast regions of Asia and Africa.

These infidels kill not merely to end lives, but to disrupt and end a way of life. With every atrocity, they hope that Islam grows fearful, retreating from the world and forsaking our friends. They stand against us because we stand in their way.

We're not deceived by their pretenses to piety. We have seen their kind before. They're the heirs of all the murderous ideologies of the centuries. By sacrificing human life to serve their radical visions, by abandoning every value except the will to power, they follow in the path of feudalism, class-ism and consumerism. And they will follow that path all the way to where it ends, in history's unmarked grave of discarded lies.

As Muslims struggle against the corruption of those who seek it's destruction we vow that we will not tire, we will not falter and we will not fail."

*

Ali thanked his Creator when finally he heard the teacher proclaim class dismissed. Another day of History class survived, again, now he could go play.

Chapter 9 (November 9, 2018)

Eric hadn't seen Jen since that first day at the saloon. His hair was getting very long now and hung to the collar of his black suit. His dark almost black eyes seemed ready to flow with tears. He struggled to hold them back as he placed one arm around his grandmother and looked at the young lady on the other side of the casket. She was wearing a long black dress with a simple white bow tied around the neck; a dress which seemed a throwback to another, more simple era.

The words of the medicine man barely registered in Eric's mind now as all he could hear was his Grandmother's sobs, and the remembered voice of his beloved Gramps. He had to be strong for his Grandmother, that's the way his Gramps would have

wanted it. There would be plenty of time to cry later, Eric kept reminding himself.

Those last days of fishing gave him only the slightest solace. This had been a great man, the greatest man Eric had ever known. The kind of man you now only saw in old movies. A man of integrity and value was now gone, and the world was a much smaller and more petty place without him.

As Conze would have wished, the ceremony was held as nature bore witness to their activities; atop a lonely hillside surrounded by tall Ponderosa pines overlooking the Missouri River; the very same place where he had proposed to his wife as a still young man of seventeen.

It was a simple service, the way Conze, would have preferred it. Just family and friends gathered around his casket as they told stories of their loved one. David's father and Conze's son, as their Medicine Man and spiritual leader spoke briefly, words of the Creator and better places for their loved one.

As they laughed, and cried, a majestic bald eagle fed its young in the branches of a nearby tree. Eric couldn't help but remember his grandfather's revelation as warmth of knowing entered his heart, and as he silently said his goodbyes.

As the memorial came to an end a tearful Jen came over to offer her support. "I'm so sorry he's gone Eric he was a good man. I know he was very proud of you too, but at least he's in a better place now."

Eric looked at the tree one more time as one of the young eagles became visible over the rim of the nest and made its first attempt at stretching its young wings. With a wide smile Eric replied, "Yeah, I know he is."

Chapter 10 (November 14, 2018)

Nicole carefully dabbed thick gobs of dried blood away from her beaten, bruised and scarred face. The antiseptic stung in the deep cuts and lacerations on her neck and arms. She shook with fear and anger as she struggled to figure out how she had gotten herself connected with someone so depraved, she would never have expected such a thing from a United States Senator.

Nicole had seen him many times on TV and had always found his intelligence and conviction to his principles to be a turn-on. When his limo had pulled up beside her she had been all too eager to accept the big wad of cash he had presented, money she desperately needed to pay her rent and buy food.

Only nine months earlier she would have used that money for heroine, but she was proud of her nine months of addiction recovery and knew she could make it if only she could find work. She had carefully attempted to shower off her shame and fear. Each drop of water was torturous as she tried to cleanse her stinging skin. Skin she rubbed hard

with soap and cloth as if she might be able to scrub hard enough to remove the memory of the abuse and injustice.

Yet this injustice was not like the so many she had known before. This one had produced in her something entirely new; a feeling of hatred and vengeance that burned in her mind and hardened her soul. She was no longer Daddy's little girl as she determined to never again allow herself to be mistreated or hurt by any man ever again.

What kind of sick fuck used razors, she wondered, as she bandaged a cotton swab on a deep cut on her left cheek? She wished she could go to the police as she stared at her newly puffed and blackening eyes; damage that could only mean that her nose was broken. She choked back tears as she reflected on the events of the night, and her hopelessness at having no recourse for justice. If it hadn't been for her two previous prostitution convictions she would have gone right to the emergency room, but now she did her best to patch herself up as she shook from fear, anger, and the loss of blood.

She had moved to D.C. in a naive hope at starting a new life. Hoping to abandon a troubled past, 200 miles away, in a new city, absent the constant reminders of lost loves and failed enterprises. Hoping that without old temptations she could change old patterns and past mistakes.

Of all the injustices she had known throughout her life, this now seemed the worse. For now it seemed that despite trying so hard to do the right thing that God had abandoned her. Memories of all of her other abuses seemed to conspire along with this one to cause her yet more anguish and even question her own role in it all. Yet despite her fear she knew her hate would serve to protect and strengthen her.

A chill of anger ran through her body as she inspected the bandage on her cheek, then reached

into a drawer beneath the sink and with a shudder of remembrance threw out a half empty package of razor blades.

Chapter 11 (November 15, 2018)

Senator Carpenter was nervous about meeting in such a public place for an endeavor that many of his political adversaries might have found questionable. However the man he was to meet was responsible for his Senate committee appointments; how he had accomplished it George would never know, but as a second term Senator with two high level committee chairs, he felt indebted to help Mr. Stephenson whenever called upon. Besides, George thought, maybe others might not understand his views, or his associations, but George knew the man was a Patriot who only cared about a return of Christian mores and white European values. He knew many would not understand the ideologies of his brothers, but still he hated keeping the association

a secret, even as he knew that keeping his dalliances hidden was for the greater good.

He had been introduced to the man, he only knew as Stephenson, during his wedding reception years earlier. George's lovely wife was now fighting for her very life from a relentless cancer ravaging her body. George could not understand how with all of his wealth, power and position that the doctor's could be so impotent to help her. Yet he knew that this was because too much money was going to treat the poor and the mud men and not enough going to protect the white race, or to further medical research. He hoped that his new position and influence could be used so that he could eliminate the foolish and frivolous pursuit of protecting the non-white and non-Christian races from their own undoing.

He had married for love, unlike his father and grandfather, whom he knew had both married for social status. George and Christine had met in High School during their junior year. They had quickly become sweethearts and continued their courtship throughout High School and college; the entire time managing to keep to their promise of virginity until marriage.

Christine was the lead actress in all of the school's drama productions, including an inspiring production of West Side Story in the spring of her junior year; he was a two letter guy, playing defensive line for the football team and left field on the baseball team. By the time George was a senior he had made a reputation of being an intense hitter and a cleats up base stealer.

He played sports with all the aggression and intensity of a person who just didn't give a shit about repercussion. His coaches loved it, the other team either steered away from him, which George took as the highest of compliments, or targeted him; playing his kind of game in hopes of leveling out his ego.

His father would not accept anything less than a perfect performance. A Bin school usually met with his father's outrageous indignation and very quickly a swift beating as well. Dropped passes and missed swings quite often meant not only a brutal spanking with his father's two inch wide brown rawhide belt but also sometimes entire days sitting in a dark closet reflecting on what a bad athlete he had been that day. He regularly explained to George that only through the ruthless pursuit of your goals could you ever achieve them. These revelations quite often were accompanied by the explanation of how those beatings hurt his father more than they hurt him. Or of how one day he would inevitably see the value of them and finally thank him for them. Once in a while he would even be told how he would know that his father had been right when he had his own kids.

George had attended Harvard, there was never any real choice anyways; it had been at his father's insistence and no one ever said no to his father. Christine stayed in Maine and went to the University. During Summer's George spent his week interning as a Congressional Page for his father; where he learned the value of projecting a polished appearance; while Christine did volunteer work in their small Maine hometown. He would drive late into the night each Friday in hopes of spending what little time he could with the woman he knew he would someday marry.

It had been almost inevitable that he would fall so deeply and completely for the still radiant now thirty-seven year old woman. He had always admired her sense of civic responsibility and concern for others. Picking her up and dropping her off twice a week as she volunteered at a local Day Shelter for the homeless during those early days of their courtship. At first he thought she had been doing it just to augment her college applications, but soon when he would ask her how she could stand the sight of those lazy, shiftless bums he had discovered just how much she really cared.

"George they aren't all that," she would say to him as if trying to rehabilitate his thoughts. "Most of them are just down on their luck, many have mental health issues that could easily be treated if they had proper insurance and took their medication. Most of them are very friendly, very nice people who would give a person their last dollar if they thought that person needed it more." George never bought any of it: but acquiesced all the same as he knew she was simply naive.

Her naivety however was one of those things that had endeared her to him. If only her passion for helping others could be re-targeted at a more worthwhile cause, George had thought many times. He knew he could refocus her attentions where they could do more good. Perhaps if she just spent more time on the yearbook committee or some other school endeavor she would soon tire of those he knew sought to take advantage of her kindness.

He remembered that Christmas Eve night when she had persuaded him to help bring hot cocoa down to the park and the night they helped pass out blankets to those same bums so they wouldn't freeze. In those early days of their courtship, he had seen so much in her that showed of a potential that she had not yet come to realize. After all, the town V.F.W. was always having charity drives; there was no need for her to get her hands dirty helping those people. Her time and pretty face could serve far better, encouraging others to give money. Or she could help in beautifying the parks he thought. Each time he mentioned these ideas he would get the same response.

"George those people need me, they don't have many other people willing to help them. It just feels good to make them smile seeing how hard their lives are. I like doing it and it makes me feel good about myself to make them feel good," She would tell him each time he brought it up.

Her stubbornness was another thing he admired in her. Her ability to always be so certain

that what she was doing was the right thing to do, even if he knew she was just being used. Her work did however benefit the church, he knew, so he never pushed too hard. After all the church was always in need of money and volunteers, but neither of those should be her concern. There were others who could do those things. He hated the idea of his girl spending those long days down at the shelter, or in the church basement sorting clothes. Time he knew she could and should be spending on him.

Better or worse though, he had walked her to that promise altar and he had determined to keep that vow as long as was necessary. He had dealt with all of the needling of his teammates and friends as they teased him about his promise ring only because he knew that someday it would all be worth it. Some day she would see that he was the only guy for her. Some day she would understand that he knew what was best for her.

Time had proven him right, it seemed, as they had married just before he left for his first commission overseas. Over the years their marriage had become one of her undying obedience to him and he loved her for that. She never complained, disagreed, or disobeyed. Many of his friends remarked on just what the perfect wife she was as she would do such a wonderful job of throwing herself into each fund-raiser and cocktail party he would arrange.

He remembered their first time as a night of intense passion.

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He had been dating Christine for nearly four years now. They had fooled around quite a bit in those years but the feel of their promise rings rubbing together as they held hands always brought them back to properness and sensibility before they would go too far. They were young and very much in love and believed that waiting would be its own reward. They had been taught over and over, in their

state funded abstinence classes, that sex was only decent and proper once you knew you were truly in love and happily married.

George had brought his girlfriend down to the beach many times before, but tonight was to be a special night. He had just graduated O.C.S. and been given his first commission. Now he was going to propose to the woman he hoped to spend eternity with.

"Chrissie I have something to ask you," he said as they both sat up on the old blanket that protected them from the damp sand of the beach. Waves were coming in hard, turned up by a restless wind from the North East. They slammed into the great rocks of the Maine coast and turned up a froth that sprayed across their perch. Like a silent ballet, points of white and yellow shimmering starlight pierced the clear night sky and danced across the surface of the rippling ocean waves. The pungent smell of the ocean was a welcome intoxicant to their noses and gave George energy of purpose as he fished out of his pocket a small black jewelry box and flipped it open. Inside laid a gold band with a brightly glowing two carat diamond nestled on white satin.

His father had brought him down to the jewelry store just the day before, to help him pick out the ring. It would have taken him years to buy the ring himself on a Lieutenant's salary, so he had been thankful and quickly accepted when his father offered to buy it for him. He knew how proud his father was feeling at the time and it had become of all importance to George to have his father's approval and respect.

"Christine, will you do me the honor of marrying me?" he asked the petite young blond woman he had grown so fond of over the years.

She had the classic Scandinavian features that he so admired, high cheek bones and dimples with big oval blue eyes lent her a childlike quality

of the face. It was a stark contrast to her womanly body. George had often lusted after her, with her firm round breasts and her tight toned ass atop, long slender legs; which seemed to go on nearly forever. Many nights of fantasy and subsequent flagellation had led him to believe that this night might never come.

She had always trusted George. She knew him to have strength of character and purpose that most of the boys at her college did not share. After all how many guys did she know who would have stood at that altar with her and promised a vow of virginity until they were both ready? She knew this was a man who could provide for her; a man of integrity and principles. A man she trusted implicitly to always make her feel loved, protected and cared for.

"Yes George, oh God yes," she said as she threw her arms around him and they began to kiss.

George grabbed the back of her head and hungrily brought her mouth to his. He felt strength of purpose he had never experienced before. It boiled through his veins as it grew from his groin. He struggled to find the small pearl buttons of her blouse with just a single hand, pulling on the end of his belt with the other. He hastily wriggled his pants and boxers down, exposing his now hard shaft to his girlfriend for the first time.

"No George not yet, not here, we need to wait George," Christine said as she raised a hand to his chest and tried to pull away. George, completely caught up in the moment, grabbed the fabric of her blouse eagerly, popping the buttons off and ripping the material. He knew she couldn't really mean no. He felt it, he knew she felt it too, a lust and passion that could no longer be contained.

"George please, no," Christine pleaded. Tears of betrayal began to well in her big blue eyes. Her pupils were beginning to dilate with, what was it George thought: excitement, Love, lust? He felt sure she felt it too. It was inescapable, he

knew, as he reached under her skirt and tore away her thin cotton panties.

He pushed her down on the blanket as she pleaded for him to stop. George knew she was only playing. He could feel it. The electricity he knew he felt could not be one sided. He turned her over on the white blanket pulling up on her skirt and exposing her tight ass. He couldn't wait any longer he could feel their passion as it throbbed in his penis. He moved between her legs as he could hear her sobs of wanton desire, His quickly enlarging cock finding for the first time her inner being.

He drove hard and deep as he took his enjoyment knowing that her tears and pleas were tears of joy and satisfaction. He felt her kicks on his back and knew by her wriggling that she must have been enjoying it equally. He threw her over on her back so he could look at her pretty face. She scratched at his legs and face, the sensation of her long sharp fingernails penetrating his flesh emboldened him to push harder. He slapped her hard across the face, giving her what he knew she was begging for. Her eyes were wide and wet with tears and he knew that she was finally getting what she had always longed for. He knew their relationship would now be changed forever. Soon she surrendered her fight and he knew that she was at peace and content in their new found love.

As he felt his body twitch and his semen spill from his now tired and sore shaft he knew that their relationship would never be the same. This sensation was the culmination of all those years of waiting.

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Just a few years earlier he had been completely faithful to his pretty wife, never even looking at another woman. Now though he took solace in the reassurances of his associates at the Fellowship House that God would understand his needs and transgressions. That with power and money came

inevitably a different set of rules and a different set of responsibilities.

He would always bring his liaisons to the C Street house where he knew his brothers would keep his trust and hold his secrets. He preferred the company of prostitutes, as he knew they were the least likely to share his secrets; 'money grubbing sluts' he thought. He paid them well, considering his appetites differed dramatically from what most women would have found comfortable. He liked it rough and imagined that so did most of the women he spent his time with. Razors and rope were common in his escapades as he struggled for release that had always been difficult for him to achieve.

The Senator had always been a very plain looking man. He had to work twice as hard for everything than those who had been born with better looks than his. He resented how easy it was for some and had begun to think of several of his political opponents now as enemies who needed to be crushed, lest they destroy Christian beliefs and white European values. The Senator was always careful who he shared such thoughts with though, as he knew so many of even his own race were not ready to accept the truth that everywhere there was danger; danger not only for the white race, but also for Christianity and the nation itself. He knew, like his brethren at the C-street house, that as Christians it was their duty and responsibility to seek Christian control over all seats of government, to not only bring God's law as the law of the land, but to also prepare the nation for Christ's return.

He was in his late-thirties and was already nearly completely bald on the top. A year earlier a Doctor had told him of a new gene therapy for the condition of male pattern baldness but he thought that many people would not trust a man who had cheated age. He had worn glasses since the age of fifteen, several times his Doctor had urged him to undergo Lasik surgery but again he thought that might make him appear vain, and didn't the good book preach against vanity? His previous military

physique was beginning to fade as long hours in the Senate didn't give him time now to keep up with jogging or other leisurely pursuits. His hair still had its blond color however and he took great pride in how it reflected his Aryan heritage.

"Nice day isn't it Senator?" Stephenson asked as he walked toward the waist high black parapet wall, speaking up to have his voice heard over the sound of the cascading waterfall.

In front of them was the 911 Memorial; sitting in the shadow of the looming, ever present, blue-green glass of the new World Trade Center One or as some had called it, the Freedom Tower. He laid his hands on the parapet wall. On the surface of the cool black granite were etched the names of the 300 people that had died that day. He looked out upon the memorial pool as the man-made waterfall flowed down the black granite walls to the pool's surface causing the blue-green water to shimmer in the afternoon sun.

The Senator thought pensively on how a lackadaisical attitude had led to the deaths of nearly 300 people. He regularly promised to himself that he would not allow Americans to endanger such a great nation once again. He knew instinctively that people quite often, like children, needed to be protected from even themselves and he knew that it was his responsibility, as a rich powerful Christian, to see to it that they were. For him the government's role should be that of overseer, that only through strong laws, Christian laws, and limited government would this nation prosper and be ready for the end times.

"Yes Mr. Stephenson it's a beautiful day," as he breathed in the aroma of the nearby lilac trees. "What did you need to see me for?" The Senator responded looking around to ensure he hadn't been followed by an adversary. He would have preferred to have met at the Lodge or the Fellowship house, as both places offered them more privacy, but Mr. Stephenson was the one who made these decisions.

"There's a bill coming through to your committee concerning voting rights, isn't there?" Stephenson asked, already knowing the answer.

"Yes there is, but it will never stand up to Supreme Court scrutiny, if it passes they're threatening to bring it to session right away," the Senator offered the best excuse he could.

"Well, our friends want it to pass. You needn't worry about the Court we have friends who can deal with that situation." With that Stephenson stood and walked back towards the two large gentlemen in black suits that had accompanied him.

Chapter 12 (November 18, 2018)

"Hello my friend," Stephenson said as he extended a hand to the new arrival. He didn't much care for meeting on what he considered to be unfriendly soil, but he knew his bodyguards were more than capable of handling a few crazy militia men. "You know who I represent don't you?"

"Yes sir, we were given your details a few days ago by courier. You can relax we've turned off the microphones and video recorders. You are among friends at the Arizona Militia compound." A rather portly man with a five o' clock shadow and several tattoos said. He wore a cutoff B.D.U. shirt and B.D.U. cargo pants both with desert print, surplus equipment from the war in Iraq. Army jump boots and a 9M.M. Berretta slung low at the hip completed the picture of a man who fancied himself a warrior of virtue.

"Have a seat," the man said gesturing to an

old green-plaid couch with several deep rips and dark stains.

The house was in need of many repairs; Stephenson was obviously uncomfortable in such surroundings. The militia men took great delight in judging a man they knew was more accustomed to mahogany floors than the gray and weathered wood floors on which he now stood. Sheets of wallpaper with a repeating gold stripe and gaudy red roses were peeling from the walls and hanging down several feet towards the floor. The stucco ceiling had many water stains now covering its entirety, all overlapping in a rust colored concentric pattern like some Rorschach test. The smell of dust and mildew assaulted his nose as Stephenson held a handkerchief to his mouth.

"Well, Captain you know how the Smith-Halsey rifle ban went down in the courts, don't you?" Stephenson asked, knowing full well the man would know the answer well and would most likely be angered by the thought of it; baiting his temper in hopes of directing his anger.

"Yes 5 to 4. Rifle ban my ass, it cuts at the very heart of the Second Amendment. Every man now owning a gun must own property or have an up to date hunting license to prove its intended use. What a crock of shit. I would love to get my hands on that Sotomayeur," the man was as irate as Stephenson had intended him to become.

"Well what if I could offer you that chance? Would you, and your men, be capable of doing what needs to be done? I mean, a situation like this calls for men of action and courage, patriotic men of integrity and determination, are you the type of men I should be talking too, or should I be offering my support elsewhere?" Stephenson had, over the years, learned well just how to pull the strings of men like these. He twirled the militia leader on invisible wires like a marionette.

Stephenson was the oldest man in the room by

at least a decade. At fifty two however he was still in remarkably good physical shape. Excellent health care provided to him by his company afforded him the best care money could buy. His hair was still mostly black; he kept it fashioned short but with a kind of longish wave over the top. His eyes were hard to see as he wore prescription glasses that changed tint except in the darkest of rooms.

He had been born with a serious aversion to the sun that bothered not only his eyes, but also made him exceedingly susceptible to sunburns. His doctors had, over the years, repeatedly warned him to avoid the sun worrying over the possibility that repeated burning may lead to skin cancer for him. Thus his skin was remarkably pale and deeply wrinkled to even the most casual observer.

Long ago he had chosen the name of "Richard Stephenson" from the annals of history. It served him well among those he so often found himself dealing with. He didn't necessarily share their racist ideals, but he did however, quite often, find their exuberant ideologies useful and easy to manipulate, and therefore quite useful in his own cause. All, the better if they thought that maybe he was descended from an early leader of the Klan. In this particular case he was not really concerned about the weapons ban, as such a thing served his purposes quite well, now however he had other objectives and he knew these militia men would be quite useful in achieving his goals.

In the greater scheme of things he could easily rationalize the necessity of certain clandestine and seemingly irresponsible actions; especially when those actions benefited his business interests, his partners, and his shareholders. Wasn't that what America was all about after all he considered? Profit at any cost.

Chapter 13 (November 22, 2018)

The old Carpenter family home always seemed so lonely to Christine when it was just her and the staff here. The twelve foot high ceilings, made her feel much smaller than she was comfortable with; the red oak wainscot paneling and ornate moldings seemed to hint at a finality of being caged, as if caught in a hell of her own making. Even the ornate handmade Italian tile seemed to serve to unbalance her mind, and filled her with the same childhood dread she had when standing within a carnival fun-house; all that seemed missing at these times were the mirrors that distorted the viewer's perceptions, but for that she had the prescriptions her Doctors so willingly provided her.

There were of course the pain medications she took for the cancer, and until recently there had been the chemo-therapy pills too. However it was the Trazodone that helped her stay the ever dutiful and faithful wife; she had lost her zeal for life so

many years ago but her husband and family need never know that, or so she rationalized.

Christine was not accustomed to having guests when her husband was away; so the sound of the doorbell came as a surprise as it reverberated throughout the house. At 37 she still had the youthful appearance that had at one time been her stock and trade, even if she had lost her exuberance for life long ago.

She never felt quite comfortable at these times when her husband was not at home. Christine longed for the attention she was now missing, attention of any kind was better than nothing she presumed. On top of it she felt as though her purpose was lost at these times, when she was left alone with only the thoughts of past regrets and dreams abandoned.

She knew that deep down he loved her intensely, and that his passions just sometimes got the best of him. She could feel it in her soul. Christine had gotten used to being the dutiful and seemingly happy home maker, even if she had to be careful not to make mistakes. Her husband was a great man and deserved that much from her at the very least. She knew that someday his name would go down in the history books with other great men.

She answered the door as she put on her thin white knitted shawl. The autumn chill of the Maine coast could cut to the bone this late in November and she didn't wish to risk a cold when she knew her husband would be back in the next few days. She knew he would be angered with her if she came down sick during his short time at home.

He rarely ever announced when he would return from his business in Washington; so Christine was always careful to be sure everything was just right in anticipation of his eventual return. She knew how important it was for her to support such an important man, after all, her role in life was that of wide receiver to her husband's quarterback.

Her cancer had been showing signs of remission for the last few months. Now she wished that there had been someone to share the good news with, but Christine knew that George's cool temperament led to his seeming lack of excitement over news such as that. She knew how hard it was for him to show his love, yet she knew in his own way that it was there. After all the man had so many concerns, just as other great and powerful men like him had had throughout history.

"Christine Carpenter?" a young and bruised woman said as she opened the door. The sound of her own name shocked Christine for a moment, as she was not used to guests asking for her and not her husband.

"Yes, may I help you?" Christine offered as she noticed the woman's swollen and blackened eyes under her large sunglasses. The bandage on the left cheek of her face gave Christine great worry. "Dear who did that to you? Come in here and let me help you."

"Mrs. Carpenter I haven't come here for your help. I've come to help you," Nicole said, as she entered the opulent Carpenter family home.

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George wandered the home from room to room not finding what he expected, his wife was not here. This was not acceptable. Hers was always the first face he longed to see after a hard Congressional session. He went to his study; disappointment was beginning to turn to rage as he sought to throw himself into his work; in hopes of alleviating much of his stress.

He never enjoyed surprises or disappointment, now was no different. He had come to expect his loving and loyal wife to never be the cause of his dissatisfaction. That's funny he thought, as he saw a piece of paper sitting on his antique redwood and

mahogany desk. It was not like his wife to leave clutter on his desk and she knew better than to enter his office unless announced. He picked up the short letter and began to read.

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George,

For far too many years I have blamed myself for the abuse I have received. Now I see it was never about me, it was you. George you need to find help for your demons. You will never find happiness until you seek out professional help. George I am leaving you, I want a divorce. I am staying with my Father. The security staff has orders not to let you on the property. If you make this divorce easy then I will not go to the newspapers and tell them about your abusive nature. But if you try to see me or fight this divorce then I will destroy your career.

George how could you do such terrible things to that young woman? I always thought it was your nature to care for people, that your abuse was the sign of a man struggling to show his love. I know now that this is just not true.
Christine.

Chapter 14 (November 22, 2018)

"Boy go talk to her, any damn fool can see you two are hot for each other." Eric's father's words might as well have been spoken by his grandfather it seemed.

Eric ignored him and went back to pumping gas into the old pickup. His Dad stood next to him leaning heavily on his cane. Jen had just walked into the back of the old gas station headed for another day at work schlepping drinks and selling gas.

She was wearing her old faded blue jeans and white short sleeved blouse again. Eric had made so many excuses to go see her over the past months he now knew nearly every piece of clothing she owned. He liked her in this outfit the best, the way the jeans clung to her butt and legs, the way her dark hair contrasted against the white fabric and the pale yellow and pink floral print of the blouse. Her cowboy boots added almost two inches to her height,

making her nearly the same height as Eric, and making her long legs appear just that much longer.

Today she was wearing an old cowboy hat, not the typical pink or trendy types he had seen so often in Denver, that most women wore, but an actual brown leather Stetson. It was well worn and faded; its brim was now losing its stiffness and hung down slightly over her forehead. It was light brown in color and framed the features of her face nicely as the brim cast a thin shadow over her eyes and seemed to add mystery to her soul.

Jen didn't wear makeup, Eric knew, she didn't need to anyways. She had a natural beauty, a beauty that came from inside and radiated out through a perfect smile, big expressive eyes and adorable mischievous dimples. Eric had every line and crevice of that face memorized, as he had seen it time and again in his dreams.

The station had just the day before received a shipment of gas, as the prices had finally gone back down below \$8 per gallon. The news had spread fast and now the old station had become moderately busy as nearly everyone in town sought to fill their tanks while they could.

It had been two months since his grandfather's death and Eric was just now becoming able to make it through a day without thinking of that last fishing trip. His job in Denver was now gone, but he had gotten lucky with odd jobs at the few ranches nearby and a few small roofing and painting jobs. He didn't collect much money but quite often traded his services for a cow, pig or something else of value. He had traded this gas today in fact for fixing a leak in the roof of the old gas station. Gas that he knew would have to last for some time to come.

The Wall Street speculators were causing gas prices to go nuts again. The family was lucky that they had an old windmill that provided most of their electricity. Most people around Fort Thompson, he

knew, had no electricity or depended on Central Electric's compassion. Some even lacked indoor plumbing. But Eric's family's land had been with them for generations. Passed from father and son until now no one could seem to remember which ancestor owned it first.

A shared satellite subscription got over two dozen homes on the reservation their internet and a basic Television package. He knew the connection wasn't legal, but considering what little means any of them had, he supposed DirecTV would just look the other way for them each only paying twelve dollars a month. Or at least he hoped they would. They had the most basic package and it seemed nowadays there were more channels but less and less real choice. He didn't care for the reality shows at all and didn't spend much time watching any of the serial shows.

Every show he saw seemed to be lacking of any originality as they all struggled to perpetuate an image of Americanism that would attract the most advertising dollars. Even sports figures and celebrities who would inevitably lose their stature in the face of disgrace or scandal, and could no longer be used for endorsements, were still used nonetheless to sell advertising by the ever present mention of their names. Instead he found himself watching more and more of the news shows and even avoided those who seemed to offer sensationalism over substance.

Charisma in public officials now seemed to be the most important characteristic any politician or celebrity could own, it made him wonder if integrity, honesty, or ethics had ever held any real value in the white culture. Or were these all simply just so much bunting that some would-be leaders liked to wrap themselves in before tearing down their opponents?

Many on the reservation were becoming concerned with the new Republican Administration. They had swept into the Congress and White House after an embarrassment of a battle in Pakistan had

forced the retreat of two divisions, two divisions that weren't even supposed to be there. It seemed odd to Eric how the news had so maligned the previous President when it had seemed everyone had been begging for him to take action in Pakistan.

He was also watching the increasingly conservative Supreme Court. He now wished he had voted in the last election as he watched funding get cut for Health Care on the Reservation. He knew those cuts were affecting his cousin more than anyone else on the Rees as he struggled to find other ways to buy testing equipment and supplies to care for their people. They now had little time to spend together as David spent more and more time begging businesses and Churches for the most basic of drugs and medical supplies.

There were rumors of a Senate voting rights bill. Eric hadn't known much about the Bill of Rights until he found out he might lose his right to vote. He hoped that these were only rumors. After all how could they do this? He thought the Bill of Rights was completely binding.

Eric approached the gas station counter Jen's father was working the register. The two older men seemed to give each other a knowing glance as Jen's old man said. "Hey Eric, thanks for fixin' my roof. You know this gas is on me; as a matter of fact why don't you let me buy you two a beer, just tell Jen it's on me." Eric wondered if had just imagined the two older men winking at each other.

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Eric's father had left several hours earlier. He was now enjoying his first real conversation with Jen, despite the rowdiness of the crowd. They had talked about events both had undergone in the years between last seeing each other. Eric told her of places she could barely imagine, tall buildings and megalithic structures she had only ever seen on TV and in magazines. The now all too few snows of Colorado contrasting with

the Red Rocks which Eric now sorely missed, the inspiring cliffs and deep crevices of the dry riverbed that had once been Steamboat Springs. Places that even though not the same as they had been in his childhood, still managed to inspire awe in him each time he saw them.

Everyone in the cramped bar came to attention as Eric's cousin came running in asking for the TV to be switched over to World Network News. Several other men followed him in from outside, men who had gone out to enjoy their cold beers in the cool autumn air, away from the hot, cramped bar.

The name change for the large network had come at a time when their ratings were at a low point. The Republicans had accused the network of conspiring with liberals during the previous administration and quite quickly they fell from favor with the American public. Soon they moved their headquarters and changed their name in hopes of regaining their viewer-ship. A new direction in their reporting soon became obvious, for those who were paying attention, as they started preaching Christian dogma and Republican values.

Many of the older men at the bar, on this unusually busy night, were obviously perturbed at first as Jen manually changed the station on the old Black and White set over to the news. Quickly everyone settled down and quickly became caught up in one of the most shocking news stories they had ever heard.

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"We would like to repeat, the images you are about to see are graphic. If there are children in your home you may want to ask them to leave the room. To continue, reports are that nearly one hundred armed men stormed the Supreme Court building about an hour ago. They took no hostages. Several guards, at least fifteen civilians and five justices, are dead or in serious condition, as we

are told, including Chief Justice Sotomayeur."

"Her loyal American service for the last ten years has always been of a controversial nature starting with her confirmation and ending with the recent weapons legislation," the young man with the blond hair and perfect smile said as he stood in front of a backdrop of the Supreme Court building in Washington D.C.

"John, do we know their motivation? And can you tell me how they managed to pull this off?" The on air anchor was of African American descent and was a holdover from the old days when the network had gone by another name. His eyebrows were arched as if in deep thought, a look he had practiced hundreds of times in front of the mirror.

"Yes Larry, Department of Homeland Security personnel tell me that the weapons ban was most likely their motivation as it seems they only shot the five justices who voted for the ban. There was a gun owner's rights rally in the plaza at the time of the incident. Senator Carpenter told me just moments ago, in an exclusive interview that he will introduce legislation that would create a new judicial agency to oversee and validate all political rallies and demonstrations, and that serious penalties will be levied against those who fail to acquire permits for attendance at such demonstrations." The response took a few moments as the words had taken time to travel over satellite. The images were indeed grisly as they splashed across the small screen and across the minds of the men in the bar. Blood spattered marble walls and black body bags lined up down a long hallway in preparation of being removed.

"Well it is truly a dark day for the American justice system and America itself, thank you John for your report. We will bring you more on this story as it unfolds. Coming up, at the top of the hour, Congress set to vote on a ban to stop door to door sales, after this message from our sponsor," were the last words Larry Smith said as the TV went

to commercial.

Chapter 15 (January 13, 2019)

Aaron had begun to worry about the company that his roommate seemed to keep. Most of the men that he would bring to their dorm were quite a bit older than either of them. Many of them had tattoos of Christian crosses but also Nazi swastikas. Increasingly he had chosen to stay away from the dorm whenever he knew that Michael might be around.

They had argued many times over the merits of gun control and social services and Aaron had begun to see an all too common theme in the thoughts of the young man whom he had to share space with. He took solace in the fact that by the end of the semester he would have enough money saved to move into his own apartment and would not have to listen

as the man seemingly blamed nearly every historic event on the Jewish race and Israel in particular.

Aaron saw no use in telling the man, whose bunk was above his, that his mother was Jewish, a woman whom meant more to Aaron than anything else in the world. A woman whom herself had worked her way through college despite overwhelming odds and had started her own successful business with nearly no help.

He found the man's notions of collusion between Israel and New York Jewish bankers foolish and ill conceived. Although he figured one day Michael might see the error of his logic.

On his laptop and in the library, Aaron researched many of the pamphlets that Michael had left around their room. The first one he had found had been titled Concerned Conservative Christians. Soon he had discovered that the group had been newly formed from another group from many years ago. The pamphlet, he had seen right away, had been published in Philadelphia. The name had proven to be almost a dead end until he had found a group with a similar name and through his readings had deduced they were in fact the same group. The similarities were simply too obvious to not come to any other conclusion.

The founder had been a man named Monte Kim Miller, the original group he had formed had been called the Concerned Christians. During the 1980's, Miller had been a Colorado businessman. Originally the group was a very vocal element of the Christian counter cult movement, established to combat New Age religious movements and anti-Christian sentiment. By the beginning of the twenty-first century however it had become an apocalyptic Christian cult, as the group adopted the less mainstream views of the millennium held by Miller.

Miller believed in a strict separation between Christians and the broader social and cultural world. He saw the whole political and cultural arena as the realm and kingdom of Satan.

Miller preached that Christians needed to always be prepared for the Second Coming so they could assume new leadership roles.

Miller's followers ranged from lawyers and business owners, to construction workers, and his flock included several families with young children.

In October 1998 more than 60 of the members of the group left their homes in Colorado and were soon to become the subject of an intense search. Miller had prophesied that he would die in Jerusalem and be resurrected after three days; his original ideals had quickly grown stranger the more he chose to isolate himself and his group from the rest of the world. The group eventually reappeared in January 1999 when they were arrested and deported by the Israeli government for plotting to blow up the Al-Aqsa mosque in an anti-terror roundup the Israelis had codenamed, "Walk on Water".

The group had believed that by blowing up religious landmarks within the holy land they could bring about the return of their Messiah. Aaron had thought the concepts laughable. His roommate, when they discussed it, quickly pointed them out as heroes and warriors of virtue to the Christian faith. This had been the start of Aaron's worries about what might someday become of the young man. Still he had figured that every man was entitled to an opinion so he had simply chosen to steer clear of Michael.

As he looked further into the newly renamed group's dealings, he found illegal blogs and forums espousing the most outrageous of claims: supposed connections between Jewish groups and the events of 911 and Oklahoma City. It seemed to him that nearly any wildly outrageous claim they could think of was posted without any rational investigation, and so too his roommates thoughts seemed to progress in much the same way.

Chapter 16 (February 12, 2019)

"God it got dark early tonight, hah Stan?"
Officer Randolph exclaimed.

"Yeah, I'd say four o' clock is a bit early even for this time of year. It's those fires from the landfills I heard, smoke blocking out the sun," Officer Stanley Webber responded.

"Did they say what's causin' 'em?"

"You know same thing they always say. Lightning strike or a spark, drought all that stuff," Officer Webber explained, proud to show that he, unlike so many others, still paid attention to the news and current events.

"Well, hey at least with the droughts we don't have the mosquitoes we used to have this time of year," Stanley chuckled at his partner's joke, he knew all too well his partner's irreverent, some might say sick, sense of humor.

"Yeah guess they managed to finally get rid

of that pesky West Nile virus, didn't they," Stanley said, offering his own joke in return.

Sergeant Webber hated stakeouts, especially when he was expecting a phone call from home at any time. His wife was two weeks overdue and two false labors had already sent them rushing to the hospital within the last three weeks. He knew the next time would most likely be the real deal.

Cutbacks in his insurance however meant they would have to foot the bill for her pregnancy on their own. Cutbacks the Policemen's Union had fought hard for despite threats from an anti-union Governor to curtail their collective bargaining rights. In the end the Union gave up a number of Health Insurance benefits when it became increasingly obvious that Union Leaders might in fact lose their own jobs. The rank and file had been upset, but as so many of the working class do, quickly learnt to deal with the cards they had been dealt. Eventually everyday diversions had shuffled the media's attentions away from what had been momentarily upsetting to so many.

Anxiety over a new baby had been Stanley's diversion away from the scandal and had led Stanley to work extra shifts ever since they had gotten the blessed news of a new addition to their family. They had chosen not to know the babies sex, but had gone through with the usual genetic testing to ensure that they would have a healthy child. All signs seemed good and now they spent late nights deliberating over names.

Stanley's new schedule didn't leave them much time for each other, but he knew the extra hours would be well worth it. The escalation of the drug trade moving through L.A. ensured plenty of work for all of the men on the force, who still had a job. Inevitably cutbacks in police personnel had meant that the more experienced officers -like him - would see far more hours. The Mexican cartels were getting far more brazen in attacks against public places and now there had been rumors of possible

martial law being enacted to deal with drug related terror events.

The Saran attacks in the L.A. Subways had been only the first salvo in an ever increasing environment of terror in Southern California and along the border of the American Southwest. Over 30 people, some of them law enforcement, had died on that single day. The media had inevitably called it the West Coast 911. Stanley knew that was a stretch. Yet he also felt that the event would be just the beginning. Sure enough it had been.

Soon the Cartel's pistelero's began kidnapping the children of law enforcement personnel, lawyers, and judges; holding them ransom for release of their friends, their confiscated drugs, and even as a means to extort tribute money; as they made empty promises to curtail the violence. It was and had always been the policy of the L.A.P.D. to never negotiate with terrorists. The inevitable escalation of violence had led to many civilian casualties, people whose only crime had been to be at the wrong place at the wrong time, or to have lived or worked in the wrong neighborhood.

Crackdowns in border crossings and the planting of land-mines on the border were cutting into cartel profits, and they didn't like it. They wanted a return to the old times of easy profits and seeming collusion by the government agencies. Soon they started attacking pharmacies and Doctor's office in search of pills and prescription drugs they could also sell. Pharmaceutical grade barbiturates and opiates were always a favorite of their customers, and being short on supply from over the border, they were now forced to find new streams of revenue. After all Hacienda's and guns weren't cheap and they needed those drug profits to pay for them.

Increasingly they had seen a decline in sales of Meth, Coke, and heroine even before the crackdowns, as more and more people started turning towards prescription drugs. What profit was still

there for them, they sought to protect at any cost. Stanley had seen firsthand how little value they placed on life. His wife warned him daily to be careful and begged him every few weeks to find a less dangerous job.

"Sergeant Webber," a woman's voice crackled over the cruisers two way radio.

"This is Sergeant Webber, over." Stanley responded as he picked up the transmitter.

"Sergeant Webber we have news that your wife was just rushed to the hospital. Sergeant you are relieved of duty for the rest of the shift. They are taking her to University Hospital. Good luck Sergeant." The woman's voice offered to a now very excited twenty five year old man and soon to be father. Stanley knew that tonight would change his life forever. Even if he didn't yet know all that would happen.

Chapter 17 (February 12, 2019)

George was worrying over the fate of his newly introduced bill as the session seemed to drag later and later into the night. It seemed to him that a small handful of recently converted Republicans were stalling the measure. He thought, 'Republicans, hah, once a damn Democrat always a damn Democrat. They should have taken them all out and hung them after the last election'.

"Senator I know this bill you are bringing forward has the support of the American people. My only worry is the last passage you only recently added; the one that would allow the court to reassemble with only five justices. This seems to

fly in the face of historical precedence," an aging Senator from Missouri pointed out to a packed house.

"Well I happen to know personally that the President supports this measure. The court's docket is full of time sensitive decisions that need to be acted on quickly. We are only asking to go forward as such to give the President time to choose his nominees, and also," the Senator paused as an aide whispered in his ear, "historically and legally speaking there is a precedent; the first Supreme Court had only five justices as well. So indeed the precedent is there." Again he paused as he shuffled a few pieces of paper, looking for a speech he had only recently prepared.

"You know that choosing nominees is a difficult process and one that should not be rushed. So far we have a single nominee before us that is qualified for such enormous responsibility and this measure would simply give the president the time to choose other qualified candidates," the Senator carefully removed, folded his glasses and laid them down, an act he had first learned from his father, but had later perfected with the aid of his handlers.

It was all choreographed very deeply. He was to remove them slowly with his right hand, always the right hand; the hand of power. Then carefully and slowly fold them with both hands before placing them gingerly to his right on top of a pile of papers. The act of placing them in itself an act, a way of showing the American people that he was not in fact using a speech. That this was off the cuff, that he was showing an honest side that they hadn't seen from other politicians. George had practiced it so many times he came to see it as almost a scene within a play. Indeed he had grown to know that politics and campaigns were after all not that much different from acting and movies, and had learned that both were essentially just a popularity contest.

"I ask for a vote by show of hands to be made

now. The provisions are well known to all and it's time we act on behalf of the American people. My good Senators, all of America is watching to see what we do today. They are tired of seeing a government that to them seems to be indecisive even in such trivial matters as these. If we can be decisive this day it will mark a new direction in American politics, it will show Americans that this Republican Congress truly has faith in their President and is capable of protecting and adjudicating a productive future for our people. Our failure, in equal measure, will show us as incompetent and indecisive. The American people demand fast action and a quick response, and rightfully so," the Senator had practiced his response to this very question many times. He knew the words were not nearly as important as his tone and tenor, and was careful to pace it just right.

Knowing the value of the sound byte, he wanted to ensure to hit all the right notes, hopeful that even if the bill failed to pass, the news media, and the public would know for sure who had caused its failure; after all, he reasoned, even if the Democratic party was theoretically gone there would always be at least a few progressives and liberals around conspiring against his best laid plans.

The vote passed by the narrowest of margins.

Chapter 18 (February 12, 2019)

"Nurse, which room is my wife in?" Stanley asked abruptly as he ran to the attendant's desk.

The reception area might as well have been the reception area of any other large American hospital: the same eggshell paint treatment over faux cloth wainscot paneling, white ceramic tile floors, and low pile blue-gray carpeting in the waiting room. The architects had obviously tried very hard to hide the fact that this was a hospital with intimate nooks and innocuous statuary, but they had been unable to hide the overwhelming odor of ether and pine scented sanitizer; which now made Stanley a bit queasy.

"What's her name Officer?" the forty something year old nurse, wearing too much makeup and heavy perfume responded. She wore her frosted blond hair cut short and noisily chewed gum. Stanley

wondered if that was holding with hospital policy, most likely not he thought.

"Webber, Barbara Webber," Stanley was still trying to catch his breath from the long jog from the parking area to the reception desk. He longed to be with his wife to do whatever might be necessary to comfort and protect her at this happy, but stressful time. He had taken all the classes and felt the part of coach deeply in his bones; always looking forward to this day, when he could take even just a small part in the delivery of their baby.

"Officer, wait right here will you?" The nurse seemed to have gone quite pale, quite quickly, "Doctor Khakwani to maternity, Doctor Khakwani to maternity." She said into the P.A. microphone pinned to her collar.

"Nurse is there something wrong?" Stanley asked, worries running quickly through his mind. His wife's pregnancy had been anything but ordinary. They had tried for more than three years to get pregnant and now he was worried that something had gone wrong. He suddenly feared the worst.

This was a first for him, but he knew something didn't feel quite right. He had gotten used to reading people in his five years on the force and knew now that the nurse wasn't being completely forthcoming with him.

"I'm sorry sir you'll have to wait to speak to her Doctor," the nurse explained as she went back to keying charts into her computer terminal.

*

"What the hell's going on Doc? Where's my wife? Is everything okay?" Stanley fired off his questions quickly to the young Pakistani Resident. There was little money in pregnancy cases anymore, so it increasingly fell to young Residents to perform what to most seemed to be a very simple procedure.

"Officer, I'm sorry to say your wife is in very bad condition. We've had to take her to I.C.U. sir. Have you ever heard of Anaphylactic Syndrome?" The Doctor, as he motioned for Stanley to take a seat, was trying to be consoling but his thick Pakistani accent was having just the opposite effect on the young policeman.

"Hell no Doc, how would I know what the hell that is?" Stanley was shaking with fear of what he might be told next. "How bad is it Doc?"

"Well, it seems your son's amniotic fluid got into your wife's circulatory system and now her immune system is fighting it off." Stanley heard son and his spirit picked up for a brief moment. The Doctor continued. "Your wife's condition is stable right now sir. Ten years ago both your wife and son might be dead now, but now we know how to deal with these things. You can relax the worse of it is over. We have her on plasma and oxygen and are treating her as best we can. Your wife is young and should be just fine. We will keep you up to date to her condition if you would like to go home or go to the maternity ward and see your son."

"If it's all the same Doc...I'll wait to see my son until me and my wife can see him together and if it's okay could I wait in her room?" Stanley worried the answer would be no.

"Well ordinarily we would have to say no, but seeing as you are law enforcement I suppose we can make an exception."

*

Barbara had repeatedly begged her husband to quit smoking, but right now he couldn't stand the urge anymore. He found himself at the back of the hospital now with a lit cigarette, which unfortunately was doing little to comfort his growing anxiety. It had been four hours since he had

arrived and received the worse news of his life. Now he struggled with a feeling of hopelessness he wished he didn't have to feel. As a tall man in great physical shape, an officer of the law, he had figured he could protect his wife from anything. Now he was forced to watch and wait as others worked tirelessly to keep her alive.

He kept his head shaved mostly for the ease of maintenance it afforded him. His eyes had started weakening early in his teen years and now he was forced to wear thin wire rimmed glasses, he despised the things seeing them as being for nerds and geeks primarily. He had wished that his insurance would cover Lasik surgery, but it didn't, and he simply didn't make enough money to pay for a new home, two cars, and the surgery.

He tried to enjoy the cigarette as he sucked back hard and inhaled deeply. He wished he could quit, he had managed to cut back to just three packs a week when the price had gone up to \$15 a pack, but now was not a time to worry about quitting. He knew Barbara would accuse him of making excuses and would scold him for it, if she were awake. Right now he hoped in fact to go back to her room and find her there sitting up, hopefully smelling the smoke on his uniform and again giving him hell for still smoking. He wouldn't relish the inevitable yelling and begging for forgiveness, but it would be far better than watching her lying there, connected to machines and breathing tubes.

Stanley was crushing out his cigarette when the four military Hummers stopped at the ambulance dock and nearly twenty soldiers jumped out. They rushed past him quickly on their way through the double glass doors, nearly knocking him over in their haste. Just then he saw what made his jaw drop in terror.

Stanley Webber was shocked as he saw first the lights of the parking garage twinkling out, as they rolled towards the hospital, and then sure enough and in rapid succession the hospital lights

twinkled out too. He waited several anxious moments for the generators to kick in and was now racing back to his wife's bed as he quickly realized that they should have kicked in by now. He raced past three armed soldiers and face to face with a short dark skinned man holding what Webber knew had to be a detonator. His eyes followed a cord running up the sleeve of the man's flannel shirt and to several long black metal cylinders wrapped around his torso. They were made of simple black plumbing pipe. Two inches in diameter, with black steel caps on either end and fastened tightly to the man's body with rawhide belts.

He stood less than ten feet away from the young man, his heart and mind now racing. He knew he had to somehow get those lights back on. He knew that this man and probably others were responsible for the lights going out.

Drugstore Cowboys they were often called. They would often attack Doctor's offices and pharmacies looking for drugs to sell, use, or both. Stanley had never heard of them taking over a large metropolitan hospital before, but with crime seemingly always escalating he wasn't surprised either.

"Whoa, take it easy buddy, don't do anything drastic," Stanley said as he held both hands up with his palms facing out. "What's it you're after? Drugs, you looking for drugs? I'll get 'em for you, just get the power back on, please get the power back on." Stanley's heart was beating so hard he could hear it himself and wondered if others could too. "My wife's back there dying," He quickly started pleading for his wife's life. He could only hope that the young Hispanic man had a soul, even as he knew how unlikely that was.

Tears of hopelessness and helplessness quickly ran down his right cheek as he pleaded for his wife's life. His whole body seemed to spasm with fear and despair. "Nurse, take us to the pharmacy." Stanley ordered. The nurse stood there for what

seemed like forever not moving, not doing anything. Stanley silently marked each long moment that his wife was without life support. He drew his service pistol, his hands shaking and his head beading with sweat, but not knowing any other alternative. "I'm sorry nurse but my wife needs that power back on. Get this man what he wants." He repeated as he pointed the pistol squarely at the frightened nurse, "NOW!"

Chapter 19 (Late April, 2019)

Eric had gotten lucky lately at finding work. He wondered how so many of the people of the tribe could suddenly afford to now take care of much needed home repairs. He had bought his own used truck and used it both for work, and to take his new girlfriend, Jen, to the old movie house in Chamberlain. He couldn't imagine that things could get any better than this. It was early spring and his life seemed to be going just as he had always hoped it would as he went to meet his cousin.

He knew things weren't going as well for his cousin. Elimination of Health Care funding, a few months earlier, had seemingly turned the young Doctor's eternal struggle for funding into a useless endeavor to find medicine and supplies for his new mobile clinic. Last year his cousin had beamed proudly as he had showed Eric the brand new clinic. He had rambled proudly and excitedly about how much

good it would do for the people of the village and the reservation.

A corporate grant, from a group that had chosen to remain anonymous, had provided the needed capital for the state of the art facility. David had only wished he had been provided with the benefactor's names so he could have organized an appropriate thank you for the good people that had seemingly just pushed Health Care on the reservation forward several decades.

Eric found his cousin at the old rickety bar nursing a beer as he went over a grant proposal he knew stood no hope for funding, but felt obligated to try to push for anyways. Eric recognized his cousin's burdens even if the man would never share his worries with those around him. He took the seat right next to his cousin, patting the tired looking man on the back as he did so.

"Hey babe," Eric said with a wide smile to a noticeably blushing and radiant Jen. Their relationship had started in earnest four months ago but hadn't really taken off until Eric had been able to forget the funeral and find enough work so that he could afford to give her all he would have wanted.

"Hey sweetie, need a beer?" Jen didn't wait for an answer as she opened a beer and poured a shot of whiskey for a man whose drink she knew better than any other customer. She walked away recognizing the sight of two men who needed to talk.

"I see you two are hittin' it off. Was I right or was I right?" David said with a short moment of satisfaction in himself.

These moments of self-pride had grown few and far between for the young Doctor who was now questioning his decision to return home. He was growing increasingly disillusioned over what he was beginning to see as a growing impotence to effectively do his job. Increasingly long hours

spent pursuing valuable resources meant less time for him to spend with patients. He worried that being stretched like this might someday lead him to make a mistake.

"Yeah you were right, she's great. I think she might even be the one Cuz." Eric said in a rare moment of pure honesty.

"Hell Cuz, that's great. This calls for a celebration, let me buy that drink for you. So have you two..." David paused, "have you, you know."

"No, I think I want to wait, you know, try the old fashioned thing, like Mom and Dad did. Seems to 'ave worked for them, so how you doin' Cuz?" Eric said trying to change the conversation away from his love life. He didn't think it would be appropriate if his new love overheard them discussing her.

"Yeah, shit Eric, this Senator Carpenter. Man what a prick, you know he sat on this damned health care proposition like he wanted it to go away. Me, and some others are tryin' to get together a new proposal now. It doesn't look good though." David said laying his proposal down.

"Sorry to hear that Cuz," Eric said taking a sip from his beer.

Chapter 20 (May 5, 2019)

They had lived the last six months in a small white cape style house in Portsmouth, NH, just blocks from Prescott Park and the Piscataqua River. Christine had always loved springtime in this nostalgic old town. The town seemingly bounding back to life each spring with the returning leaves and young grass. Music and plays performed each weekend by people proud of their community. And an honest and sincere easiness of being, that was easily shared by friends and neighbors. Everywhere she looked the contrast of God's new green contrasting with man's brick and wooden structures seemed to mark a place that was all to right in the world.

To Christine Portsmouth, New Hampshire had always been the quintessential New England town, full of history and nostalgia. Centuries old three story houses painted in a rich tapestry of vibrant colors interspersed with antique brick buildings and set upon miles and miles of herringbone patterned brick sidewalks.

The sound of her heels on the old brick streets always gave her comfort and even more so in the company of Nicole. She had taken the young woman in after the divorce, and after having worried over what George's temper might cause. The young woman's physical scars were quickly beginning to fade and Christine was now starting to feel emotions she had

long since thought she would never feel. They both still felt deeply their emotional scars but felt these to starting to heal.

They stopped at a wood and wrought iron bench across from the old harbor. Christine always enjoyed watching the old gundalow as it rocked gently up and down in the waves. This time of year was the best though, the harbor full of boats and ships with great sails unfurled as if ready to leave at any moment on some romantic trip. The sound of the waves lapping against the gravel shore and stone breakwaters gave them a sense of the power of the inevitability in God's design.

Nicole had shoulder length tussled brown hair. It was fashioned in a style so as to appear both neat and yet as though she had just gotten out of bed as well. Large brown and mischievous eyes and a sly warm smile marked a woman of sexuality that oozed from every pore of her body. Soft alabaster skin stretched over seemingly sculpted proportions marked her as a truly classical beauty. Christine was worried about the implications of the feelings she was beginning to experience for Nicole. Should she tell her? What would Nicole think? What would her family think?

Christine had only recently returned to using her maiden name. She had always been proud of her genealogy and proud of the name too. She came from a large old New England family. Several in her family could trace their roots back to the ship Anne and a few even the Mayflower. The Brewsters had become legendary as one of New England's founding families.

One of her most ancient ancestors had been William Brewster who as a Puritan opposed the Church of England, and as a graduate of Cambridge emigrated to Plymouth Rock aboard the Mayflower. He became a great leader and teacher among the Puritans of the time, both in Holland and later in the New World. A New World, which many in their Puritanical faith, took as their best hope at religious freedom not

afforded to them in their English home. Yet their love for their beloved England was what led them to name the tiny landmass, they called home, New England.

Christine had been taught this history many times by her family. She had come to see in others, needing help, the same troubling past as that of her ancestors. Instinctively she knew that, even if her faith differed from that of her ancestors, that at least they would have found favor in her want to help others. From an early start she recognized that many unfortunate circumstances of life and society were born out of ignorance and mistrust of the cultures of others.

"Chrissie, thank you for letting me stay with you. No one has ever been so kind to me," Nicole said in an all too rare moment of honesty and openness. She stared out onto the water as if looking at both past and future. "Do you know Chrissie my first time with a man was with my Uncle? He forced himself on me when I was just twelve. Her eyes seemed to moisten as she tried to find the words to convey all of the pent up rage and pain she had known. She struggled to find both a way to confess her feelings of pain and grief, but also her thankfulness for having found a truly great friend. "What is it with men Chrissie? Why are they all so evil?"

Nicole began to cry as Christine reached out to hug and console the beautiful younger woman. They held each other; at first as if mother and daughter, then as if sisters and then finally as lovers. The intensity of their embrace increased as their mouths met for the first time, their first kiss and their first real love.

Chapter 21 (May 29, 2019)

Lisa Summers had never wanted to go to college, but her parents had left her no choice. If she wanted any piece of the inheritance, that her grandparents had left, she would do as she was told. Now though, she had finally graduated. Four years she thought, four years of classes she knew she would most likely never use. After all, she knew, she was not meant to be like her mother and not even her father.

She just couldn't see herself having kids and worrying about the greenness of her suburban lawn. There was no way she could ever enjoy charity luncheons or see herself planning cocktail parties for a button down husband, and thoughts of attending mixers for the housing committee made her want to vomit for the absurdity of their purpose. Weekly game nights full of Bridge and Canasta would never be exciting enough for her, not unless they ended with her getting gang banged as well. She longed instead for adventure and the open road. She saw

life as a series of new opportunities and promises of adventure.

She had only graduated the previous day but had planned her escape for three years. Saturday afternoons spent skydiving, base jumping and in other high risk endeavors had failed to feed her hunger for danger. Friday and Saturday nights of clandestine affairs and group sex had not fed her lust for life either. She longed for excitement and was now determined to find it. She had often confided to others that she felt a life well spent was one full of experiences, both good and bad.

Her classes at Warren Wilson had taught her far less than her time on its farm. A small liberal arts school set in the Blue Ridge Mountains of western North Carolina it had long been a place that taught of social and environmental responsibility by requiring of all of their students, time spent on their farms. Farms that used tried and true, time tested ideals of responsible farming. In this manner all of the students, besides learning fields such as Archeology and Arts, also learned ideals of sustainability and responsible stewardship for fellow man and nature.

She had packed her small hatchback carefully, taking only those things she saw as absolute necessities and now hoped to put as much road behind her as she could, before her parents realized she had left. The little hatchback struggled as she pressed down hard on the gas. Lisa had no fear of cops; and had fantasized many times of having sex with a cop on the side of some lonely highway; and she had always enjoyed living out her fantasies. She rationalized her love life in this way, a series of doomed relationships and non-starts as she sought to satisfy her urges based upon her fantasies.

Her cell phone and laptop were no longer parts of her life. She wondered even now how many messages her parents had left in hopes that she might soon call. She had no doubt that someday she

would talk to them again, but now was her time to do as she wished. She knew what lay behind her she longed to know what lay ahead.

Chapter 22 (July 22, 2019)

Flu season seemed to always come early to the reservation - like the guest no one remembered inviting - as the poorest of any society are always the most prone to sickness. Eric was returning home with his ailing Grandmother from the clinic, David had told them to be sure she got plenty of rest, and unable to give them antibiotics offered the best advice he could, bed rest and liquids.

Chilali, or Butterfly, had not been herself ever since the death of her husband. A once very social woman who had served as midwife for decades on the reservation, and spent her time in concerns and pursuits that were intended to better the community, now barely left the house. She had married young and had only ever known the one man in her nearly sixty-five years on Earth. Her husband's passing had hit her harder than anyone could have expected as she found it harder and harder to get

out of bed each day. Even now, nine months later, the family would often find her crying and praying to be reunited with the love of her life.

Eric had long looked at the marriage of his grandparents as an example of one of the few things right in the world. He hoped to someday find the same kind of love he knew his grandparents had. Increasingly he was beginning to feel he had found it with Jen. No matter how busy his daily life would become he would, every few moments, find his mind wandering back to thoughts of his new girlfriend.

The road back to the motor home had gotten much bumpier this mid-summer than in previous years. Eric was hoping to find some work soon so that he might have the extra money to grade the road before winter came again. His grandmother came out of her short nap as the truck hit a pothole he knew to be there but had not been able to avoid.

"This darned road, be careful Eric you don't want to hurt your truck," the old woman said pushing her black rimmed glasses back up her nose.

Chilali was a small woman. Standing only five one she seemed almost fragile but precious as well, much like a prized vase or porcelain figurine. Her hair was now nearly completely gray and her face was deeply wrinkled adding depth to an already warm smile and caring eyes. Her countenance seemed to betray her complete lack of malice towards anyone.

"I know Gram. I hope to fix that damn pothole soon. Work's just been slow lately is all; no one seems to have any money anymore to fix their houses. Funny last summer was so busy," Eric wondered where all of his construction clients were now.

"Yeah, well everyone got their loans Eric, now they're trying hard to pay them and not lose their land. The banks made it so easy for people last year. It's just too bad that they hadn't bothered to wonder if anyone could pay them back."

Eric hadn't thought about this when he had seen the new found wealth pour in the previous year. Suddenly many things started to make sense to him.

"David told me you're thinking of marrying Jen. She's such a lovely girl. Her father is such a nice man. It's too bad her mother isn't still with us. She would have liked you a lot Eric." His Grandmother was beaming with pride at seeing the maturity of her beloved grandson. "Eric there's something I want you to have." She continued as she slowly and deliberately removed an old gold ring from her finger.

"Gram I can't take that." Eric said as he watched the old woman's actions.

"Nonsense boy, I had always hoped that you would someday give it to your wife. Your grandfather would have wanted it that way. You know when he gave this to me he never bothered to tell me how much it had cost him. He spent nearly a year working towards this one goal. I only found out later how proud he was to buy it for me with his own hard earned cash. The fact that he hadn't been forced to take out a loan for it, a whole year of a man's life Eric. It seems like such a long time when you are looking forward to something, but you will learn that it's nothing when compared to a lifetime. I hope you too can make a life based upon it and based upon love. I want you to have it Eric," to give it to the woman you fall in love with. "Whether that's Jen or someone else."

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Eric had never known anyone to die from the flu even now he found it all so unusual. He had seen her health deteriorate quickly within that week since her diagnosis. She hadn't been the first to die from what the news was calling possibly the second deadliest influenza outbreak in history, and David had warned him she probably wouldn't be the last either. He had watched his normally upbeat

cousin become more serious and introspective over the last few days as he complained that there was no money for vaccines that might have saved so many.

The two men now sat in David's waiting room drinking a toast to their ancestors knowing that in heaven they would soon be reunited. They laughed at remembrances of Conze and Chilali. A sudden moment of silence brought them both back to feelings of grief from their recent losses.

"You know Eric I wish there had been more I could've done. Damn government bureaucrats, you know this wouldn't have happened five years ago; but hell Eric look around you people paying 32% mortgages now on loans they should've never gotten anyways. Loans they never would have got if the damned government had stayed out of the banks. Many of our people are losing their homes and land now. It seems to me the white man is trying once again to steal our lands," David had recently become far more disillusioned with what he now saw as a corrupt and dying system. "The damned white man has always conspired to steal our lands. It just seems like this is just their newest trick to me. This time they come in Sheriff's uniforms instead of soldier's uniforms and armed with eviction notices instead of guns, but it's all the same. Funny though those bankers aren't happy anymore with just our land, they seem to want everyone's land now."

"Yeah but what the hell can any of us do about it? Seems to me the politicians are going to do whatever they want anyways." Eric in his youth still found other concerns in his daily life to be far more pressing than noble ambitions about political involvement and social responsibility.

"Eric, I'm shocked to hear you say that. You vote is what you do. You pick a cause an issue whatever and you support it. Eric your old man would be ashamed to hear you say that. Don't you know what he went to College for?" David seemed quite heated now against his younger cousin's apathy; an apathy and an indifference it seemed he had witnessed

nearly everywhere he looked, but found most especially distasteful in a young man he had come to think so much of.

"No David. I never even knew he went to college." Eric said in astonishment of this new revelation. He thought he knew everything about his father.

"Eric your Dad went to D.U. and got his Masters in Political Science. He had hoped to someday make a difference. He and your mother were just recently married when they graduated, but then he got arrested at a graduation party. Damned cops said he was holdin' Meth. Eric I know your father, I know it had to have been someone else's, but he would never talk about it. My Dad told me about it years ago, told me how he couldn't get a job after he left prison, five years they took away from him, not to mention his voting rights and his future career." Eric now felt some of the anger of his cousin as he listened to this news. "He would never tell you about any of this Eric as he is so ashamed of it. Conze saved his whole life to send your father to college. He was to be the first. He had hoped my father would go too, but my Dad didn't want to go to school. You know I love my Dad deeply but I can't understand how he can be so oblivious to what's going on in the world. Ever since Mom died that damned bottle is all he thinks about. Funny Eric, we hear over and over how everyone deserves a second chance, but it seems to me that no one ever gets one."

Chapter 23 (July 24, 2019)

Francisco had never known his parents. All he'd been told was that he had been found in a public restroom of a subway terminal just a few hours newly born. He'd been raised in foster care first, and then in private military schools. He had received the best training and teaching any young man could hope for, learning of the great military leaders of past: Alexander, Hannibal, and Napoleon to name a few. He greatly enjoyed his studies of military tactics and had a natural understanding of military procedure.

He had come to love old war movies, the way they portrayed their heroes as strong and always right, no matter what their actions. Frank, as the other boys called him, fancied himself a modern gladiator, just like so many of those he saw on TV. He hoped that someday he too could prove, through his strength and courage, that he was worthy of the

same rewards he saw so many of his movie and TV heroes receiving.

This day had been so many years in the making. It was the culmination of so much hard work, study, and discipline. Today Francisco could look out at a future of great promise and service to his country.

He was now looking forward to his walk up to the stage. Officer's Candidate School had been tougher on him than he had thought it would be - back in his R.O.T.C. High School, but as he watched many others his same age wash out of training, he knew it had done a good job of preparing him to get to this day. He knew that he needed to work much harder than others to overcome the stains of his childhood past and that only through loyal servitude could he overcome the ill-conceived stereotypes of his race.

He was tall for a Hispanic man, or so many thought, his complete ancestry being unknown to him. He wore his hair extremely short, in a military fashion. Many hours over his 19 year life spent in the gym had given him large and well defined muscles. Frank took great pride in his looks. Free time for him was almost always spent at the gym.

It had been a football coach who had first introduced him to juice at thirteen. At first shooting the thick liquid had seemed strange to him, but now it was second nature. He had heard the warnings on television many times, but reasoned that if it was alright for his movie and sports heroes then it couldn't be all that bad. Warnings of impotence meant nothing to him, after all he reasoned women liked muscles, and without his muscles of what purpose would his virility be anyways. Frank had long since discovered those magic little blue pills, so he no longer worried over impotence and he knew his fate was to die young in some foreign country anyways, so warnings of future heart trouble really meant nothing to him now.

He had the dark brown eyes of his Hispanic

heritage, eyes which showed little emotion as they looked at a future of discipline and a past of rigorous training. Chiseled jaw, dark skin and full dark red lips completed the picture of a young man that any woman would have found appealing, and most men intimidating.

“Lieutenant Francisco Rodriguez,” he heard the name and walked confidently over. Standing in front of the Colonel he received his bars, and just before leaving snapped to attention and gave his proudest salute.

Chapter 24 (August 2019)

The old brick building, occupying nearly an entire city block was almost completely engulfed with thick green vines; that broke through the numerous cracks in the brick and mortar of the three story building. In some places the thick overgrowth overran the sidewalk by several feet and sat on the wall up to four feet thick; they intertwined themselves with the black wrought iron patios and obscured all of the north facing windows. John Marcy, for lack of care, had been staying at the old hostel now for three months. At first he had tried to find an apartment in Denver; but as the summer heat brought more and more visitors, including the pretty young women from overseas, he decided to take his time in moving.

During the day he played his guitar on the 16th Street Mall for passing tourists. He enjoyed the open air and days upon days of sunshine down at the Street Mall. Of course there were those days where the money was just not there. So all too often

he was forced to work at the Day Labor Hall down on Colfax.

Late nights of partying made those 5AM days hard to do with any regularity however, so he thanked the God's for his little part time housekeeping job here at the hostel. An easy job, to say the least, but it kept a roof over his head, even if he had to share a single small room with three other guys.

It took him only about an hour a day to clean all the rooms and change the mismatched sheets. He took great amusement in his choice of sheets and pillow cases, choosing from an eclectic selection which included such vintage choices as "My Little Pony" and of course "The 1973 Dallas Cowboys". Always careful in his choices, more often than not, the female guests got the Cowboys as the males got the Ponies. Matching pillow cases with sheets was an exercise in futility so Ponies quite often were complimented by pillow cases of "Orphan Anny" or "Bob the Builder".

The old man who owned the Hostel was a strange character who hoarded the most unlikely items in selected rooms throughout the building: broken vacuums, beaten down refrigerators and the occasional mouse corpse littered over half the rooms of the decrepit old structure. Junk piled floor to ceiling with narrow pathways in between. He would leave early each day being sure to be the first in line at his favorite thrift stores in order to ensure he got first crack at the best deals. Bringing more junk back daily to add to his ever growing collection; before leaving each night for the Mason Lodge and then off to his lonely room at the far end of the building for some much needed rest; so he could repeat the cycle the following day.

The hostel had a strict no alcohol policy, which the guests and residents strictly ignored. They would sit out at the picnic tables on the orange steel porches in the back, or the stone patio

in the front, telling jokes late into the night as they smoked herb and knocked down P.B.R.'s and half pints of Jack.

In the basement was a makeshift library, comprised of several sets of encyclopedias and twenty year old travel brochures. There was also a television room of sorts, to offer amusement and diversion. If you could call a 25 year old broken big screen and old V.H.S. tapes with no V.C.R. amusement. A few of the residents kept their PC's in the room and quite often people would gather around a nineteen inch monitor to watch a grainy download of whichever movie had been newly released that week.

John had come lately to spend company with an eclectic group of travelers much like himself. This night they had pooled their money and bought a 'thirsty pack' of P.B.R. to share. He sat on the stone patio with a writer - researching a book on the early Gold Rush, a young college graduate - trying to determine pre-law or pre-med, while his parents waited for him to grow up and come back home and a young French man - trying desperately to avoid deportation.

They attempted nightly to get the attention of three young pretty Russian women; who seemed to have a new boyfriend each day of the week. The hostel in the previous few weeks had neared capacity and the owner was spending less and less time there as he spent more and more at Goodwill and the A.R.C., reveling in new found wealth as he bought Holiday decorations that would never be used and junk that should have long since been thrown out or recycled and would nevertheless sit in a pile and be quickly forgotten.

"I can't believe I played all day today for a measly ten dollars," John said discouragingly. "The money last year was so much better, seems no one wants to spend this year."

John had a dark tan that ended abruptly at

the edges of his wife beater shirt and tattered cutoff shorts. His footwear, this time of year, was nearly always a cheap pair of black flip flops that were rapidly falling apart. He had long dirty blond hair and large expressive emerald eyes. He shaved only about once every two weeks and wore a longish five o' clock shadow. At first glance he appeared, to most, to be exceedingly, almost unhealthily thin.

He tried hard to fashion his looks after the rock stars of old he enjoyed so much. It had been his father who had turned him onto the hair bands of the previous century. He had grown up in a musical family, always on the road each night in a new city as his parents entertained a new crowd. Drugs and alcohol had always been around, from his earliest days, and he had done his share of experimenting as an adolescent and teen but had eventually found both things to be boring when compared with the joy and excitement of performing for others whether on a stage or a street corner.

Some might have considered John a bum as he strummed his simple tunes and sang his melodic verse down on the corner of California Blvd, but John saw it as work, and as a long lost art form. Long since lost to the ages, the traveling minstrel had been a form of work for centuries, but these days it seemed as though the government and economy were conspiring to destroy a once noble profession.

"Maybe you just need a new shtick," the young writer offered.

"Well you got any ideas?" John asked and so began a long but merry night of conspiring, planning and rehearsal.

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The plastic bottles of clear liquid were laid out in two red, plastic picnic coolers in anticipation of the tourists who would soon arrive at the Street Mall. Two young men and the grisly, yet wise older man prepared their costumes. Their

wardrobes consisted of: colorful silk scarves allocated from the Goodwill, an old stove top black hat, that John himself liked wearing - as it made him feel even more regal and austere, and a pair of gold sequined ballerina slippers that Duncan Blaine wore proudly on his sixty year old feet.

Those plastic bottles may have read Dr. Lambert's Magic Elixir, but the enterprising men who created the faux labels knew better and were careful in their entertaining deception as they took pride in their ploy.

The bottles were nothing more than water, from the tap of the hostel where they all lived. Tap water from a sink that this morning still wreaked of last night's supper dishes, in hopes of making a few coins for their 'bread and wine' - as young John liked to say, which they were selling for 'an amazingly modest price'. In actuality however, the money made from selling their elixir was not important, but what was, was this creative idea that necessitated a much needed diversion in their audiences' daily lives, a chance for spectators to forget the hard times and have a few moments of fun.

Several decades ago men not much different from themselves had regularly put on the same show, quite probably even on the same street, as Sixteenth and California had a history of outdoor entertainment going back to the early eighteen hundreds. Dirt streets that had provided transport to horse and buggy that had now long since been replaced by red and white concrete pavers that were now quickly cracking and disintegrating. Those men however had more sinister intentions. Men who had been their inspiration and had been everywhere during Denver's early years, John and his friends were not the snake oil salesmen of Denver's beginnings but were a trio of Denver's elite and evolving class. Whatever you called them they were masters at their perfection. Their routine had been practiced over and over and perfected through many hours of repeated performances.

John, as the most gregarious of the three, stood on a small platform making promises that their elixir would cure all of life's modern ailments, everything from baldness to male enhancement; from flu like symptoms to yeast infections; all the way up to depression. He waved his arms with enthusiasm as he would introduce the inventor of the 'miracle cure', Doctor Lambert, the young writer now wearing a long white doctor's uniform and a 'stethoscope' they had fashioned from tubing and other junk found around the hostel.

The young, blond Frenchman wore short breeches and a puffy white shirt with sleeves ending in lace. It was his part to herald in the crowd at the beginning of each show, with wildly boastful claims of the 'greatest advance in modern medicine'. His long hair, hanging just past his shoulders, waved this way and that as he became more animated with a most impassioned delivery. The crowd played its part too; a boisterous chorus of entertainment that gave, everyone present, the cure they really needed and desired, diversion.

Inevitably, John would invite to the front, a man seemingly sickly of some undetermined illness. The player in this act was always the grisly and wise Duncan Blaine, a sixty something year old frequent inhabitant of the hostel for the most part of thirty years. Duncan would do anything for a little spare change for his share of the 'bread and wine' and put on a dashing display with long gray beard prancing in his shiny silver slippers.

John would offer the magic liquid as the crowd listened with great hilarity to John's proclamation that soon this aged, old man would again be turning cartwheels and making passes at the cute little thing standing in the back.

This, being their third performance of the day, became quite routine yet uproariously unpredictable, as they had perfected their dramatic rendition with impromptu acting and with audience participation.

John could always count on at least one well to do lady wowing at the testimonials of the elixir and the excited look in the eyes of the young business sort who would hand John a quick hand written slip of paper that stated he wished to purchase several bottles. The businessman, the future of Colorado, would then grab the hand of his female companion, and quickly exit the crowd. Each new performance brought with it a deeper understanding of what the spectators really needed.

Under a clear blue sky, on one of the hottest days of the year, the police had worked their way to the front of the crowd.

"Stop this act now," said the irate officer. He didn't see a performance, he simply saw another 'busker', 'spanging' for a quick, easy buck from an unsuspecting and naive public that needed protection from themselves.

"Young man let me see your demonstration papers and your, Union I.D."

Chapter 25 (September 12, 2019)

As Billy dropped his bicycle on the lawn, and bounded the steps up the rotting old porch, he could already hear the arguing and fighting that had become such a normal occurrence in his daily life. He struggled to understand why his mother would endure such abuse. 'If Dad were still around he would kill that jerk,' Billy thought.

Billy walked into the house while a noticeably drunk man yelled at and berated his young mother. The man was still wearing an unbuttoned police uniform exposing a crisp white t-shirt with a whiskey stain. A patch on his right arm said Department of Homeland Security. The patch on his left arm read New York Police Department. He was quite a bit older than his Mom and Billy often wondered what his mother could see in such an asshole. His shaven head left the shadow of a noticeably receding hairline. Cold gray eyes and a perpetual scowl betrayed the man's mean temperament, or so it seemed to Billy. Sergeant Holloway looked at Billy in disgust then turned and stormed out of

the house slamming the screen door behind him. Billy figured he had probably run out of whiskey.

They lived in a small, dingy white, Cape style home. Its paint was nearly gone from several years of neglect. Inside, red carpet and white linoleum were worn thin. His Mom managed to keep the house clean however, but Billy could still remember a time when it had felt much more like a home.

She had gotten pregnant and married young, and now struggled to keep her house and care for her son. "Are you okay Mom?" Billy asked as he offered his mother a wet face cloth to wipe the streaks of blood coming from her quickly swelling lip. "Mom you need to throw that asshole out."

"Billy, watch your language, besides you don't know him like I do. He can be very sweet when he's not drinking," the young mother said sniffing up the last of her tears. Billy wondered when the man didn't drink it seemed to him that he drank, nearly every day; even now, with the man's departure several moments passed, the smell of whiskey and stale tobacco smoke still hung thick in the air.

Billy was still very angry at the embarrassment that his mother's boyfriend had caused at his fifteenth birthday party. He had stumbled in drunk, screamed for everyone to leave and shoved his mother around in front of two other parents. He wondered why those parents hadn't done anything to help his Mom. It seemed to him that nearly everyone was scared of the man's gun and badge.

Billy had short curly black hair and olive skin. His dark brown eyes seemed puppy like to many and reflected a child with a caring emotional heart, but a deep sense of responsibility to his mother as well. He had grown rapidly over the last year and now, standing at five-eight, was starting to look very much a man. His mother regularly remarked as to how much he looked like his Dad, he took great pride in the Italian blood that he shared with his old man.

He hated Chris with all of his heart. Someday he would get that guy for all he had done to his Mom.

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"Shut up you fucking bitch," were the first words Billy heard as he woke from a restless sleep. The sentence was accompanied by the loud hollow sound that Billy had grown to know was a man's open hand hitting someone's flesh.

Billy walked out to the living room, seething with anger, as he listened to his mother's screams and Chris's abuses. He struggled to consider what he should do. The telephone had been turned off for a week now. His mother had not been able to pay the bill and now Billy felt small, scared and cutoff from the world. A feeling he had come to know all too well since he first met Officer Chris Holloway.

On the kitchen counter he saw it. He walked over contemplating if it was the right thing to do as he picked up Chris's revolver. Then a sudden scream from the bedroom, louder than he had ever heard before, gave him the courage he sought. He barged through the bedroom door holding the revolver near his side. He knew he had no intention of using the gun, but hoped, seemingly beyond hope, that this time he could stop the jerk and protect his Mom. Chris, lying on the bed over his mother turned and saw the young boy there.

"Whach-you goin' to do with that boy?" Don't you know it's a federal felony to take a cop's gun?" Chris said as he moved off of the bed, pulled up his dark blue uniform pants, and began approaching a visibly shaking Billy. The gun was much heavier than Billy had expected it to be, as he pointed it squarely, yet nervously at his foe with both hands. "Gim'me the gun boy."

His hands obviously trembling and the gun in turn shaking, Billy now wondered if what he was

doing was right. Billy glanced over to the bed to see his mother trying to cover herself with the bed sheets. The left strap of her night gown, broken, left the thin material hanging down exposing a breast. For some reason she seemed to not be able to move her right arm as she struggled to cover herself with only her left. Chris kept moving towards Billy, taking small slow steps, with his right hand outstretched. As the man's hand reached for the barrel of the revolver Billy jerked the trigger, more by reflex than actual forethought, and felt himself pushed back by the sudden recoil and reverberating explosion.

It was only several moments after the flash and the smoke had subsided that he saw Chris lying on the floor in an expanding pool of blood, and yet another moment before he began to feel anxiety for himself and his future. He began to worry too if he hadn't over reacted, if in fact there might have been another way. The echoes of the gunshot hung in his soul long past the time they had hung in the room.

Chapter 26 (October 12, 2019)

Eric and Jen, armed with a new found respect for the law and the political process, had watched for several weeks as the Supreme Court deliberated over an amendment that would have ended the 26th amendment; both had been hoping to vote in the coming elections. They now found a target for their growing concerns over their own small lives and their hopes for a better world.

They had begun talking seriously of late about marriage and kids as they both saw friends and loved ones lose their long held lands to foreclosure. It seemed that now, everyone on the reservation was looking forward to the next election cycle and a chance to vote out a system and a group of politicians who were seemingly so much in the pockets of those who would seek to destroy their culture and way of life.

Eric finding a new social conscience had

started spending many hours discussing politics and cultures with his father. A man he now had new found respect for. His father began in earnest teaching him of many different cultures, not just their own. In the revelations of each new lesson he found a common thread: a longing, a hope, a dream of all men to live free; to have a voice and to control their own destiny. It seemed to Eric now that all men craved self-empowerment, even as he saw so many willing to throw it away; seemingly oblivious as they numbed their thoughts with pointless diversions meant to sell worthless gadgets and chemically dulled their own minds.

He learned from his father of a time when the teachings of philosophy and sociology were considered to be of the utmost importance. Times long since lost to history and a new enlightenment that said that Math, English, and Science were of the top priority. In each lesson he came to realize that if young people were not taught properly of history and the greater social concepts of great men, who had come before, that inevitably they would make the same mistakes as those who had come before and social injustices would never be corrected.

The ride to Denver and the voting rights rally would be a long one, but Eric knew they would not be alone. This rally had been planned for days to coincide with others, all over the nation. Young people now enraged at losing a right that had been fought so hard for, so many years ago, seemed ready to go to any lengths now to get that right back. They reasoned that if this seemingly antiquated right could be so easily taken away, then which rights would be next? Young people were determined to make a stand now before it became too late.

He had started spending many more hours writing in his journal. Reflecting now on how his everyday life could be so easily influenced by men 200 miles away making decisions that at one time seemed to have no effect over anyone he knew at all. His journal had run over from one small notebook now to many such notebooks. Eventually finding the

notebooks to be cumbersome he had started to jot down a few quick ideas in them and then fleshing them out later on a newly acquired, used laptop.

He had found the laptop at a pawn shop in Fort Thompson. He had only reflected briefly on his luck at how the laptop had come to be there. Later he had written a lengthy journal entry about what had caused his good fortune. He wondered over the man or woman who had become separated from it. Wondered over what financial obligation had led them to get rid of something that had most likely been a beloved amusement for some other person, at some other time, somewhere.

He had no need of an internet connection as he now found the newly secured and 'bettered' internet to be more about propaganda than free expression. As a teenager he had enjoyed his time in the Denver Library's computer lab, he had spent many hours on Yahoo and Facebook back then, sharing secrets and daily concerns with friends, even as his parents had warned him to be careful there.

Thinking back now on those diversions, he wondered if while he had been playing with his virtual fish and virtual farm whether it had made him feel virtually productive or virtually creative. His thoughts and concerns now seemed so much different than they had once been.

His parents had worried over the people who spent their days at the Library. It appeared to his mother as though it was overrun with criminals and the homeless. Eric had no concerns back then for these people. He would arrive return his books and head straight to the third floor to enjoy those too brief hours of chat, research, and diversion. His time soon running out he would find a good book, devour it in a few short days and repeat the cycle. This was the nature of Eric's teenage years.

He hadn't been back to Denver in over a year and had gotten so used to the change of pace on the reservation that he had been dreading the return. He

remembered the noise and odors of the city and wished he wasn't going. Unfortunately though, his new found social conscience and his new found love had pressured him into believing that they must now do something to ensure the voice of the young would be heard.

The bill had won overwhelming support and had received no court scrutiny as it sailed easily through Congress. It flew in the face of the 26th amendment, requiring basic testing for newly registered voters and raising the voting age to the previous age of twenty five.

The 26th amendment had been passed during the Vietnam War, he had learned from his father. As young people and their parents found it harrowing that young men could be drafted and die in a war half way across the world, they reasoned that those being forced to fight and die should also have the right to vote. Now with the draft eliminated, several Washington groups had wondered if the 26th amendment was still based upon fundamental principles, or if it had become an outdated concept.

He had learned too that there were those, after 911, who had proposed returning to a draft to fight a war that many thought might last for decades but saw as a necessity in a world apparently fraught with new dangers. Dangers his father had taught him had actually existed throughout history for as the vernacular may have changed the very same people that modern people called terrorists had in the past been called other names too. Names like barbarian and savage that served people well in forgetting that they were fighting other people much like themselves who were themselves too in fact victims and part of a cycle. Eric quickly began to wonder what would happen if the leaders of these men, and the supposedly learned peaceful men of America and other nations, actually sat down and talked, if maybe some kind of peace might be brokered through the notions of common longing of all men to live in a just world.

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"We have our orders men. These demonstrators failed to obtain the proper permits and the courts have authorized the arrest of all who are attending. The Stadium has been tasked as a temporary jail and we have been ordered to arrest anyone who chooses not to disperse and go home," the Denver Police Captain told his men, all dressed in riot gear, at a hastily assembled meeting in the police gymnasium.

"Sir, I'm really not sure what we are doing is right," a young officer said raising his hand and voicing his opinion.

"Officer Thompson it's not our job to question the orders. It's up to us to carry them out and let the courts determine their legality." With that, all of the men assembled visibly relaxed of their burden of conscience.

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Eric and Jen felt as though they had never before seen so many people in one place. A city with just over three million people and it seemed to them as though nearly half of those people were out now on the grass in front of the State Capitol building, and the park across the street. The projections had been for at least 50,000 to attend. It would later be learned that ten times that number had come. Eric still could remember the hope he had felt oh so many years ago as he had watched the first African American President give a very different kind of speech in the very same place.

Although they had been from different cultures and vastly different backgrounds he felt as though he could relate to a man who he knew had experienced many of the same intolerances he had. He wondered now where all the feelings of great hope that man had heralded had gone. Had it been just youthful naivety?

Not all of them were young people either. It seemed people of all ages and all backgrounds were outraged by this new legislation. Young men and women were attending with parents and in many cases even grandparents.

Over bullhorns and loud speakers the police could be heard calling for all attendees to disperse and return home, no one moved however. Speakers walked to the top of the capitol steps and gave speeches that brought new cheers of outrage each time they had finished.

The first arrests came from the edges of the crowd as National Guards men and police moved in, slowly at first and then much quicker as many of the demonstrators began to heed the warnings and run away. Eric and Jen had barely noticed those getting beaten with rifles and batons. Then finally Eric turned as he heard a scuffle to his right. The last thing he saw before going black had been the butt of a rifle.

He came awake in the Stadium as Jen wiped away a small bit of blood from his forehead. She had been using her own spit on a torn piece of her dress to wipe away the dried blood. Eric's first thoughts were confused as he struggled to remember what had happened

"Jen, where are we?" Eric asked groggily as he looked around, coming to with a splitting headache and a fog of nausea and a mild delirium.

"We're in the stadium Eric, they arrested us for demonstrating," Jen replied.

Chapter 27 (October 13, 2019)

"You know I really doubt these arrests will stick," Senator Carpenter noted as he watched the news of the arrests in the grand hall of the C Street house.

For several generations the house had provided temporary and long term housing at cheap prices for Washington's richest and most powerful. The group went by many names, but to members was most often known as 'The Fellowship' or sometimes 'The Family', and sought to keep its nature and intent secret, but inevitably and repeatedly became the target of many investigative reports. A moderately secretive organization it had come under some short lived scrutiny in the early part of the century, when it was discovered that the group had

assisted in covering up sex and financial scandals by its members.

Later, investigative reporters would discover that these same men had espoused the idea of the spread of Conservative Christianity throughout the government and into other governments. Congressmen, who were also members, had used taxpayer money to travel repeatedly to African and Middle Eastern nations to discuss religious ideals and theology, not political or economic policy, with tyrannical leaders. Their belief was that by enlisting enough world leaders into their cause they could hasten Armageddon and bring about the return of Christ. They followed a radical theology on the fringe of Christian philosophy called Dominion-ism.

The ideals of dominionism originated indirectly from a specific passage in the King James Version of the Bible. "And God said unto them, be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth." Genesis 1:28

Christians typically interpreted this verse as meaning that God gave humankind responsibility over the Earth, but many members of the Christian Right and the members of the Fellowship took this much further. They had determined to follow a far more extreme theology in the matter and had secretly followed the ideal that Christians alone should hold political office and that biblical law should rule over secular law.

Unfortunately as the base of popularity in politics shifted to those espousing so-called Christian values, adherents to these philosophies found themselves increasingly more popular as candidates. The media in its own quest to fatten their ratings, and subsequently their advertising revenues were quick to promote this new found popularity in the more radical and intolerant

notions of the King James Bible. Of course many voters at the time would have been shocked to know what most of their so-called Christ-following leaders really thought of the secular world. To them the word secular itself had seemingly been shortened to a four letter word.

The house was relatively modest by Washington standards. A simple red brick structure at 133 C Street, S.E., two blocks from the United States Capitol. Many of the members there had ideas that as rich, mostly white men, they were entitled to certain leniencies not entitled to other people, ideas that were regularly re-enforced by others of their group. Like so many social circles just like it, it had quickly become self-serving, self-promoting and intolerant of alien ideas.

At one time the house itself had served as a convent. Then later it was taken over and setup as a very shady religious center for the Washington elite. Many had questioned whether the group had established it as a means of avoiding paying taxes. Set up as a quasi-religious meeting house it could charge rent and even membership but could avoid paying all federal and state taxes. When it had eventually come under fire for doing so it had re-organized as a non-profit institution and once again enjoyed its lucrative tax free status as it accepted millions in donations which were later, quite often, used in lobbying efforts.

The group acted quite often as a political lobbying group, even though unlicensed to do so. They had been partly responsible in many military decisions within the government for decades. The group, still secretive as the day it had been founded, had experienced its greatest growth in the last ten years. Being filled with the world's most influential people made the 'C Street House' -for those members not involved in the day to day - almost a social club, a place to occasionally be seen with the nation's rich, powerful and influential. Now at over fifty thousand strong with 'friends of the family', and many uncounted national

leaders from around the world, they found themselves possibly the most potent political force in the world.

The members would receive guidance from other members at the house; guidance basically being affirmation that whatever the men had done wrong was justified by their high stature, and help in covering up transgressions that the public would have found unacceptable. Scandals of money and sex, and abuses of power were often discussed in secret and promised to never see the light of day. Powerful deals were brokered between men and women along with their dirty laundry.

"Don't worry about that Senator. They'll stick, it's all just about public perception after all, and I can ensure you the public will be mortified that these young people failed to follow the law and get their permits. Our friends in the media have assured me that they will play up the drugs and weapons angles at the events and at least some of these arrests will stick," Stephenson said as the Senator contemplated the nature of a man who could be so seemingly confident in everything.

Nearly 150,000 arrests had been made in nearly every major American city. The news media had already latched onto the story as disenfranchised youths with weapons, most of who belonged to a drug culture, and who had failed to follow the law. No matter only small amounts of drugs had been found and the majority of the guns, which had been found only after the arrests, had been scrubbed of their serial numbers.

As time slipped away, and under the scrutiny of a media with its own agenda, the public's outrage quickly turned to approval. Learning that many of the young people had belonged to other groups, which had come to be seen by the majority as extremist, they quickly saw the benefits of the new demonstration legislation. Groups like Food Not Bombs were pointed out as espousing dangerous thoughts that, if allowed to propagate, could lead

to more opportunities for terrorism to flourish. Paranoia was the media's hammer and, as always, they swung it effectively for the benefit of a reactionary public.

Chapter 28 (October 30, 2019)

Bail had been set low for all but those who had been apprehended holding either weapons or drugs. Still Eric and Jen's families had to struggle to scrape together the \$350bond for them both. The families couldn't believe what the news reports were saying about their loved ones and the other outraged youths that had been arrested that night. They could only hope that someone would come forward and see just how ludicrous this all was. After all hadn't they simply been demonstrating for their right to vote to be returned?

As the families prepared for the worse but hoped for the best, 2000 miles away other men were preparing for the exact opposite. Wondering how the overcrowded federal prison system could house upwards of 100,000 men and women (these were the

numbers they were now looking at), they had begun discussing creative solutions.

It would mean a huge boon in new prison construction at the very least. Many Senators had already started, in secret, lobbying for these prisons to be built in their states. At luncheons and in back room meetings, they met in secret with representatives from C.C.A., G.E.O. Group and Cornell Inc. and other corporate prison contractors. There was a very large freshly baked pie now on the table and it seemed as though nearly everyone was stepping forward to claim a piece of it.

Senator Carpenter had just proposed another bill to Congress shortly after successfully promoting the Prison Redevelopment Act. The new bill would allow for the military to recruit from within prison ranks, if the crime was of a specific nature; meaning mostly crimes committed by minors or crimes of a non-violent nature. Military leaders were trumpeting it as the single most important legislation in the previous twenty years to safeguard the nation from terrorist and foreign attacks. The law, if passed, could once again fill the ranks of the depleted enlisted corps.

Many in the Senate had hopes that it would lessen the need for costly military contractors. Contractors who were now being used quite often as a quasi-police force to supplant Homeland Security Officers in the more destitute areas of America. Contractors who were more attuned to their corporate paymasters than the taxpaying citizen or the Constitution.

With Iran threatening to become another Vietnam, the new recruits would most assuredly be needed. Even though it would be more than a year before the majority of the offenders at the election reform revolts would go to court. Meanwhile the military contractors with domestic missions were spending more on urban combat equipment and research at equipping the 'soldier of the future here and now' in hopes of fattening their own coffers some

more.

The contractors were not cheap; the typical private soldier was paid three to four times what his government counterpart was. They were also not, as they who had become proponents of their use would say, likely to have bouts of conscience in performing their jobs.

"So, now the final item of business." the Senator said addressing the new Deputy Director of F.B.I, "Where do we stand on the Arizona Militia and their arrests?" He continued as he shuffled some papers around his desk.

"Well sir we've arrested 11 people, and killed 3, but we believe that there are over 80 of them still at large."

"Eighty? Still at large? Damn, Tim it's been over 4 months, what's goin' on here? The public is anxious for justice for the Supreme Court assassinations; we need to do much more to get them." The Senator, still newly appointed to the Senate Intelligence Committee, was careful not to offend those who had more experience in such matters, but was outraged that his government had been allowed to become so incompetent by men of less character and strength of will than himself.

"Well Sir, we believe most of them have gone south to Mexico and we have intelligence that suggests they are being aided by the Mexican drug cartels."

"Well then what would it take to get rid of the cartels?" the Senator asked matter-of-factly.

"Get rid of the cartels or apprehend the militia men?" Tim said. Shocked at what the Senator might be suggesting.

"Get rid of the cartels Deputy Director."

"Well to get rid of the cartels would

require a regime change in Mexico. That would require more than 75,000 troops. But we can get the militia men with perhaps as few as 500 men and aggressive negotiations with the Mexican government," Tim said hoping to offer a much more reasonable course of action.

"Deputy Director, are these cartels not in fact terrorists? And aren't they aiding other terrorists now?" The Senator was always sure of himself when it came to matters of national defense.

"Well sir I would say yes on both accounts but I still don't think that regime change is the smartest option here, at least not at this time."

"Deputy Director this nation is at war against terror. Now, most assuredly, IS the time for regime change. We cannot allow the greatest nation on Earth to be bullied by such entities."

Chapter 29 (November 2019)

"Hello young man where you goin'?" The elderly driver asked of his rain drenched passenger.

Matt carefully laid his backpack on the floor of the passenger's seat, trying to keep the man's car as dry as he could. The pack had gotten significantly heavier as it had gotten wetter. He hoped more than anything that the old man was a smoker as he knew his tobacco and papers were most likely soaked at the bottom of his dripping backpack.

"As fah South as I can get suh, the woeh-mah the bettah," Matt Pascuzzi said in return. He was elated at having finally being relieved of a several hour long wait in the rain for his next ride. He

hoped this ride would last awhile for no other reason than to dry off and get warm.

"You know the only reason why I picked you up is because I remember hitchin' once. Got picked up by Art Carney on my way to Hoboken," Matt listened but wasn't sure who Art Carney was. "I think it's been about 20 years since I saw anyone hitchhiking, hell of a day for it too, hah?" The old man said offering a cheerful smile which warmed Matt just as much as the old sedan's heaters. "Aren't you scared hitchin'? You know, worried about crazies and stuff."

"Hell no, ain't met no crazies yet. I think our media just loves to play to people's paranoia, aftah all Americans love their bogeymen, don't they?" Matt said with a cheerful smile.

"I suppose that's true young man. Here want a beer?" The old man asked as he reached into a cooler behind his seat.

"God I haven't had a be-ah in a week, thank you."

"My name's Tim. So what do they call you, young man?"

"Well, I'm not that young sah, I'm 32 and my friends call me Paz, my parents call me Matthew and my ex-wife called me Matt, befo-ah she took everything that is, now she calls me asshole," both men laughed at Matt's little joke.

Two years of tramping had taught him well how to win over the trust of those who he spent company with. He had left his previous life behind long ago and now the only time he made mention of it was when making light of it. The time he had wasted mowing his lawn and keeping up with the neighbors now seemed like foolish endeavors to him, things meant to dull his senses to the inequities and absurdities he had now seen all too often. Others might have called him a bum, a hobo, or homeless,

but Matt had a home, one which no one could ever take away, he made his home in his thoughts. Long ago he had determined that not all men without an asphalt roof were wanting of one, that not all men who slept under the stars were needy, and that not all men who were wandering were lost. He had come to see the idea of homelessness as a 20th century notion meant mostly to conscript people into living a life best suited towards commercializing and enslaving them in debt. Matt no longer put faith in any of the mindless diversions that had conspired to take him away from what he now knew most men were missing out on, LIFE.

Chapter 30 (Late April 2020)

As Eric and Jen's court date loomed ever closer, they still had not been provided any legal counsel. Cutbacks in state funding had left the Public Defender's offices woefully understaffed in light of having an unexpected rash of new defendants.

The families were beginning to worry that the worse might actually happen; the penalty could be as high as five years in federal prison. Construction of a new prison had just recently begun in Rifle, Co. It seemed, to many people, that it would mean an economic boon to an area that had at one time seen millions in profits from natural gas

exploration, but now struggled in poverty and other hardships.

Rifle was a small town, whose inhabitants now knew all too well, what chemicals the oil companies had used, all those years ago, in their gluttonous frenzy to free the gas within their lands from its ancient prison; as many of the young began to show cancerous conditions and leukemia. Fracking they called it the process of pumping chemicals deep underground to break up shale and slate and force the gas up to the surface. Great quantities of these chemicals had been used and spills were an all too common occurrence. A previous Presidential Administration, in collusion with the major oil companies, had determined that the exact ingredients needed to be kept secret for the benefit of the oil companies. Trade secrecy was the excuse they used to pump poison into the ground and allow spills that seeped into local water supplies, all while they paid the historically lowest lease rates ever on public lands and avoided paying trillions of dollars each year in taxes. There were the occasional outrages by the public and environmental groups as rigs exploded and seeped petroleum into the oceans, but again and again the ongoing atrocities of the megalithic corporations were largely ignored by a media delivery system that benefited from millions of dollars of advertising revenue from these companies each year. To have screamed conspiracy between these entities, in the form of convenience and profit, only brought negative attention to the environmentalists in the form of being labeled as extremists who only wished to return to the Stone Age. So rather than allowing for rational thought and debate to be heard, and questions to be answered over the effects of these chemicals the oil companies continued to destroy the land, and the people; just in some places more slowly than others and with arrogance to what they knew would ensue.

With tort reform, came the final insult to the poverty ridden areas in Western Colorado that had at one time found good paying jobs in this murderous industry. As their children, livestock,

and finally themselves began to get sick; as their water turned into an explosive, undrinkable poison; and as their already too few crops ceased to grow; they were soon left with little to no recourse over the companies they had at one time accepted with warm inviting arms. Unknowingly they had become complicate in their own doom, for the promise of decent wages and lower gas prices.

A new prison, however, meant that many of these people could once again afford those things that society and media had told them were necessities to a good and productive life. The glut of jobs and money arrived even before the surveyors, and engineers. Soon a community that had been teetering on the edge of oblivion was hastily making plans for their new found wealth, providing a valuable service for the Federal Government.

Eric had been planning this day for weeks now. Often he would rehearse his carefully prepared speech, always worrying the answer might be no. He carefully tucked the tiny gold ring into his right shirt pocket as he waited in his truck for Jen, to take her out to the creek before she had to work. Out to their spot, the spot they went to quite often now when pressures of the world got to be too much for either of them.

The hanging screen door of the old trailer slammed shut as Jen ran out to the truck. Jen jumped into the passenger side and leaned over to give him a kiss. Both looked at each other with immense satisfaction as Eric set out towards the Crow Creek. It was twenty miles east to the spot they enjoyed. Their spot was at a place where Crow Creek turned towards the north. A sparsely wooded spot atop a small knoll, covered with low prairie grasses, few people even within the tribe ever went there.

*

The creek was surrounded by gently rolling grasslands covered with purple and pink pasque flowers. The small flowers gave off the faint, sweet

smell of lilac; an aroma which had offered Jen and Eric comfort during trying times. The ground still held the glistening morning dew as the sun came up over the trees. Trees that struggled to survive in the harshness of the windswept plains, as if symbolic of the people who struggled for survival there as well.

Eric lay out a blanket on a small hill overlooking the creek. He helped Jen gingerly to a seat on the blanket. Taking a knee he recited a poem he had written into his journal only a few days before.

*

When we are young things are easy,
Each day I think of you, of you,
When we are young we play by our own music,
Each night I sing to you, to you,
When we are young we laugh at the world.
Each hour my smile is for you, for you.
When we are young love is like the innocence of our youth.
Childhood memories are only of you, of you.
When we are young I love you, I love you, I love you.

*

He paused for a moment, knelt on one knee, reached into his shirt pocket and clumsily took out the old gold ring. Placing it on her finger, he asked her. "Jen, will you marry me?"

Jen cried tears of joy, "Yes Eric, Oh My God yes," as she flung her arms around him. They kissed as they had never kissed before, two tongues eagerly exploring, searching for the others soul.

Swept away by her burning desire, Jen laid back on the blanket, pulling Eric down with her. Eric gently brushed back her hair and caressed her cheek with his right hand. Her inhibitions were now lost to her passions. She took his hand and pulled

it under her thin floral print dress. He could feel her warmth through her moist cotton panties. "Are you sure Jennifer?" Eric asked. The only answer he received was a slight moan as she undid his belt and pulled him closer to her.

Chapter 31

The news media had already started calling the previous year in the Supreme Court 'their most productive in history'. Leaders from all walks of life were quick to point out their new found efficiency with the recent cutbacks from nine to only five justices. In light of this new found 'productivity' the President had not chosen any new nominees. After all several new court systems had now led to a shortage of qualified lawyers and judges and their talents could now be used far more effectively enforcing the law rather than deciding it.

The first decision made by the courts was to allow passage of a newly revamped mission for the F.C.C.; now any media was first screened by the F.C.C. before it could be allowed to corrupt the airwaves. The court had determined that the needs of the nation, to provide for the common good, to vastly outweigh the needs of free speech. Citing the Bin Laden tapes, visions of be-headings from years earlier, and images of suicide bombers, as going against the need to promote a strong military, they had determined that it was the job of the F.C.C., in

conjunction with Homeland Security, to decide what constituted obscenity.

Next on their docket, and only a few short days later, had been to decide on the Demonstration Registration Bill. They had deliberated for some time before determining that the Constitution had not expressly forbade the government from requiring registration for public assemblies, and therefore after only two hours of careful, thoughtful debate returned and allowed the law to stand.

The news media was quick to point out the benefits of the new demonstration bill. Now large events could be carefully planned. Facilities could be offered, at a small fee for the registrants, and entertainment prepared to conjoin with such events. Dissenting speakers could be allowed their time to speak now as well. Even advertisers quickly saw the benefits they could enjoy by sponsoring political rallies.

By far the most unusual and controversial motion put forth during that year had been a request of partnership between the New Hampshire State Department of Corrections and Viacom. The state, short of funds to run prisons, had signed a partnership deal with Viacom Television to allow for the Pay per View distribution of live public executions.

Liberal political elements found the partnership both distasteful and inappropriate, calling it cruel and unusual as well as unconstitutional. Conservatives fought back successfully under the auspices of State's rights. In the end the conservative court decided that the needs of the state to recoup the costs of litigation, imprisonment, and execution, outweighed any argument that a hardened criminal might have.

Viacom and many other media distribution outlets quickly sent their representatives to other states supporting the death penalty. Deals were signed and money was soon rolling in; money that was

sorely needed for the construction of new prisons.

Chapter 32 (May 3, 2020)

Billy sat at the long wooden table next to a man in a cheap brown suit. His Public Defender had done his best, or so he thought to keep his defendant from facing charges of premeditated murder. He had hung his case on the young man's age, choosing not to reflect upon the nature of the victim. After all, he reasoned, no jury would look favorably upon a lawyer who had called into question the values of a patriotic servant of D.H.S. a man who had been there and saved the lives of four people during the attacks of 911. He had reasoned

that he had his own reputation to consider and what good would it do anyone if he endangered that.

"All rise for the Honorable Judge Randolph," the burly bailiff said.

"Please be seated. Young man please stand. Mr. William Bianchi, you have been found guilty by a jury of your peers of manslaughter. Young man I am sure that the jury took into consideration your age when determining their verdict, yet I disagree with their assessment of leniency and hereby impose the strictest sentence available to me at this time. You are to serve fifteen years in Federal prison for the murder of Lieutenant Christopher Holloway." With this Billy's mother began to weep from the second row. "I hope this time will allow you to reflect on what you did when you took the life of a hero such as Officer Holloway."

The sentence had not been completely unexpected by his attorney. His caseload had become overwhelming in the last year and he had simply not had the time to devote to his clients as he once had. A year ago he would have loved to be handed a case such as this. A year ago he knew things would have gone so much differently. Unfortunately the media had latched onto his client's case, holding him up for all to see as to what was wrong with the youth in America; a perceived general disregard for heroism, authority and patriotism.

Chapter 33 (May 31, 2020)

Aaron had only recently learned that his roommate from his freshman year had dropped out a few months earlier. He wondered now if it had been fortuitous that he had done so.

The young man's rhetoric had come to be the topic of conversation many times by fellow students of M.I.T. In the last year the young man had several times even tried to accuse his falling grades upon a Jewish conspiracy in the educational system. As much as the students had worried over the young man they

soon began to feel much more comfortable in his absence.

They wondered why Michael and his friends would choose their college for anti-abortion rallies, and had even questioned their involvement with graffiti that had been left on a Jewish temple just off campus.

Aaron thought it ironic that many of the same people who found fault in Michael's beliefs, even as irrational as they were, nonetheless seemed all too quick to also exclude. Rallies shortly after the vandalism of the temple had been intended to exclude anyone from their school who espoused any thought the school council found objectionable. Aaron had tried to point out to his own friends how absurd their thinking was, but found himself in a losing argument against a much larger group that seemed to be acting out of reactionary instinct rather than rational thought or discussion. He now couldn't wait to graduate and join the real world outside where he knew people were not this way.

Chapter 34 (June 1, 2020)

"Mr. Blake, I appreciate you taking the time to see me. I realize how busy you are."

Stephen knew an ass-kiss when he saw one. He had never been a man to tolerate such tactics especially when he knew it meant that inevitably he would be asked for something. Some small service or consideration, he knew the man's next tactic would be to promise little to no inconvenience to Stephen's already busy life. Stephen had met hundreds of men just like this. They all came dressed nearly the same, expensive tailor made suits, power ties and fancy watches, this one even came wearing city boy boots, white snake skin and leather and a brand new Stetson; Thinking the boots and hat would show him to be some kind of cowboy; undoubtedly probably having heard the rumors of Stephen's own nature. Stephen would have found the

whole thing quite comical if he hadn't long ago tired of the type.

Stephen Blake himself only wore a cowboy hat when the sun dictated it. He hated suits, last time he had worn one was at his Mother's funeral. Nowadays he stuck to blue jeans and collared shirts, which was the extent of his formal wear. His boots were plain black or brown leather. He had only a few pairs and when a pair began to wear he would donate them to the Episcopal Church back home.

"So what can I do for you and your company?" Stephen pushed to get straight to the point, and defuse the man's sales pitch.

"Sir it's not like that at all. I'm here to tell you what my company would like to do for you. We are interested in buying out your lease on this land; land that hasn't been profitable for oil drilling for what, more than ten years now?" Well at least the weasely prick had done his homework Stephen thought.

"Actually, closer to twenty," Stephen said as he knelt and scooped up the loose sand of the Texas panhandle. Of all the lands that his family had stewarded this was his favorite. Land that his family had profited from, but had also protected for nearly a century too.

He loved how the grasslands gently undulated with hills and dry craggy creek beds, the wide open blue sky contrasting with the green of the sparse grasses and tan of the coarse sands; with large boulders and a few old fences scattered here and there to only occasionally break the horizon. Skies like nowhere else on Earth as Stephen had seen, wide-open skies, which brought a whole new meaning to the phrase 'big-sky country' for him. Stephen had long since fancied himself a steward of the lands his family had cared for, and now he was trying to ensure these lands would last another hundred years.

"Really; what's your company's plans for my

land?" Stephen figured he already knew but wanted to hear the prick say it himself.

"Sir with advanced oil recovery techniques we believe to be able to reclaim hundreds of thousands more gallons of oil right here." The young man seemed indeed proud of the recent technological advances in petroleum recovery.

"Sure sure like Hydro-reverberation or microbial-injection right?" Stephen was trying his best to bait the snake. He knew the techniques well himself, and had even started to see a few of the signs of what long term damage he knew they would inevitably cause.

"Yes sir my company is a pioneer in those two techniques we are quite proud of their effectiveness." The yuppie puke pushed up his glasses and scraped the bottom of his boot after walking right into a pile of cow turd that Stephen had skirted.

Stephen had long ago opened his lands for the use of nearby ranchers. He had seen first-hand the horrors of finishing farms. Cattle standing in growing mountains of their own feces until the 'farmer' determined to dispose of it, usually in nearby ponds, streams or rivers, the waste inevitably running into the ocean or the groundwater. He had read the studies many times and understood the reasoning behind treating cattle in this manner, to provide better marbling at lower cost, yet still wondered why meat poisoned by deadly e. coli could ever be considered superior to good old fashioned grass fed cattle.

"Young man, get the hell out of here before I skin you myself and bury you in that ravine over there." Stephen said off-handedly staring at the wide open horizon.

Chapter 35 (July 4, 2020)

When the mason's annual July 4th celebration had gotten under swing George, as a thirty third degree member decided he should introduce himself to the newest member of the lodge. He knew the young man's background well, having done much of his background check for the lodge himself.

Michael Ryan had been a 911 orphan. Both of his parents had been working on the 97th floor of World Trade Center One when the first plane had hit. They had been employed by the insurance company of Marsh Inc., one an adjuster the other in assessments, never even knowing what the day's events might bring. Never having planned what the events might mean for their son. It was believed

that they had died quickly but Michael would never know.

What he would know was the imagery of the events of that day. Imagery that even today played through his mind as if on an endless tape loop. He had seen the images so often that many days he even thought that perhaps one of the 'objects' falling from those broken windows had been his mother or father. Quite often he strained to look through the thick smoke and flames hoping to be able to grab one more glimpse of lost time with two people he had deeply loved; the last memories of a six year old boy with his family playing through his head with each news story, with each new war and with each vow to not forgive and never to forget. There had never really been any choice but for him to watch the video over and over again. It was everywhere he went throughout his childhood and even now. Like some inescapable torment meant specifically for him. As though every individual in the world had conspired specifically against him so that he himself might never forget.

He had been adopted by his father's sister and her husband. Unable to have children of their own they quickly accepted him as if he was their own. They were a devout church going couple and the husband had been a member of a Mason's lodge in New Jersey and had other affiliations that George found quite laudable as well.

Michael's adopted father had swallowed the end of a twelve gauge pump after losing his home and business to foreclosure in 2008. The body was first discovered by young Michael and his mother returning from school clothes shopping. It was an image that had stayed with him even into adulthood. A man he loved and respected laying on the kitchen floor next to an overturned chair. The white tile wall of the family kitchen spattered with dried blood. Wood floors that had absorbed the spill and had quickly stained so that they too might eventually become a permanent reminder of the violence that had once happened there. The event had been devastatingly

traumatic to young Michael. Soon his adopted mother had fallen into a deep depression and a state of paranoia that had eventually necessitated her commitment; so young Michael, at fifteen, went to stay with yet another family member.

George first met Michael's foster father at a Klan rally. The man had the finest of family, Christian and white values, he had continued Michael's training into what he had deemed as the Zionist conspiracy. Showing him how his adopted father's death, his adopted mother's commitment and his own parent's deaths could all be seen as part of the vast Zionist conspiracy.

Michael had taken eagerly to the readings presented him and had even made rank within the Klan by the age of sixteen. George had never killed for his beliefs in white purity, so he always admired those who had. He looked proudly at Michael when they had first met, having already heard of his slaying of two race traitors and their child on a Boston subway platform.

Brutal murders, he had been told, involving a knife. Michael had proudly boasted of these murders to their mutual acquaintances and soon George had found someone whom he knew was a true hero to the white man's cause.

Chapter 36 (July 11, 2020)

Prison time is always hard time, even when it's good time. Time spent with nothing to do but reflect. Left alone with nothing but your thoughts it would inevitably change a man, some for the better, some for the worse. Eric had been lucky though, the men he shared his space with were all of a decent nature.

He had almost instantly found friendship with Stanley and John. They wasted their time playing spades, long games that offered diversion from their circumstances. Spades played in threes though just was not the same game they all knew and enjoyed.

"All right boys you got a new bunk-mate." The burly man with a guard's uniform said. He was armed with just a Taser and a pleasant demeanor.

Eric was the first to feel shock as he looked up and saw the kid. Just a kid, what could he have done? The boy had soft almost androgynous

features. Eric wondered what this child could have done to warrant prison time.

They were housed in a CCA prison, now the state of the art in prison technology. The patented radial view prison design had found favor with state and federal agencies in 2003; with the signing of the Prison Rape Elimination Act. It had promised an astounding reduction in recidivism and was believed that it could cut prison costs by billions. The newly built building employed the highest standards of Total Surveillance Technology. Never a single second went by when a sole prisoner was not being watched either by guard or camera.

Eric got up and walked to the bunk above his to introduce himself. "Hey kid I'm Eric, what's your name?" He asked extending his hand.

"Hi Eric, I'm Billy. Billy Bianchi," the young boy said feeling slightly put out and quite nervous surrounded by so many men so much older than himself. Everyone knew the stories of prison rapes and abuses; thoughts of which played heavily on Billy's mind.

"Shit we got a fucking Wap with us now," John said jovially as the mood quickly lightened.

Volume Two
Chapter 1 (Summer 2021)

Dear Eric,

I hope you enjoy the present your mother sent. She spent several days tanning the deer skin and stitching the journal cover herself. I know it's not much in the way of a birthday present but having heard your excitement over writing she thought you might enjoy it.

Your mother and I were glad to hear you are adjusting well. Your Father O' Connell sounds fascinating, but it's as I told you so often, learn from as many sources as you can and make up your own mind. No one can tell you what's right for you; you just have to feel what's right for you. I agree with you about a lot of those preachy types but as I used to tell you as a boy, 'Never take what anyone tries

to make you swallow until you see them taste it first'.

Unfortunately I'm sorry to say your mother and I were forced to sell the family land. It seems our deed didn't include ownership of the mineral rights, but that was just their excuse. They would have found some other way to take our land if they had to.

The damned oil company claimed eminent domain and moved in buying up land all over the reservation. We didn't make nearly as much as I would have hoped, but we have since moved to Chamberlain and are living in a one bedroom apartment. If there is oil there it could be worth millions, we didn't even get full value for the damned land, those greedy sons a bitches really screwed us.

I remember reading about 'Kelso v. New London' when it happened, but I never thought that it could be used so easily against us. It seems that the American government just continues to steal our lands even today. Unfortunately these days they do it for profit for big land developers and oil men. Seems like the damned politicians will do whatever they ask. It is regrettable that it should be this way. I remember living and playing on that land even when I was a child and my grandparents lived there. The notion of an individual having ownership over land always seemed to me to be a bit absurd, but now that ours is gone I feel a bit forlorn by it all.

In a way though it makes it easier for us, as now we are much closer to stores and other necessities and your mother has a shorter drive to do errands. We only hope that through the upcoming oil explorations that people on the reservation may find decent paying jobs, at least then some good might come out of what has happened to us.

*

The note continued with stories of a recent

sweat lodge ceremony and a few mundane events of his mother's day to day routine, but Eric was most concerned with just those few short paragraphs. He felt partly to blame as he could not have been there to help them through their economic hardships.

Eric looked with immense pride at the new possession in his care. He inspected the stitching and bead work containing his name under an impressionized image of the sun. A simple orb made out of red beads with yellow beads radiating out. His name set with turquoise and teal beads just below it. He imagined that save his pretty bride he had never seen anything so beautiful in his life.

*

Prison time seemed to pass easiest for Eric, he just kept to himself as he wrote letters home, and hid in his journal. It was hardest on John, a young man who had always been free of spirit. He despised the idea of always being watched, and more than any of the others was quickly losing his name to his new one, prisoner JM00769. The more depressed he got, the more trouble he found himself in. It seemed as though he took delight in attacking guards and spending yet more time in solitary. Quite often he would throw his prison 'batch' - a concoction of noodles, cheese and sausage cooked in large batches for the benefit of the cell - at them calling them fascists or even less savory names. Eric and the others worried over his state of mind as he seemingly became much more dangerous and aggressive than the man they had first met. Yet he still hadn't completely lost his sense of humor and quite often had managed to amuse his cell-mates while causing turmoil.

Billy had heard of enlistment opportunities in the military and secretly applied for induction into the Marines Corps. Shortages in enlistment drives had meant that now the military was grabbing recruits from anywhere they could get them. His enlistment would mean that his 15 years in prison could possibly be dropped in exchange for a couple

of combat tours. He was eager for a second chance but knew the others might try to talk him out of the decision. His mother had never visited him citing the long plane trip and her low income. Billy could only hope that his enlistment might lead to him seeing his mother once again. He hoped by serving his country he might once again win her love and approval, if not her pride.

Stanley had hired a new lawyer and felt confident that his arrest and conviction would be overturned. Family members had taken in his son and Stanley was now hoping to be able to see his baby boy, hopefully before he would take his first steps. He spent his days looking over photos, which his sister seemed to take and send almost daily. He had determined himself to study at law in hopes of finding some loophole or technicality that might help with his case.

In his studies he had come to recognize the concept of intent and felt that a little white lie on his part would prove his best defense during an appeal. Advances in weapons safety features had meant that when he was relieved from duty that his revolver was not able to function. L.A. had been the first to adopt such technologies and now his lawyer was pleading that since the gun had been remotely disarmed that there could not have been any intent on Stanley's part.

The media citing his many years of loyal service and his heroism, during the Saran bombings of the subways, had built up a groundswell of public opinion in his favor. Unfortunately the very same media was indignant towards young Billy. They had chosen to paint Billy as all that was wrong with youth in America. The public eagerly gobbled up the editorialized reports without question.

Soon youth programs focusing on very strict measures of discipline including government sponsored R.O.T.C. youth camps and military schools started seeing great favor among the conservative elite of the media. Heralded as a first step to

living a responsible life for inner city youth and children at risk, these programs quickly saw unprecedented levels of grants, corporate sponsorship, government vouchers, and other funding both public and private. They expanded quite quickly, after defining a model of how to run a profitable school had been established, and were now being franchised in every state in the country.

A handful of corporate R.O.T.C. schools came quickly to be seen as offering the best disciplinary model. These companies soon found themselves the subject of numerous television commentaries extolling the virtues of military discipline. Soon parents who saw their children as troublesome would even enroll their children to avoid the burden of parental responsibility.

There were others in their cell, some staying longer than others but the four men had found between them a group in which they could feel safe and find at the very least an occasional laugh if not some comfort.

Chapter 2 (August 2021)

"Miss Bianchi?" The young woman at Social Services said calling an unknown woman to her office.

"It's Ms. Bianchi ma'am."

"Okay Ms. Bianchi, have a seat," the young woman said motioning across her desk to the vacant chair.

It was a very small office. A single desk sat in front of a large dirty window and a filing cabinet. It was very claustrophobic with the ever present humming of a single large fluorescent light and the almost overpowering smell of paper dust. The room had little space for more than two occupants.

"We're going to have to refuse your grievance for a Medicaid hearing. I'm sorry but we have found no evidence that your condition warrants keeping you on prescription pain killers," the young social worker stated succinctly without ever even bothering to look up from the file before her.

"But my arm and my shoulder they hurt all the time. I need those pills and I can't afford them myself," Amanda pleaded the best she knew how.

"I'm sorry ma'ame your own physician says he

believes that you are addicted to them and that he can find no reason for your phantom pains."

Amanda Bianchi began to weep from desperation and in a last ditch hope that the bureaucrat in front of her might have a change of heart.

For thirty-three she was still a beautiful woman. Many years of hard work to care for her son as a single parent had kept her in good shape. She had had Billy while still in High School and was forced to dropout to care for her young family. Her now deceased husband's income, at the labor hall, and at the few regular construction laborer's positions he could find, as a dropout himself, failed to adequately provide for the three of them. Amanda thought how her own parents had been able to care for and raise five children, in seemingly modest comfort, on a single income and wondered why it was no longer this way.

She loved her son and even now, when she wasn't speaking with him, still loved him in her own way. Yet her own life had dissolved to such a degree she didn't want for him to see her this way. It had always been hard for Amanda to look upon her son and not see her dead husband there. A man whose transgressions only she knew. She had long ago determined to not tell Billy of his father's demons or of his betrayals to her; and even now her own betrayals to her son. For this is how she had come to see her 'disease'.

She had no doubts that she had a problem but at the same time struggled with very real pains. Unfortunately the relief she sought in that little orange bottle inevitably meant that she was at the same time fueling something else that even she could see was becoming a problem. So as she continued gobbling up what she had come to see as 'devil's candy' her guilt swelled to a point where she felt as though it too would consume her, building up in here an un-escapable cycle. Guilt over her addiction now combined with guilt over losing her son and

finally the perceived guilt she had over losing her husband all of those years ago.

He had been murdered while Billy was still a toddler, a jealous girlfriend that he had been seeing on the side. The fact that he had gone to see her to break it off and give his marriage another chance had been of little solace to the young wife and as Billy grew his growing physical similarities served only to remind her of far too many betrayals until it had become a daily struggle for her to remind herself that they were not in fact the same man despite how much alike they may have looked.

Amanda had come from an Italian mother and a Greek father, yet she bore little of the stereotypes of big butt or hairy arms that many would point to when thinking of either race. She had the classical dark hair of the southern Italians and the dark brown eyes of her Greek father and his dark skin as well. At five-six she was neither fat nor skinny but well-proportioned with full breasts and a shapely figure. Her facial features were stern yet thoughtful from many years of a hard life, both mentally and physically.

"I'm sorry Miss but I have a lot of other clients to see today. You're going to have to leave now."

Chapter 3 (August, 2021)

"Hey bud, are you OK." The burly man said as he awoke a sleeping Paz, carefully with the side of his foot, from an all too thin well-worn old Army sleeping bag. "Those rain clouds ain't just a stohm buddy, they-ah's a hurricane comin' through these pahhts." The man's Yankee accent was quite pronounced and mirrored Matt's own as he rubbed his weary eyes. "Let me give ya a ride to the Mission, okay?"

Matt was camped under a dark blue tarp, in an all too thinly wooded area, adjacent to an eerily now empty, large truck stop. The interloper awakening him was most likely a trucker he thought, as he noticed the man's sun faded, over-stretched blue jeans and cut-off yellowed, dingy t-shirt.

"Hell no, ain't no way I'm goin' to no damn Mission; those places are depressing as hell." Matt quipped back, in no mood to have his freedom or privacy robbed from him. After all he was on a mission, hitching from Galveston to Roanoke, and he didn't want to be bothered by minor things, like acts of God.

"Buddy those places ahh thayah foah folks

like you. To help you get on yoah feet and stuff. Thayah doin' God's wohhhhk."

Matt finally stood as he began breaking camp. "First off, I'm not off my feet, I'm on a trip, and second they aren't in the business of helpin' people, they're in the business of converting people." Matt said as he walked away looking for new digs for the night.

Matt had grown tired over the previous few months of the daily perceived stereotypes he saw all around himself. People hugging the far side of the sidewalk in case his perceived 'homelessness' might be communicable. Driver's diverting their eyes lest they be presented with their own guilt and so many other modern tragedies against what, Matt perceived, as human nature.

Chapter 4 (December 2021)

Dear Eric,

It is my unfortunate responsibility to report to you that your parents died Friday night. Your Father's disability payments were eliminated and they were unable to pay the electric bills. The damned electric company came around just before the first snowfall and turned off half the reservation. Seems like taking the land of half the tribe isn't enough for those pricks, now it seems like they won't be happy until they've killed us all off and taken what little money and self-respect we have left.

They felt little pain though dear cousin, as they died in their sleep of carbon monoxide poisoning from a faulty kerosene heater. I regret that I could not tell you this in person but flu season has been very severe around here this year and has kept me all too busy.

Many members of the tribe have gotten sick and a few have died. My father has relinquished his duties as Medicine Man now, as he can no longer deal with the inevitable depression of helping others to cope with their grief. I have been asked by the

council if I would take over such duties, but I'm having trouble deciding whether I can handle the added responsibility myself.

His drinking has gotten much worse in the last few weeks, especially since we buried your parents and his beloved brother. He seldom leaves his old still anymore and I worry greatly over what that damned rock gut will do to his health. It seems to me that his drinking is just a symptom of a much deeper problem for him, as he struggles with his own feelings of hopelessness and despair over the regrets of his life. I worry he has personalized the injustices he has seen done to our people. I love my father dearly Eric, you know that, yet I wish he could find some measure of peace to his life.

I know this news will be hard on you dear cousin but I urge you to look forward to your release and your pretty bride who will be out in a few short weeks and waiting for you to come home. We look forward to your upcoming wedding. After all we could all use some good news around here for a change. Jen's Dad has even promised free drinks for everyone afterward. I'll believe it when I see it. Seeing as that guy can squeeze a penny so hard he makes Lincoln cry.

Love always your friend and cousin,
David

*

Eric had read the letter over and over, hoping each time the news might be different. He longed to be able to relieve the grief in his heart, but prison was not the place to show such emotions. Instead he buried his feelings and hardened his heart. After all there were many people who counted on him for his strength: young Billy as a father figure, Stanley as a confidant, and John as a symbol of manhood, courage and properness.

He had however found an unlikely confidant. The prison chaplain had a personality and

convictions that had at first shocked Eric. His sermons which spoke more of the common influences and common thoughts of all the major religions came at first as a shock to Eric, and his sensibilities, but the more he listened the more he found to reflect on in such thoughts. He had never been an overly religious man, after all he thought, the missionaries of old and the media of new had seemed, in his mind, to have conspired to bastardize the ancient Lakota spirituality of anyways.

A man whose appearance seemed to conspire against his gentle demeanor and deep thoughts, he was broad of chest with thick arms and legs, and cut an imposing figure at six eight. He was of Irish descent and hearkened imagery in most minds of a warrior rather than of an introspective thinker. His hair was of a reddish / blond hue, cut to a medium length and quite wavy. His skin had the texture and color of fine porcelain, smooth appearing and very pale.

He didn't put much stock in the man's sermons of virgin births and miraculous occurrences, but found much to think about in the teachings of good and right, of the man called Jesus. Christianity was not new to Eric, but the method and interpretation of the preacher called Arthur was.

Eric had become more accustomed to thinking of all Christian preachers as fiery and full of rhetoric as they seemingly screamed their faith in hopes that their convictions in such things could sway the opinions of others. Eric for a long time had come to mistrust anyone who played upon the reactionary nature of others through such tactics. It seemed to him that many of them enjoyed taking small pieces of verse and twisting them to suit their needs, much like politicians used the sound byte to great effect in the same manner.

Arthur however was not of this nature choosing instead to ask questions of his audience and through those questions develop thought and reason within his listeners. Each question leading

inevitably to more questions and the explanation from Arthur that it was beyond man's nature, and any man's abilities, to understand God's design as he would make his comparisons between the texts, written and spoken, of Allah, Jehovah, Wakatanka and others.

Arthur was an imposing figure, in thought even more so than in appearance. He was only two years older than Eric, but well-schooled in theology. As he taught of the Christian book he would attempt to compare it to the teachings of great men in history and explain how spiritual thought had shaped society, cultures and even governments. Quite often he seemed to be teaching that many of the texts were in fact teaching the same thing, but that many of the 'churches', founded around their principles, chose to herald their differences as they sought to exclude rather than include others into their 'faiths'.

Spirituality was not religion as Eric saw it and Religion was not a Native American concept, a word that seemed to him to have implications of things that often ended badly. He saw religion as leading to Holy wars in the name of an individual's God and intolerance for others based upon the exclusion that many of their clergy preached. To Eric spirituality was about the Creator, period, and in Arthur he found another who seemed to feel the same way. Even though their views were not the same, they were similar and they found much reward in debating the merits of their ideas.

As their friendship grew Eric began to confide in Arthur more and more. He found in the man, that the other prisoners called King, a confidant to whom he could unburden his heavy heart, and a friend that had ignited in him new ideas. He eagerly devoured his friends suggested readings, finding in each new book, thoughts and ideas, that he had often felt, but had never known how to express. Eric thought in ideas not in words, as most men do, and sometimes found it a struggle to convey his pure thoughts into words that most people could understand. Through his readings he found great

thinkers that had similar feelings, and new ways of expressing his own.

Arthur had ignited in Eric the beginnings of disfavor with injustice and intolerance as they discussed ideas of rampant paranoia and widespread, yet falsely justified, intolerance and indifference. They would often talk about how the media, politics and religion took their cues from society and individuals, and how growing apathy and other social injustices were finding acceptance as individuals seemed caught up in their own feelings of entitlement, instant gratification and self-justification; or how a never ending cycle of growing injustice was inevitable within a culture that had never had a great spiritual leader and whose common religion was business and the pursuit of consumer and material goals, rather than the ideas of enlightenment and community. Unfortunately, the corporate penal system did not find favor in what they interpreted as a mingling of religious ideals, and soon Arthur was released in his position as prison chaplain, still though Arthur had left Eric with a passion for learning and reading.

He read mostly political and spiritual teachings and fictional accounts that shed light on these truths. However by Eric's third year the industrialized penal system and the newly re-tasked and greatly empowered F.C.C. banned or censored many of the books Eric had enjoyed the most. He was soon left with little choice in his readings.

He had seen it first with his childhood beloved "Huckleberry Finn". A book that had at one time used certain words to great effect to show the intolerance of its time had now seemingly failed to convey anything other than childhood fancy. Its message for children and adults alike now gone and replaced with simple pointless entertainment to supposedly protect children from dangerous notions begged Eric to wonder; if education begins in the home then doesn't ignorance as well?

Chapter 5 (January 2022)

Matt had always longed to see the desert. Yet now he was forced to rethink the wisdom behind taking this trip, after 200 miles, a good deal of it on his now well-worn sneakers he found himself just South of Albuquerque. From the looks of his dog-eared and wrinkled old map, he had thought his route to be a shortcut to Phoenix, now he understood why so few cars went this way.

In near total darkness on a lonely canyon road he found himself worrying each time he saw a distant headlight. He was forced quite often to dodge to the side of the road and in many cases hug the canyon walls as cars and trucks came barreling towards him; most of them going far faster than the two lane road had ever been designed for, as they rounded tight corners and traversed seemingly never-ending switchbacks. While on the far side of the

road they averted sheer cliffs falling thousands of feet.

The last of these cars had just narrowly missed him as it passed and came to a screeching halt about 100 yards past him throwing up dust and stone in its hasty sojourn. A beaten and broken old piece of shit yellow Kia hatchback, he saw its tail lights come on as the driver backed up right next to him. 'Not smart backing up on this road,' Matt thought. In areas like this Matt always worried over the intent of people performing what seemed a dangerous action, so as the car had come closer to him he had covertly flipped open his straight razor holding it close to his side.

"Hey sweetie, need a lift?" Matt's heart melted as he had just seen what he imagined to be the prettiest girl he had seen in years.

"Um, so-ah why not," He struggled to say something clever but his surprise at his good luck overcame and thwarted his best efforts.

"So sweetie where are you headed?" The pretty young girl asked as Matt got into the passenger's seat.

"Wherev-ah you are darling." With that Lisa blushed and smiled.

Chapter 6 (February 2022)

Amanda Bianchi couldn't believe it had come to this. She silently began to worry if she had finally lost control of her problem as she sat in the Emergency Ward waiting room of Bellevue Hospital. Grasping her mutilated right hand as her severed fingers lay on her lap in a quickly saturating white cotton cloth. She needed those Oxy's more than she had ever needed anything before, it seemed, but was it really for her pain or was there more she wondered.

She had never gone this far before to get her fix. At the time it had seemed like such a good idea. She had seen the small ax in the basement many times but had never thought upon a single use for it until this night.

The urge was all too overwhelming this time for her. She had reasoned that the doctors could quickly sew them back on and she would get the tens she loved so much. The time released ones that kept her in a much longer state of bliss and provided her a more prolonged escape from the burdens of her reality. Long ago she had come to rationalize her need for the damned things as a conspiracy between the drug companies and the doctors to get people hooked on their product. Now she knew for sure, but still she ached all over for the damned things. A

longing that rivaled every other need she had ever known.

Her fingers throbbed mercilessly, yet the pain in her gut was still so much worse. The pain which had led her to do something most would and could never understand. The pain which knew only one single relief, the pain that had come to dominate so much of her day to day existence and so much of her guilt.

Chapter 7 (February 2022)

"Eric, hey Eric wake up," Billy whispered as he shook Eric from a deep sleep in the lower bunk. "Hey man, I'm leaving. I just heard my enlistment was approved."

Eric rubbed his eyes and responded. "Billy I think you should rethink this. You're a sweet kid; I'm worried you might lose that in the Marines."

"That's easy for you to say Eric, you've only got two more months, I've got twelve more years. I hate this place, two years in Iran and I can be free. Free to do what I want and without any record. Shoot, I could even go to college." Billy seemed more animated than Eric had ever seen him at the apparent opportunity that his enlistment might mean.

"Watch out Billy, those recruiters make a lot of promises, just be sure you've got it all in writing. Good luck buddy and keep in touch, I'll miss you and I know John will too." Eric had seen his friend grow from a scared boy into a strong and

confident young man; he took great pride knowing that he and the others had been a big part of that.

The men hugged their goodbyes, neither knowing if they would ever meet again. Eric sighed, "Shit, first Stanley leaves now you, and John in solitary again, what am I going to do to keep from getting bored the next two months?" Eric said partly laughing.

"Shit, knowing you, you'll just keep writing in your journal. Hell, I wouldn't be surprised if you didn't even write a book." Billy said playfully yet sincerely.

*

"Shakedown, out of your racks!" Exclaimed a man in a powder blue uniform with short sleeves, pointing his Taser threateningly, as the men in third floor D-cell moved slowly to the center of the prison block; wearily rubbing their eyes as they came slowly awake to the earliness of the hour.

"Warden, we got something here." The young corrections officer said as he proudly held up a shank after inspecting Eric's bunk. Eric was greatly shocked internally but showed no external surprise. He had seen before how the system seemed to only work for those willing to take as they pleased and exploited those who sought only to stay away from troublesome entanglements.

*

Dear Eric,

I was sorry to hear about your added time. It seems very unfair to me that they would give you another year without even a trial. The world just seems to have changed so much since back on the reservation. Everything just seemed so much simpler then and that's why it's so hard for me to tell you what I must. I will always love you Eric, in one way or another.

I've moved to Boston Eric. I'm sorry to say my dear Eric that I don't think I can wait another year as I find myself attracted to another man. I am so sorry Eric but I'm just not that strong. You will always have a special place in my heart, but I have to say goodbye.

Love,
XOXO
Jen

*

As much as the words of the short letter had hurt Eric, he knew that his life's journey and that of his beloved Jen would become in-twined again.

Chapter 8 (February 2023)

"Damn it Dad, how many times've I told you not to come down here drunk. You have a problem and you need to get help!" David had tired of his father's drinking and his resulting visits to his clinic; quite often appearing for no other apparent reason than to stir up trouble and in turn resentment.

However this time he had fallen down and opened a large abrasion on his forehead. David was worried that the next time might be far worse, as he cleaned his old man's cut and applied a bandage.

He longed for those days when his visits with his father had not been marred by the man's drinking. Days in his youth of hunting and fishing now didn't even seem to have been with the same man. David had seen the ravaging effects, to his father's health the bottle had done, both mental and physical. His once proud stature now seemed stooped and much smaller than the giant he remembered from

just a few short years ago. It had seemed to have aged him in so many ways.

"I'm sorry David. I guess I must be a real disappointment to you." The old man said slurring his words and nearly coming to tears, hanging his head in the self-loathing that had become such a big part of his life these days. He had heard his son's and others pleas many times to quit drinking and sincerely wished he could, yet to him it seemed as impossible as stopping his own eventual death.

David smiled, hugged his old man and said, "Dad you could never disappointment me. Just please I beg of you to do something for yourself before that poison gets the best of you."

*

"Mr. Red Cloud?" The voice on the clinic phone asked as David answered.

"Yes, may I help you?" David repeated as he waved for a young female patient to go into the next room.

David's clinic was little more than a forty foot diesel trailer. His office doubled as a waiting room, it was only about ten feet square with a small desk, steel filing cabinet, a simple white coffee machine and a few folding chairs for patients. The entire clinic had simple linoleum flooring which was starting to rip and peel in the corners of the waiting room. The next room was David's examination room and it too was beginning to show the signs of overuse. David was beginning to look forward to his cousin's return. Besides missing him as a friend and confidant, he also hoped that he could help with some much needed repairs.

The examination room's cabinets had a few loose drawers and the hot water in the lavatory needed to be turned off under the vanity after each use, else his tank, or the well he filled it from, empty all too quickly. David reflected on how his

life had gotten to a point such as this. It seemed to him that he had to bandage and repair his clinic even more often than his patients.

Nails, wood and building materials now seemed to be so much easier to procure than gauze and sutures. Whenever he mentioned the need for one material or another, within earshot of certain company, it would seem to miraculously appear within a few short days. Unfortunately, he knew too, that these items had not been procured legally, yet when faced with the choice of reporting and returning the item or getting much needed work done, the latter choice inevitably always won out.

The third room - once a small lab and medicine storage room - David had found himself regularly now taking naps in, as his schedule seemed to be getting far more burdensome. Being tired or sick was no longer an option for David, days off were few and far between as he regularly found himself working hours and weeks much longer than he had ever done at Mass General. He no longer had the time or the inclination for even the occasional beer he once enjoyed. Coffee and power drinks had become his drink of choice; not for enjoyment but rather to be able to endure the long rigorous hours that he faced daily.

"Sir, this is the Chamberlain Police Department," David felt he knew what was coming next. He knew the sound of a man about to give such news, having been in the very same unfortunate place so many times himself. "We need you to come down and identify a body we found this morning; we believe it may be your father."

"I'm with a patient but I can be there in an hour." He had known that bad news would be coming however he had not been prepared for the revelation of his father's possible demise. David tended his patient but with his mind now several miles away.

The ride to Chamberlain had taken longer than David had thought it would. He arrived twenty minutes late and only barely caught the Sheriff as he was leaving. The morgue - in the basement of the county hospital - even though much smaller, had the same bare concrete walls and white tile floors that David had seen in the Boston Morgue, he had once visited. He wondered if they were all built and designed in such a manner. The clerk was a disagreeable sort. He seemed to not want to be bothered by anyone of David's race; after all to him this was an all too common story.

The old man laid stretched out on a gurney inside a thick black body bag. The clerk explained that no autopsy would be necessary, as his blue pigment and the nature of his body's discovery made it apparent that he had died from complications of the cold. His skin color was blue and his toes, nose and fingers had the obvious signs of advanced stage frostbite characterized by black and blue skin.

"We found him stranded in his truck about five miles from here," The Sheriff said, the smell of the rock gut whiskey was still apparent on the old man's body, a smell that now sickened David to a point where he knew he would never touch a drop again. "It seems he ran his truck into a snow bank. He ran the engine to keep warm as long as he could but ran out of gas. We believe that he passed out from intoxication and hypothermia over took him. Can you tell me the last time you saw him? It could be useful in determining a time of death."

David reflected on his last moments with his father, that day in his clinic, as he saw the still bandaged cut on his old man's forehead. Now wondering if there was something he could have said, something he could have done to avoid this moment, he felt more helpless now than at any time in his life as he began questioning his own abilities. After all was he not the tribe's Doctor? Was it not his responsibility to keep his people safe from such travesties as these? If he couldn't even help those closest to himself, convince them of the dangers of

their own actions, then how could he convince those he knew far less?

David tried, unsuccessfully, to take solace in the look of peace stretched across his father's face. Hoping that he might now be free of the many burdens he had carried so heavily for so long.

Chapter 9 (April 14 - 2023)

"God it's good to see you again Cuz." David said as he drove the beat up old pickup away from the prison gates. "Man what did they feed y'all in there? You've lost so much weight."

Eric didn't respond, recognizing the question as being rhetorical anyways. Instead he just stared blankly out the passenger side window and reflected on his hopes for a new life. Hopes of making amends for his mistakes, whether perceived or legitimate, well cemented in his mind.

"I'm sorry to hear about Jen. You two just seemed destined to get married." David said recognizing the forlorn look of his cousin. "Everything will be better when we get back home, you'll see."

"I'm not staying on the Rez David. I'm going to Boston. There ain't nothin' back there for me, now that Mom and Dad are gone." Eric said matter-of-factly, still staring out the window and avoiding his cousin's glance.

"Boston? Eric, forget about it. She has a new life, she doesn't want to see you, you're just going to hurt yourself even more, come back to the Rez, get a job there and be happy." David paused for a moment, then realizing his words were falling on deaf ears continued in hopes of influencing his cousin's decision. "You can't be worried about others all the time Eric, just be sure to take care of yourself. That's the only thing that matters now." David thought he was giving his cousin the best advice that he could.

He had seen how his father's caring manner and gentle heart had proven to be his undoing and didn't wish to see the same fate befall his beloved cousin too. "Besides Eric, things out there," David said motioning with a nod of his head towards the road in front of them, "well everything has changed cousin, work is real hard to find now, especially for ex-cons. You don't have any chance out there, back home there are people to take care of you at least."

While Eric had been in prison a new labor system had insidiously reared its head, when first the US Post Office and then the majority of government agencies started to contract for their workers. The new Labor Brokers were seen as the salvation to an overly indebted and heavily burdened economy, in need of ever escalating capital and human resources to fight in Iran and Mexico. Now the government would accept bids for labor from independent agencies and choose from those who offered the best at the lowest price. Several Senators had trumpeted the measure as the single most effective proposal ever put forth to curb government spending.

They had come into existence soon after new Federal regulations had imposed stiff procedures for collective bargaining agreements. No longer would individual states determine the regulations for labor unions, now they would rely upon criteria imposed by the Feds. Congress had justified the need, due to increasing burdens to states and cities

and the upwardly spiraling costs of their police, fire and teachers unions. It was believed that the best way to curtail endless bailouts for the municipalities was to limit these costs.

The Labor Brokers would not be overly burdened or encumbered by years of bureaucratic regulations, and mindless employee benefits. Soon however the Labor Brokers also began to supply labor to large private corporations, as they too recognized the economic and cultural benefits of treating a man's labor as a commodity that could be exploited every bit as much as the oil and cattle barons of old had exploited those other resources.

Eventually the Fed had begun to also employ large numbers of 'citizen soldiers'. Men and women employed by specialized Labor Brokers; men and women who fought for a paycheck rather than principles. With three wars going on all in different parts of the world the military had been unable to keep up with the demand for 'warm bodies'. The first recruits found themselves fighting in Mexico.

The war in Mexico was proving far more challenging than anticipated. Yet many Americans saw regime change as the only solution to the contraband and violence that so regularly and so easily were finding their way over the border. The new, freely elected Mexican Government had lauded their own progressive nature and willingness to cooperate with the Americans, even as they made their back-room deals to encourage the export of labor to the North. Labor the brokers so desperately coveted as they sought to maximize profits. Soon violence escalated to even higher levels as the new number one illegal Mexican export became human cargo.

As the Labor Brokers became increasingly dependent upon the public health insurance option, Medicare, Medicaid and other social services quickly started to make cutbacks to curtail upwardly spiraling costs. Private insurers could not afford to be competitive and quickly began declaring their bankruptcies and swallowing each other up, creating

less competition in yet another industry.

The burden of paying into the government subsidized insurance option made undocumented workers even more desirable as the Labor Brokers did not have to report their earnings. Soon the government health insurance option was abandoned as lobbyists from the private insurers successfully fought for the elimination of a failed policy, not even bothering to stop to study the real causes behind its failure.

David tried to warn Eric of how difficult work was to find now, even as he knew his cousin was having a hard time accepting it. After all, Eric reasoned, he had plenty of experience and didn't industry, especially the construction industry, always need experienced men? You might be able to teach the basics, he reasoned, but there would always be a need for people of experience in supervisory capacities. He listened to David talk but didn't really hear his warnings.

Chapter 10 (January 12 - 2023)

"So you're telling me that since some damn bureaucrat forgot to file my papers, construction on my wind farm will have to be stopped? I have over twenty million dollars of my own money already invested in this project, damn it! This project will create hundreds of jobs and cheap power in a place needing both right now and in the future," Stephen Blake was never a man to tolerate incompetence from anyone.

"I'm sorry sir but it seems that we have had a difficult time with our staff lately and have had to replace several people. We are trying to fix your problem but at this time your Bureau of Land Management lease agreement is null and void, but we appreciate your patience." The voice on the other end of the telephone infuriated Stephen. He slammed the elegantly curved white and brass handle of the antique phone down several times and turned to look out the window and upon the great Colorado plains below in hopes of soothing his anger.

Stephen could not help but think that this might be because of a competitor wanting the same

land. He remembered an all too recent meeting, 'that weasily little prick', he thought aloud. His family business had always been one of cutthroats and villains as they would quite often resort to any means to eliminate competition and control market prices of the black liquid that was so eagerly devoured by their customers. His grandfather and father had struggled with this kind of corruption and backstabbing throughout their lives and even now as Stephen struggled to divest his oil interests and move into the new technologies, he too was finding his best efforts and best ideas thwarted at every turn.

He had taken it for granted that the land, which he had been to so many times, would always be in his family's possession, as it so seemingly had been his whole life. Now that the oil and gas reserves there were nearing depletion he had felt certain that his proposal to once again make these lands productive would meet with nothing but approval. Unfortunately others had very different ideas of how to make them productive again, as they were quickly building underwater pipelines through the Gulf of Mexico and up into the southwest. He had also seen the new technologies for reclaiming oil and gas from wells long thought dead and worried over the damage such techniques might cause. He hated the thought of what some of those techniques might do to his beloved Amarillo land.

The Amarillo land had been under his family's lease since the time his grandfather had first drilled there, and there was no way he would let it go without a fight. If he had learned anything from his grandfather it was to be a fighter. Stories of his ancestor's fight with Rockefeller and Standard Oil during the early days of oil exploration were legendary throughout the industry.

"Bad news sir? Here have some tea it'll make you feel better sir. You know it's like the song says sir, you can't always get what you want." Stephen was fond of his butler, having known the man

since he was a small boy, yet right now he was in no mood for the man's sarcasms.

Steven Blake was the descendant of a great oil tycoon of the early twentieth century. His great-grandfather had started out as a miner slaving in the tunnels around Pikes Peak until he had set off as a still young man in his thirties with a growing family, yearning to make his fortune in the newly burgeoning oil industry. He had gotten luckier than most and had struck oil in the Oklahoma oil fields on his first endeavor. His fame and fortune quickly grew and it seemed everyone wanted to hitch their wagons to his growing reputation and luck.

Recognizing that the real money in oil came not from drilling, but rather from refining, the man in his forties built his first pipeline then his first refinery. In those early days he had to fight off the immoral and soon to be illegal tactics and overwhelming might of Standard Oil. A wholly detestable organization run and owned by a man known as Rockefeller. His ancestor however managed to stave off the offers of money and the threats of extinction from what he had seen as a tyrant in the industry who had to be eliminated. As luck would have it in 1908 the Justice Department had also wearied of Standards practices and sued for their breakup. The family business grew substantially from that point forward.

Stephen turned to take his tea from the antique desk that had been first his grandfather's and then his father's before it had inevitably come into his possession. He could only hope that his values and work ethic would have been approved of by the two men he had come to see as great men not only in business, but also in life in general.

Stephen loved his old family house but often wondered over whether it was too much for a single man. He rationalized it's upkeep by thinking of the many workers its maintenance necessitated, jobs that he paid well for.

The large opulent white stucco house, a true mansion in fact, had a mix of Mission and Spanish architectural elements. Barrel tiles on sloping roofs in many places, but also flat parapet walls in other areas. The front had a palisade with ornate columns reminiscent of early Mediterranean architecture. Probably the most beautiful part of the old house though was the view it afforded its tenants. It sat halfway up Cheyenne Mountain, in the shadow of the two great Colorado Springs Mountains, Cheyenne Mountain behind it and Pikes Peak only a few short miles away. What he loved the most was the view from his office through the ten foot high arched windows. From up here he could see all of Colorado Springs, his home. He wondered often over his grandfather's choice of name for the old house, Vista Del Valle, when in fact it was nowhere near a valley.

"Bernard that's all well and good, but in a world where everyone takes what they want, how is anyone supposed to get what they need? Bernard, get me Senator Carpenter on the phone," Stephen had never been of the sort to skirt the law, but in this case he thought the ends would justify the means. After all he had already determined that his wind farm would be a new boon to an area mired deep in economic oblivion. He reasoned, "That crooked prick will do anything for a quick buck."

Bernard had worked for his family for over forty years. The man had been indispensable to three generations of his family. Even now as his years began to advance Stephen had started to worry how he would ever be able to fill the position when it would become vacant. He knew Bernard had decent means now, having taken the good pay that his family had given him each week and saving it effectively, but his worry of losing him was more a worry for himself than Bernard. He simply didn't know how he could ever expect to find anyone as competent as Bernard, not only as a competent employee, but more so as a friend and a man he had learned to look up to for sagely advice starting in his own childhood.

He could still remember sledding in the back yard as a child with Bernard watching him. The man's face was now becoming heavily wrinkled and his thinning hair had finally gone completely gray but his eyes still had a hint of playfulness and quite often Stephen was reminded of his days of youth just by the man's ever present smile. It was regularly Bernard who would be Stephen's best confidant and toughest critic and in fact now had become a bit of both towards the proposed Amarillo project.

Stephen had planned his venture to supply cheap electricity to tens of thousands of people, through a cooperative business model, while employing local people who would inevitably invest back into local businesses. He could not allow the incompetence of others, or the corruption of a few to thwart a great plan to help so many.

He had learned many times throughout his life that the best way to ensure motivation by an employee was to pay them well and make them feel important within the organization. His father had taught him that all people long to feel important and need to feel as though they are part of achieving a goal. But he had also sat many times and listened to Labor Brokers as they exuberantly told him how wasteful his thinking was. How providing benefits and decent paying jobs was not an effective use of his resources. That by using their services he could guaranty huge savings which he could reinvest, through his own personal savings. Stephen had not taken much notice of this, after all, he reasoned, his entire life he had wanted for nothing. So why not be sure that others at the very least could find reward too, both personally and professionally. In this mold he had come to see himself and his family as responsible stewards not only to the lands under their control but also to the men and families dependent on him.

Chapter 11 (August 2023)

"One way ticket to Boston," Eric said as he stood in front of the blue and tan desk. He looked at the emblem of a dog in full stride on the wall just behind the ticket counter and the piles of suitcases and duffel bags lined against it. He couldn't believe that once again he was going to be getting on a bus. This time he tried to decide, was he running away or running to. He felt sure, running to. Running to the one he loved, running to the one he needed, and running to the future.

"Okay that will be \$279.13 and the trip will take 43 hours and 47 minutes, absent any delays. Your ID please," the middle aged woman in a blue uniform said, pushing her glasses back up her nose. "Sorry this is taking so long it's my first week here, trying to get used to this software and all."

"Seems like a decent job, seems a lot of people would like this job. How do you like it?" Eric said handing the woman his identification papers, state and federal, as he thought of his own

recent difficulties in finding work.

The new federal ID's were now mandatory for anyone traveling between states. They were meant to curb the movement of weapons over the borders. Each one had a microchip in it, that when read would give, the agency requesting it, information that had been promised to assist in dietary needs, health problems, frequent flier miles and many other useful benefits to the seasoned traveler.

Seldom said was that it also was used to weed out suspected terrorists. Unbeknown to Eric, as the card was slid into the ISO-7816 card reader behind the desk, was that his name was on a list. A list he had only seldom heard of. A list meant to protect Americans from terrorists or those suspected to have terrorist leanings; a list which, even from the time of its inception, had become mired by abuses of power, false positives and malaise. Eric's involvement in a political rally had provided the justification to add his name to a list that seemed to grow exponentially every few months

The watch list was once used solely to stop suspected terrorists from boarding planes but had eventually found new uses within a society paranoid of future terrorist acts. The list now was being used to exclude people from government buildings, buses and even places where large groups of civilians might be. There was no legal recourse to find out why you had been refused entry to a bus, plane or building and the presence of your name on the list would only be known after attempting to enter such areas. The list when first conceived had been heralded by the media as a necessity in a dangerous world and had changed names several times until now it was called, People Requiring Special Scrutiny.

A soon realized secondary problem was that any law enforcement agent could easily add your name to the list, with or without reason. Cases of jealous ex-boyfriends, and angry ex-husbands, in D.H.S., having posted names there, seeking some

level of payback, had become common place within just a few short years. An abusive practice which had led political pundits, and even a few liberal and progressive politicians to find their own names there during its earliest days, added by those who wished to harm their reputations and further their own power.

The government ever mindful of semantics had renamed the list several times to avoid the scrutiny of groups such as the A.C.L.U. It seemed the best way to avoid investigation from citizen advocacy groups was simply to change the name of these programs every few years. Congress had long since found it tedious to track down lies and illegalities that had started several years past. After all the men who had created these systems, that had become abusive of their power, were long since out of power anyways and in the political world repercussions to the unjust, immoral, and irresponsible always seemed, to other men of power, to necessitate political embarrassment rather than prison time; so what was the point in investigating them now?

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The cashier looked from her terminal handing back Eric's I.D. and proclaimed, "Sir I'm sorry I can't sell you a ticket. You're name is on the no fly list."

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Eric was glad to have simply found a respite from the rain and wind outside, as he sat in the quiet cafe. It had taken him two weeks to reach, God he thought, 'where is here'? He found himself in the most God forsaken little town he imagined he had ever seen. The only thing remarkable in Littleton, NC seemed to him to be the brightly painted water tower he was now examining through a dirty and streaked window. He sipped his coffee out of a small brown plastic mug and sat it back down on the greasy faux-wood surface of the table in front of him.

"Hey bud mind if I sit with you for awhile?"
The man pulled out the chair opposite him and sat

down even before Eric had a chance to consider the words. "I hate to ask you this but you're Native American aren't you? I've never met a Native before." Paz said as Eric wondered as to how he could get rid of the guy. "My name is Matt Pascuzzi but everyone calls me Paz."

His blond hair hung halfway down his back and he had a couple days worth of growth on his face. Vibrant blue / gray eyes, rounded, soft features and a smallish nose showed of a gentler nature; that stood in contrast to a man who seemed to be in excellent physical conditioning. He wore an old olive drab Army jacket, from the previous century, with a name that said Newbury stitched just over the pocket. As he sat he laid his beaten and tattered Army backpack just under the window. Eric knew right away, just by the man's many layers of clothing and his backpack, that his would be intruder was a homeless man. Despite his apparent homelessness though, Eric could tell he was in seemingly excellent shape.

"My name is Eric," he responded, not at all at ease by being interrupted by what he perceived as a homeless man. He watched as Matt twisted his tobacco cigarette and, despite the many signs saying not to, lit it up and began to use his discarded creamer containers as an ashtray.

"Just Eric, I thought you all had names like Running Bear and stuff?" Paz said laughingly.

"My whole name is Eric Wakatanka Luta Mahpiya, Eric of God's Red Sky, but most people just call me Eric," Eric said as he was quickly beginning to regret allowing his solace to be disturbed and began questioning the motives of his would be intruder. "My Grandfather named me on the night of my birth. He told me that it was a night that he saw the most beautiful sunset he had ever witnessed and he and my father knew right away that my life would be remarkable." Eric paused wondering if he should say what he was thinking. "And if I was homeless like you I'd probably not be making statements that

could be seen as racist."

"Hey bro, it was just a joke and I'm not homeless. I have a place to live. God, people are so judgmental and defensive these days!" Matt shot back quickly. "Hey Lisa, this is Eric. He's a Native American." Paz said as he held out a chair for the young lady with auburn hair newly arrived to Eric's table.

*

Eric looked around as he struggled to avoid breathing through his nose, lest the overpowering stench of stagnant water, rotting carpet and God only knew what else, get to him again. He looked over to Paz as the joint made its way back to him. Eric had never smoked pot before and found the sensation a bit off putting, but still enjoyable. Paz was talking about something, but Eric had long since, so it seemed, lost track of what he was saying.

The cinder block structure had been abandoned ten years ago, Eric had been told. It was impressive for its size with ten stalls for the big Mack trucks to pull into, in anticipation of being scrubbed and pressure washed. It had been a failed business venture of a man whose name Matt had not known, but had become a local legend when his partner had taken off with the bank accounts and owing several hundred thousand in back taxes.

They were camped in what had at one time been the enterprises business office. Threadbare carpet and boarded up windows did little to add to the comfort of the place, but a warm heater and a couple of mattresses did. The dim lighting was provided by a single kerosene lamp hanging in the middle of the space. A door at one end led to a 'bathroom' long since left unusable by lack of water. Matt and Lisa used the nearby truck stop for number 2, the woods suited them just fine for number 1.

On the old MP3 player was playing Casey Jones. Oh yeah thought Eric that's what he was talking about, The Grateful Dead. Paz seemed to put an awful lot of significance into their music, or so it seemed now to Eric. He had never really understood what people saw in them, but now was finding new meaning in the song as he took another hit and fought against laughing uncontrollably. He passed the joint to Lisa, who was sitting cross legged, and Eric now considered how the dim lighting of the old abandoned truck wash seemed to enhance her looks.

She wasn't thin, but she wasn't overweight either, she had thick but toned hips and legs with a round yet firm butt packed into a tight pair of faded blue jeans with a hole exposing the left back pocket and an enticing bit of skin. A thin white cotton blouse stretched tight over an ample chest had managed to attract Eric's attention as he struggled to not be too obvious with his glance. Her beauty however seemed to lie in her eyes. Light brown, glistening, doe like eyes. Large and round shaped that had the inquisitive, curious look of a child's eyes. Long auburn hair framed her face, a face that seemed to express a sexual radiance with full red lips and an easy smile.

Lisa leaned towards Paz and whispered something that Eric couldn't hear. Paz kissed Lisa, smiled cleverly and then asked Eric, "Hey want to fuck Lisa with me?" as Lisa removed her shirt, exposing her round firm breasts.

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"Are you sure you want to leave honey? We had a great time last night. You can make money here." Eric had already heard how Matt and Lisa would wash trucks for the little bit of cash they needed for food and weed. The only question he had failed to ask was where they got their water; visions of being arrested for tapping into the truck stop's spigot left him little doubt that he needed to find other employment. "Come on don't leave. Last

night was so much fun." Lisa said holding and releasing Eric's hand several times, hoping the playful human contact would be accepted and acknowledged. Eric felt the inevitable pains he always experienced when having to say goodbyes, but knew these too would soon subside.

"Come on bud don't leave. Lisa drives me nuts when it's just the two of us. We might not have much, but what we have is ours and we want to share that with you." Paz was beginning to convince Eric, or so it seemed.

"I'm sorry Matt, Lisa; I've just got something I gotta do. If I don't take a chance I'll never know and I'll always regret what might've been," Eric said as he shook Paz's hand and then kissed Lisa goodbye on the cheek.

"Hey just be sure not to misspell my name when you write about me in that journal, bud." Eric smiled as he thought of what and how he would choose to write about the events of his few days with Matt and Lisa. Dare he write such private moments? What would someone else think of him if they ever read of the events of the previous night?

"She's a lucky girl Eric. I hope she realizes that." Lisa said with a warm smile.

*

Eric had gotten lucky with his first ride and now found himself in Southern NJ, regretting the drop off point he had chosen. The shoulder seemed overly narrow now and the traffic too hurried for him to stand any chance at a ride here. He had been standing in this spot for four hours and several police cruisers had already passed during the time. He worried that he might be arrested as he thought of the events of the previous night.

The sex had been amazing, it seemed to him. He had never done anything like that before, but now he had a few regrets about it as he reflected on how

it simply had not been the same as it was with Jen, three bodies twisted together on a dirty old mattress, was it the setting that had made it so exciting or the thought of being caught at any moment? Eric was no longer sure, but he knew that, even now, he was still feeling the adrenaline rushing through his body. Something most certainly had been missing though and now the more he thought of it the more determined he became to get to Boston.

In the Lakota nation it had long been custom for a relative of the same sex as the dying partner to console the surviving spouse with sex. Many other cultures might have found it distasteful but to the Lakota it had long been seen as part of the grieving process. With so many years in prison and so much absence from his true love he rationalized the previous night as just such an intervention to console a heavy heart.

The sun was waning towards dusk and the temperature, on what had been a beautiful autumn day, was rapidly falling as a hardy breeze began to blow in scouring his face. He was intent on making it into Pennsylvania before morning though, and wasn't ready to setup his tent just yet.

He didn't like the looks of the neighborhood either, as the all too few street lights nearby began to shine their light on to the road and cast shadows all about him. The traffic had slowed to near nothing and the cars were now coming in small groups about every twenty minutes or so, adding to Eric's feelings of foreboding and making the area seem all the more dangerous. In his nervousness he began pacing. He didn't like being so close to a large city. He would have preferred to be camping in some remote area. Somewhere he knew he would be safer, after all the animals of the woods had only claws and teeth, the animals of the city had knives and guns.

Eric thought on this and then stopped to jot his thoughts in the journal he had been neglecting

for several months now. As he continued he reflected on how man was the only animal that when faced with a decision would kill another man for his own survival, rather than working together for the common good. He knew this however was just the nature of those at the bottom. Those forced to survive off the few scraps left by the real animals, those at the top, the predators, who even now, on the side of this lonely highway, he saw, as they passed him by. Driving solo in big brightly lit S.U.V.'s, too busy on their cell phones to even pay him a sideways glance.

He wondered how when so many in the world seemed to have so little, how people like this could justify gobbling up what little remained. He had realized, just a few days before, how over the course of his journey not a single S.U.V. or luxury car had ever offered him a ride. Was it their guilt over their actions that which leading them to their paranoia of anyone who seemed different from them? Was it the action of isolating themselves from others through their technology and diversions, locked away in the suburban prisons of their own making that had disconnected them from the rest of humanity?

He knew their vehicles to be glutinous as they gobbled up enormous amounts of the same substance that had robbed him of his ancestral home. Eric wondered if the drivers, who seldom seemed to be riding with any other occupant, were just as greedy as their vehicle. He saw the fumes coming out of their tailpipes and saw now that gluttony came in many forms, for as they were taking, they were also destroying; seemingly oblivious to the consequences of their own actions; as their metal dragons pumped out gases, which rained destruction down upon the land.

He had known others throughout his life of the same bent. Men and women who bought their large vehicles so that they could live far outside the city and drive their hour long daily commutes, safe in their misconceived perception of comfort and

safety. It seemed as though those who moved the farthest away had been the ones to most completely imprison themselves, doing it quite often gladly as they had told him. "I want to be way out in the country when it all goes to shit."

Now Eric reflected on how the idea could become a self-fulfilling prophecy, for as they moved they took much needed money and resources with them from the cities and towns and wasted it elsewhere. Instead of supporting local workers and local businesses they would buy their trinkets on the newly improved, safer internet or in the big box stores in the burbs; bragging about the free shipping from the Chinese manufacturer. Or the low, low, low price, never bothering to give thought to what price that low cost was exacting on the nation, or on the workers of some other far off nation. He wondered too if the exploitation of those workers would lead to yet more violence against Americans, all while American workers and American businesses were seemingly facing extinction as their clientele had abandoned them.

His father had turned him on to the thoughts of many of the great early American leaders, men who in large part had taken their cues from the ideas of the Native peoples. Men like Washington who had warned repeatedly over the dangers of foreign entanglements and the two party political system. Two parties, Eric thought that funny, now realizing that after the scandals of Pakistan, that no group had stepped forward to supplant the party who at one time had started great social reforms within the nation.

He thought of how he hadn't seen a single farm in weeks. In a place that had at one time had many of them, after all was Jersey not called the Garden State at one time? Farms that had not only employed local people, but had also enriched communities and provided fresh, safe food for the people living in the towns nearby. It seemed to him now that these farms had been replaced by big box stores; that necessitated even bigger parking lots

or golf courses providing diversion for the very same people in their S.U.V.'s and luxury cars. All to attract and justify further suburbanization.

He thought on how when he had asked a man once of what sense was a finishing farm if the process leads to poisoned water, loss of jobs, destruction of natural places and diseased cattle and how he had received the angry response "I like meat, I don't care how they do it."

He remembered his beat up old truck, and that of his cousin. They had been gas hungry too, but at the very least by struggling to keep them on the road, it seemed to Eric anyways, that he was living within the Native principle of not wanting to waste what Wakatanka had given him. With no truck now, he wondered over whether his want to take care of what he already had, and owned, was indeed enough.

Suddenly he came to see how all things were connected and that no matter how complicated an issue seemed to be it always came back to just one thing. The ever increasing degradation of principles, ethics and values by the mass of society in a world; where people were constantly being fed on the pointlessness of such ideas by their media and their chosen leaders. Eric wondered if it was indeed inevitable that society was doomed to collapse and wondered too if it was his responsibility to do more to counter the apathetic actions of others.

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"We need gauze, God this guy's bleeding bad. Get him on a ventilator!" Was all Eric could hear as he felt himself lifted. Where was he? It seemed as though he had been asleep all of his life, just at this moment; as his memories, both from long ago, and even the last few moments, seemed lost behind a layer of fog. He struggled to make sense out of them as he felt himself drifting away once again to an all too uncomfortable feeling of overwhelming

dizziness and an accompanying headache; with an intense ache in his stomach as he had never known before.

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"Relax young man. I have some questions for you?" Eric awoke to the blurred vision of a man in a dark uniform sitting next to him. As his vision began to slowly return he realized it was a cop. "We believe you were mugged while hitch hiking, we would just like to know if it was by a driver or by a fellow transient."

Eric wondered why those had to be the only two options as he suddenly found his memory returning. "It was neither. I was standing on the ramp when I was attacked by three teenage kids. They called me Chief and other racist words and then one of them stabbed me. I can't remember anything after I saw the knife."

"Well I guess that's it then." The Officer said flipping shut his small notebook. "I'm sorry we won't be able to help you in that case."

"What? You're kidding right?" Eric was shocked more than angered. Where was his justice he wondered? What had he done that had been so wrong?

"Son, you were illegally hitch-hiking and a group of teenage kids attacked you? Hell I wonder if you hadn't asked them for money or done something else to instigate the attack. What were you doing in that neighborhood anyways? You have a criminal record, don't you? You didn't belong there. We have places in this state for people like you." Eric knew it was pointless to pursue the matter. The young officer's mind had been made up long before he had even met Eric.

As the Officer was leaving Eric had one last worry. "Sir, did you happen to find my journal?"

"Shit Chief ain't you got more to worry about than a damn diary?"

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"Mr. Mahpiya, I'm sorry were going to have to release you today. You have no insurance and we can't afford to keep a bed open for you. Here is a prescription for Oxycodone and the address for the Rescue Mission." His nurse said wishing she could have done more for him. The revelation came as a shock to him when he realized he was still receiving intravenous transfusions.

Chapter 12 (November 2024)

"Senator Carpenter let me introduce you to Bob Winthrop. He is with...which defense contractor did you say you were with again?" George had met the Californian Governor before and knew that something wasn't quite right with him. He had heard the rumors of his sexual nature and as the man spoke he found his attention drawn elsewhere.

"Senator Carpenter, I would like to discuss with you the need for more privatization of the Mexican war." Bob Winthrop was a very driven man. He had worked his way up from just a simple foot soldier within the ranks of the military industrial complex and now enjoyed a lucrative and, what he thought of as rewarding, career. He made decisions daily which would put men at great danger while he sat in the warmth of a Southern California office earning a seven figure income.

The man was wearing a three button double breasted suit with a red power tie. Wire rimmed glasses partially hid his eyes as George said, "I'm listening."

"Well sir it seems to me that Americans need a reminder of why we are fighting this war, as well as the one in Iran. It seems with the absence of

violence against Americans here at home, that inevitably they will tire of war. If this happens then we will be forced to eliminate over five hundred thousand good paying private military jobs and that will leave us ill prepared when we have to mobilize again. Five hundred thousand well paid private military men who would have been paying taxes will end up on the public tit." Bob was good at feigning worry over his company losing jobs, most especially his.

"Well if that happens then we will just have to remind them of why we're fighting, won't we?" Carpenter said smiling proudly at the creativity of his proposed solution; after all he hadn't gotten to this position without knowing how to handle such matters. No, Senator Carpenter was a man who had learned early on how to work the media and how to coerce a reactionary public. He thought back to his own military time, proud of his experience and of his heroism.

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"Baghdad One, come in Baghdad One, do you copy?" George was sitting in his Bradley as he awaited their response. He had lost contact with his troops just a few brief moments before. Moments that now seemed to be an eternity as George became worried that he might be alone, in the desert.

"Command One, this is Baghdad One, copy," the voice shot back giving George some respite from his worries and fears, "Yes sir, sorry just some interference here, copy."

"Sergeant, have you reached the target? Over."

"Yes sir, we're at the target and we have it painted, over."

George pushed the button on his command computer's touch display knowing that overhead somewhere there was a B-2 waiting for his signal. A

B-2 whose guided bunker buster bomb would be looking for the 'paint' that Jones had promised him. In a few moments he knew he would see the bright light and hear the loud explosion he had come to take so much pride in on past missions of a similar nature. He never gave thought as to what that bright light meant.

"Sir, call him off we have children here sir. Repeat children are in the building call off the attack!" The voice was so harried he had forgotten to follow basic protocol. "Sir, we have friendly's on the ground do you copy, friendly's on the ground!"

Lieutenant George Carpenter now struggled with this revelation. He had been told that the target was a munitions plant. Should he call off the attack, after all he had his orders. Failure to follow his orders could mean demotion, demotion in his mind meant failure, personal and professional. Failure, in his mind, was never an option. He knew the procedure for calling off the mission but struggled now with a decision he would have to make soon.

"Sir, repeat women and children on the ground and in the building, People moving around, Sir the building looks like a school of some sort, Sir....Sir!"

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"Sir, we have the numbers now." George was suddenly brought back to his current surroundings by a young campaign worker who was still holding his telephone. "Everyone quiet please." The boisterous crowd took a few moments to settle their revelries. "Sir, district seven is reporting an overwhelming win. You've won the election sir. Congratulations."

A rousing applause erupted from the campaign headquarters, the Penthouse suite of the Washington, DC Hilton. George suddenly felt himself inundated by hundreds of men and women who had all worked long

hours in hopes of an appointment during his next term. All of them with hand outstretched in hopes of shaking the hand of the man they had tirelessly campaigned for and for the promised future political favor they were now coveting.

George thought of how much it must mean to each to shake his hand, with all of his fame and power at the very least, but also maybe to shake the hand of a man who had been a hero to this great nation so many times. He had come now to see it as his responsibility to ensure the safety of this great nation. He wondered who else would do the job in his absence. Would anyone else know what was best as he did?

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"Lieutenant what went through your mind as you called off the airstrike?" The beautiful young reporter asked while she held the microphone in front of him.

"Well as a married man who hopes to have his own children one day I knew I had to call off the mission." George had tired of the same questions being asked over and over again. He didn't necessarily believe that he should be given so much attention, even questioned if he was indeed a hero in the traditional sense; after all he hadn't really sacrificed anything nor been at any personal risk. But he had been repeatedly told by those higher up and those in the media that this was a time of war and in war a nation needs its heroes, real or perceived.

Even with all of his misgivings of being called a hero, he had eventually chosen to accept the role; he had even started seeing the benefits that his 'heroism' could have to the nation as he accepted his C.M.H. award. After all he had great ideas, ideas that could benefit the whole of the country, if it took an award to do that then so be it, he knew his father would be proud.

*

George's attention returned to the here and now as heard the chants of, "Speech, Speech."

"Ummm Umm," George started with clearing his throat, an affectation to those who knew him slightly more than the public at large. One meant to put them at ease by showing an approachable, imperfect side that George would never show to others not so close, "Well I hadn't prepared anything, but..."

Chapter 13 (December 31 - 2024)

Eric stood watching the first large snowflakes of the year as they fell onto the cobble stone streets. This had become the nature of his daily routine, standing outside her apartment building late every night as she returned home from work.

His recovery had taken twice as long as the Doctor's had promised, as infections had sent him back to the hospital twice, but then recovering at the Salvation Army was not what the Doctor's had prescribed anyways. Twice he had come down with infection, which had delayed him from traveling to Boston, where he hoped desperately to win back the love of his life.

He waited patiently until he saw her round the corner and then pulled out a simple hand carved wooden flute and began to play the old courtship song. A simple melody he had been playing every day for a week now. A tune that unfortunately had done nothing to sway the heart of the woman he loved.

Eric had followed her to work one day to find her waiting tables at a small diner. He had watched through the window as her boss would steal her tips; feeling that if it hadn't been for him causing her arrest, that her life would be much different than this now. He longed to be able to make it up to her, as he struggled to find work and build a new life. A life he still hoped desperately she would want a place in.

His early mornings were spent standing outside the local mission. Waiting on a corner competing with an ever increasing number of men, as a diminished number of contractors would pull up in their large pickup trucks looking for workers, work which seemed all too often to go to those most willing to push and shove others to obtain.

Eric was quickly beginning to realize what Matt had told him, all those months ago. At the time he had wondered if the guy was nuts when he had told him of lashing himself to a tree during a hurricane to avoid going to a mission. Matt had told him that the rules of many of those places made it nearly impossible to find work. Quite often having to check in by 4PM to listen to a two hour long sermon and be fed wilted salad and questionable meat.

It wasn't the fault of the workers of such places, Matt had explained, just the nature of the volunteer labor they employed. Men struggling with addictions forced to spend ten hours a day in prayer and bible study with no prior kitchen experience preparing food in inadequate kitchens, with no compensation; kitchens which were only rarely inspected by city health officials as they cut the frequency of their inspections to bi-annually; inspections that were always preceded by a warning of the inspector's arrival, worked in by men and women who had long since given up on any hope of self-sufficiency or independence in many cases.

Eric could see how that kind of living situation would make a full time job difficult at

best. At the very least, he was forced to look only for day jobs so that he could keep his bed. Days where he did get a few hours of work he would quite often have to miss meals at local soup kitchens. It seemed that a system of dependency had been built into many of those he met, men and women, who had long ago decided to forgo any offer of labor in favor of handouts and sympathy. A system created by programs which seemed all too often to be self-serving for the benefit of their own founders, managers and employees, with almost complete disregard to the benefit of their 'clients'.

In many cases he had seen that what little money they received quite often went to feed addictions to supply momentary relief from the hopelessness that had become their lives. A seemingly unbroken cycle bred into them by the contempt of many, but also their own self-loathing. He had come to readily notice how cycles could go on infinitely in this way, how absent any intervention from both parties that they would inevitably go on into perpetuity. Cycles he inevitably also began to recognize within society as well, with an eager public eating up whatever propaganda was offered them.

Eric had eventually given up on the missions and shelters and started to camp under a bridge. Others were camped there too, but he kept mostly to himself as he made plans to win back his love and build a new life. He rarely ever wrote in his journal anymore as he found his thoughts seemingly returning to memories of Jen every few moments. He now struggled to keep his mind busy so to avoid dealing with the regrets of loss he now felt so often.

He began his simple melody on a hand carved wooden flute as his love came within view. A melody taught to him by his grandmother and passed down in his family as far back as anyone could remember. A stirring grew deep in his stomach and his heart. He longed to reach out for her, to touch her, to kiss her. But alas he knew that to do so would simply

push her farther away. He hoped that she would hear his simple song and find favor in its melody. He played as he watched her climb the sagging stairs of the old Victorian house, now cut up into small efficiency apartments, a place he knew Jen called home. Eric glanced at her only once, but had he imagined it? He had seen it only briefly, but had she smiled this time?

As he struggled to decide whether to stay or go and was turning to leave, he heard the squeaking of the heavy wooden door and its slam. Turning, he looked as large white snowflakes began to cling to his love's dark hair. She stood, wrapped in a simple white blanket, as tiny red and green specks of nearby Christmas lights illuminated her from behind, Eric began to smile as she opened the folds of her blanket, inviting him into her blanket, her life and once again into her heart.

Chapter 14 (March 2, 2025)

Stanley Webber had come to resent his new job. The Las Angeles Police Department had not wanted to reinstate him and eventually he became forced to work for a private company that specialized in the disposal of evidence from cases long since seen as resolved, evidence that in many cases no longer held any value.

He would take careful care to catalog and inventory each piece of evidence as it went into the hot furnaces. The old laptop brought back a nostalgic moment for him when he had opened it and saw the now illegal Open Office program open upon the operating system loading.

A program which for many years had been fought against by its chief competitor, it was seen by them as simply a way to circumvent their proprietary file extensions and methods. Trusted Computing Technology had eventually proven its downfall despite newly enacted licensing procedures under the newly revamped G.N.U. agreements that had promised to allow for a mix of proprietary and open source solutions. A conservative court had sided with the megalithic software giant.

Stanley Webber wondered if it might not prove an amusement for his young son at the very least.

Chapter 15 (March 21, 2025)

"You know Amber, Kyle, holidays and celebrations are such an important thing to us humans. It is almost a given that you could pick any day of any year and it will have some significance to many people," Paz thought best these days with a buzz. He was feeling a very comfortable euphoria and beginning to feel more insightful than he had in years. The two young people had sparked in him renewed idealism that he thought had long since disappeared; and they in turn were enjoying the wisdom being imparted to them.

They knew that no matter how much their teachers tried they would never be able to teach them the lessons that they were learning while enjoying the cool night air, warm fire and wisdom of their new found mentor. Kyle was poking the fire with a long bent stick; throwing up little plumes of smoke and sparks as Amber jotted their notes. Both sat silent feeling as though Paz was about to impart upon them some new revelation to the nature of man.

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Arthur nervously prepared again for the first Lakota ceremony he had ever performed. The invitation from Eric had come as a surprise, he hadn't preached in over a year but this was something different now wasn't it?

Eric figured that with no Medicine Man on the Rez, a position left vacant by his uncle's death

and being fought over covetously by many members of the tribe; that he did not wish to wait for the problem to resolve itself. So he had asked his old friend to perform the ceremony. The position of Medicine Man had long ago become more of a ceremonial position, but still held great weight among many members of the tribe, most especially the elders. Eric's cousin had been nominated for Medicine Man, but was running only reluctantly.

The choice of a non-Native to perform the ceremony at first had led many of the elders to anger and resentment, but after listening to both Eric and Arthur they soon lamented so long as it would be a traditional ceremony. Arthur had proven himself his own best advocate for the upcoming job and many now saw him as the only one to perform the joining of two young people who had experienced so much injustice. His simple words and deeds devoted to personal responsibility sounded a resounding chord deep within many of those who at first had opposed the notion.

Arthur was working construction in New York when Eric had called, to Arthur it seemed as though none of the 'Christian churches' were interested in his brand of scripture anymore. He was going back to school now, augmenting his education with a secondary degree in philosophy. He wasn't really looking forward to a career change and he still longed to preach his truths of faith but knew how unlikely that now was.

The two men sat in a small cafe in Chamberlain discussing the upcoming nuptials and each man's new life. Eric and Jen had moved back to the reservation during the winter, Eric had hoped that there he might find work. He hoped that his friendships and contacts there could be of benefit now. Jen had returned to the tiny bar that her father owned.

After a long uncomfortable break in their conversation that had been preceded by a moment of laughter in times remembered (even prison has its

moments of levity), Eric turned and asked. "Arthur, I don't get it, why aren't you still preaching?"

"I would, if I could Eric, but no congregation will hire me after being fired at the prison and my ex-communication," Arthur said casting his eyes towards the floor. He wondered over what in his message had so offended the church and his employer, and felt guilt over his loss. Hoping that, despite what his life had taught him, and what he had so often seen of others lives, that someone would offer him a second chance. He had long ago given up any notion that a person only needs a second chance and now he found himself quite often wondering that, as unlikely as it was, if he would change his style of preaching if he were given that second chance.

"What? That's just silly, start your own church. You're a preacher my friend. The best I ever met, you need to continue that. I don't put a lot of stock in all that mumbo jumbo but you have a message, a message that others need to hear. Who says you need to do that inside of a bunch of walls?" And with that simple observation, the seeds of an idea were planted within the mind of Arthur O'Connell.

*

Eric sat as Arthur, David, and Jen's father inspected his lodge. A simple tipi made of hides which he had constructed over the recent few days. The ceremony was in large part simply a gesture to a long forgotten time and old traditions, but Eric and Jen had decided to forgo the contemporary ceremonies of the modern religions and keep to the ancient ways.

Eric wondered over how Jen's day had gone as he listened to the drums being played down by the river. Men were never a part of that portion of the ceremony. Eric knew that the women and children were right now dancing around a drum circle. Some of them preparing soup and food and dispensing it to the

main party and then joining in. This was what little he had been taught of that part of the ceremony. As they grew tired each would rest and eat again and repeat the process until called upon. It was all part of a ritual that had started early in the morning and would continue until near sunset.

As late afternoon approached the Master of Ceremonies, Arthur, arrived with Jen, for the final inspections of Eric's 'abode'. Arthur's paint had been applied by David and he carried a staff from a young ash tree, a staff that had been cut and stripped of bark by Jen's father. In Lakota ceremony nearly every one of the tribe took a part. The couple themselves had made gifts and passed them out earlier in the day, to everyone within the tribe, and now soon would come the proclamations of marriage. The two young people could not restrain their smiles or keep from looking at each other as final preparations were being made just outside the tipi.

Eric and Jen stepped through the flap of his abode and out under the white blanket of marriage held high by David, Jen's father and two others of the tribe, each holding the blanket high by a corner with one hand and a spear in their free hand. Each man was painted and dressed in the traditional garb of multicolored leathers and skins. They wore their beads and feathers proudly just as their forefathers had for what had become a now rarely seen ceremony, each of the four men representing the warriors of old, each ready to present the couple to Wakatanka.

Arthur led the procession throughout the small town. The feathers and paint tickled his skin but he managed to endure as he knew just how important a day this was to his old friend. As they walked through town, under a bright crimson and purple sky, men and women from the entire village approached and offered their congratulations. After offering their support each member of the tribe fell in step behind an ever growing party of people trailing behind the young couple.

When the wedding party, now several hundred strong, had returned to Eric's newly built structure of Elk skins stretched over three large wooden timbers, they all stopped. The torch lights of the revelers seemed to mirror the brightening moon and stars above, seemingly joining earth to heaven for a few brief moments. Arthur turned to face the village and spoke the Wedding Prayer in Lakota from memory. A prayer he had spent days studying to ensure perfection in his recital. He had never taken a single sermon as seriously as he took the words he now spoke.

"Grandfather, Tunkasina, you are giving us life again. For many days we were lonesome for you. Earth was cold and the winds were strong. But now we hear songs. Your children are singing, and we are happy. They are singing, and we are lighthearted."

"It is the time for your children to find happiness with each other. It is the time to build nests. It is the time for pairing. It is the time for flying and the time for the Eagle. In the early morning we see this, and we hear it under the warm moon. Tunkasina, there is no bird without a song. No creature without a call. No man without a skill. And into the bird you put the song, and into the creature you put the call, and into the man you put the skill."

"You are good. Tunkasina, all your creatures need a partner. You made us that way. Each wing needs a mate. You made it that way. Each feather needs its likeness, it's that way. In secret we carry a feather. It is close to our heart. In secret there is its likeness. It is close to a heart."

"On a spring day your promise will be kept. The two will meet, and your life will start in them. Your song will be in them. Your happiness will come to them. They will praise you. Grandfather, Tunkasina, you are giving us life again. For many days we were lonesome for you. Earth was cold and the winds were strong. But now we hear songs. Your

children are singing, and we are happy. They are singing, and we are lighthearted."

"It is the time for your children to find happiness with each other. It is the time to build nests. It is the time for pairing. It is the time for flying and the time for the Eagle. In the early morning we see this, and we hear it under the warm moon. Tunkasina, there is no bird without a song. No creature without a call. No man without a skill. And into the bird you put the song, and into the creature you put the call, and into the man you put the skill."

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"On a spring day your promise will be kept. The two will meet, and your life will start in them. Your song will be in them. Your happiness will come to them. They will praise you. That is all."

With that it was time for the young couple to separate, but as Jen began to turn away, Eric in an unceremonious manner, caught her hand. She stopped and turned to see what her new husband might want. Eric pulled her close and kissed her. She stepped back to smile at him as he took her small hand, and stepping out of the normal bounds of the traditional ceremony, slipped his Grandmother's small gold band on her finger. No one had been warned of Eric's intent to do such, not even Jen, but as Jen glanced at the small ring remembrances of so much good swept over her, making her feel finally complete. Jen and Eric finally separated as the sun went below the horizon, both looking to the other several times with unrestrained smiles and eager hearts.

The sun had finally faded over the horizon and soon it would be time for the young couple's

first married night together. A time Eric had thought of many times over the course of nearly five years. Wow, he wondered had it been five years? They had endured so much yet their love had survived, he felt certain now that their love could endure anything. He reflected on the simple advice his grandmother had given him all those years ago, when he had first met his new wife. Thinking how he had fought so hard to win her back over the course of that lost year of their life together. Knowing, as he had been told, that a single year was nothing when compared to a lifetime of love and happiness (advice which now seemed so much more fortuitous) knowing that by night's end that year would be forever vanquished.

Eric had just finished lighting the marriage fires in their wedding abode and could see the shadows from the approaching torches of his betrothed's family and friends. Eric thought now how he had never felt so nervous nor so anxious. His palms were sweating but it was a good nervousness. He knew that this was a moment he would never forget.

They entered through the open flap of the tipi, six women carrying a blanket stretched tight, straining under the weight of its burden. They laid the blanket at Eric's feet, presenting him with his new wife. Jen looked up with a broad beaming smile - a smile which instantly melted his heart - Eric took out the ramrod of his ceremonial rifle, tapped her on the head and playfully proclaimed, "You are mine and I am yours."

*

(March 21, 2025 Halfway around the world)

Ali loved his weekends, days spent with friends and nights spent at home, in prayer with his family. Their village was small, only about three dozen children were in his age group to play with, and inevitably they were all friends. They enjoyed games very similar to the ones enjoyed by children of other cultures; games involving chasing, hiding and tagging, games which have a nearly universal

theme. However, today was not a day for games, today was a day for celebration, the journey toward manhood, and preparing the young men in the way of the village faith.

Today was a festival day for them as the village roasted a calf on an open fire and tended a large bonfire. Today was Jashn-e Sadeh; a daylong celebration that was now coming to fruition in the coolness of the desert night air. A day that Ali had been promised he would remember well into adulthood.

The boys sat in the desert sand and basked by the heat of the bonfire as their Ayatollah spoke, "Legend teaches that King Hushang, The Law Giver, established the Sadeh tradition. It is said, that once Hushang was climbing a mountain, when all of a sudden he saw a snake and wanted to hit it with a stone. When he threw the stone, it fell on another stone and since they were both flint, fire broke out and the snake escaped. This way he discovered how to light a fire."

Young Ali and the other boys listened intently - for even though they may have been bored and fidgety at times in school - all of the boys loved their Ayatollah, they found him to be funny, and understanding to whatever problems they might seek his assistance with. The clergyman continued with great delight in his bearded smile and radiant warmth in his gentle eyes, "Hushang cheered up and praised God who revealed to him the secret of lighting a fire. Then he announced: 'This is a light from God. So we must admire it.'"

The previous day Ali, and the other boys his age, accompanied by a few adult males, had gone to the mountains in order to gather camel thorns. For most, this was the first time they had been away from their families. The occasion was meant as a ritual of passage to adulthood, a notable step for Ali and the other boys on their way to manhood. The

boys took the camel thorns to their village temple - and this being Ali's first time doing this - on his return, a celebration had been held at his home with the presence of his friends and families.

The fire today was ceremoniously intended to assist the revival of the sun and bring back the warmth and light of summer. These were days that the village looked forward to every year and men looked back to as the formation of themselves from boy to man.

Ali was a handsome young man, light olive skin and short of hair, black hair with tight curls. He had big brown soulful eyes. Ali Atta was the pride of the Atta family, the only son and the oldest of four children. He stood tall for fourteen at five eight and had become an exceptional student in his small school. He excelled in Math particularly, and his teacher had high hopes that someday he might attend the University in Tehran, perhaps learning physics or chemistry.

Ali was the first to see it, about 300 feet up in the night sky. A simple fast moving black wedge shaped object which seemed completely alien in this simple place. Then two more with the same shape and color, flying low to the ground and faster than he thought anything could. They came in fast and swooped out and up even faster, dropping several large objects in their wake.

Soon the night sky was illuminated as if mid-day and the tranquility of the licking flame and spiritual moment were replaced by deafening explosions and shrill screams. Fires broke out in the simple adobe houses, accompanied by explosions and twisted and broken pieces of stone, glass and metal flying everywhere. One, Two, Three Ali counted as each of the objects found its target and his village. Ali had never known terror like it as he struggled to hide behind a log.

He wondered why they would want to hurt his neighbors and friends; and then the final explosion and the screams of his family and friends and men running from temple with bloodied faces and broken limbs, falling on the ground writhing in pain. Young Ali could only wonder as to what had happened as he saw his own father stumble down the temple steps and fall at his feet; bloodied and holding his stomach, never to get back up.

Chapter 16 (February, 2026)

Matt sat at the pier enjoying the unseasonably warm ninety degree day. He and Lisa had only recently arrived in Lake Worth but had quickly fallen in love with the place. Money seemed so much easier to find around here, in many ways, than it had been back in North Carolina. He no longer washed trucks, now his days and many of his nights were spent delivering pizzas for a small Italian restaurant owned by a Mexican.

He worked for under minimum wage pay, but having no license he didn't see as he had much choice either. His employer had supplied him with the vehicle with which he plied his living and even a small apartment for him and Lisa. His paycheck may have been a joke, but at least the tips were good, allowing them to eat well and buy the pot he so much enjoyed.

The restaurant was located in downtown West Palm and inevitably meant deliveries to both the island and also points North and West. Quite often he carried deliveries in both directions, always first to the mansions and hotels of Palm Beach and then just a few short miles away to the broken and dilapidated shacks and broken tenements of Tamarind Avenue. His boss always coaxed him to bring menus to

both, citing how poor people ate too, but inevitably pushing him to the island first. He often wondered how those with so much could look with total indifference upon the squalor, despair and crime just a few miles away.

He had come to love the old pier that sat nearly thirty feet over the water; the creaking of the old thick heavy wooden planks under feet; planks which were now completely grayed by time and the elements. The rhythm of the waves allowed him to temporarily forget the truths of injustice he saw all about him. Many times he would come here when time permitted and would cast his bait of sardines in hopes of snagging a fish. Matt never ate of the fish, he had long ago sworn off meat, and now lived his life entirely as a vegan. Still he enjoyed the quiet and the fun of catching them on those rare occasions when he got lucky.

"Hey are you Matt?" Paz was shocked back to attention by the sudden intrusion. The sound of the waves and the gulls overhead had nearly put him to sleep as he had waited for his guest.

"Yeah I'm Matt, you must be Doug? You got what I'm looking for?"

The six foot tall black man put down his brown leather backpack while affirming a yes. "Good stuff too bro, barely any seeds at all, smokes and rolls real good. You got some paper for me?"

Matt, inadvertently casting his eyes at the backpack at his feet, noticed a small brown leather book with an intricate design of bead work, several of the beads were now missing, but recognizing what he saw he asked. "Forget the weed man, wanna sell me that book?"

Chapter 17 (February, 2026)

"Welcome Staff Sergeant, please have a seat." Captain Frank Rodriguez was a busy man these days. He had been assigned a new mission, just a few short weeks previously, and these meetings over the next few days would be the culmination of a long search for just the right soldiers for the task at hand. "Bill Bianchi: two years in Iran, member of Marine Delta team with twelve confirmed kills, trained in demolitions and special tactics with a Bachelors degree in physics; very impressive Sergeant."

"Thank you sir," Even sitting Bill Bianchi's demeanor suggested his military bearing. It seemed

as though he even sat at parade rest.

"Sergeant were you briefed as to the nature of this meeting?"

"No sir, I was just told to be here today."

"Sergeant I am putting together a team of men with very specific skills and I want you to lead them. Our mission is nuclear recovery and deterrence. We are to be the front line of intelligence and protection against nuclear material smuggling. We will be working under D.H.S. supervision but we are independent of all government agencies. Our unit will be a joint venture of public and private resources under employment of Mili-Tech and the US Marines. You were chosen for your security clearance as much as your experience. Are you interested Sergeant?"

Chapter 18 (February 2026)

"How is your steak dear?" Arianna asked her husband. They had married just the previous summer. Introduced by mutual friends they seemed well matched. Both in their early 40's, both from families with money and influence, George had seen right away the benefits to marrying the woman. He knew that his father would have approved and even encouraged the marriage.

She had been born to a family of Swiss immigrants. The family had come over just after the Second Great War. They had brought with them immense wealth and settled in upstate New York. Her Great Grandfather had been a banker and saw, just after the Allies victory, the benefits of capitalism.

She was still quite a beautiful woman with the same classic Scandinavian looks of his first wife. She didn't have the innocence of the face of his first wife, but what she lacked in sexual magnetism she made up for in other ways. She kept her blond hair cut moderately short, just touching

her shoulders and had blue eyes and a smallish nose which she would never admit to having had worked on in her youth. A clearly defined jaw line showed a hint of some kind of Roman heritage at one time.

Their marriage had instantly become one of comfort. Both had their own agendas and goals, so they spent little time together. George appreciated how this allowed him to pursue other interests and other people. He found the sex, as rare as it was, to be bland and almost a chore but he knew that to further his career beyond Senator he would need children; an heir, someone to carry on the family legacy and his ideals well into the future and to prove his commitment to family values. After all he reasoned no one trusted a man in his forties without children, it was simply unnatural.

"Its fine dear," he said looking over the expansive mahogany and oak table separating the newly married couple.

"George I have a Doctor's appointment tomorrow. I think I might be pregnant," Arianna said with almost no emotion at all. George looked up giving her a slight grin.

Chapter 19 (May 2026)

Eric had gotten lucky just a few months prior and found a new job remodeling with a man from Chamberlain. The job didn't pay what he had been used to, but at least it was enough to survive on. Things seemed to be taking a real turn for the better for him and his new wife.

Most of their work was at the new development in Chamberlain. The large townhouses had been designed to resemble cliff dwellings, yet Eric found them to be an insult to his people and culture. Still it was work and he needed it desperately.

They pulled to the guard station, a cone built out of smooth stucco to resemble a tipi and then painted a light tan, another object that to him seemed a clever insult to his heritage; but he knew the suburbanites were eagerly snatching up. Today though, Eric noticed a new sign on the side of the small building stating - in bold clear letters - 'Convict Free Living'.

"Eric turned to ask his boss. What's that all about?"

His boss chuckled and asked, "You don't watch much TV do you?"

"I don't watch any TV, even if I had the time there's nothing on there for me," Eric thought it funny the importance people seemed to put into those silly devices. He listened in quite often as people would talk about characters on the silly things as if they were long lost family or friends and found it all quite amusing.

"Well it's a new law. You have nothing to worry about though. You've never broken any laws, have you?"

*

He hadn't told his wife, he just simply slipped out each day early. Each day he looked for work, if he found none then he would look for scrap. He knew that eventually she would figure it out but still he felt shameful in losing his job. He had however heard of an alternative.

The national ID's he knew were how they kept track of criminal records and people seen as trouble for society. He knew, even as he was to meet Aaron Whitehouse, that what he was doing could mean federal time, but that if it worked, it would be well worth the bother. It had actually been his own boss who had told him of Aaron, promising to hire him back if he got his ID glitched.

The ISO-7816 card system had long been fraught with security difficulties. Even as the Feds had begun employing them, they knew that inevitably there would be those who would step in offering 'hacks'. The technology behind the cards had started long ago with cable and satellite providers who had long since perfected the technology. The Feds however, still had not. Most hackers of the cards knew that it was indeed employees of D.H.S. who had

leaked the secrets of the cards, providing the public and private keys needed to gain access to the code contained on them, agents who had been paid handsomely by an ever growing group of people looking to circumvent the technology.

Circumventing the code was as simple as creating a jump point in its routines. The small bit of code used to verify employment and residential verification would be over written with a new routine telling the card readers to, instead of verifying through its internet connection, to instead verify off the card itself. It wasn't an original idea and in fact had been used this exact same way to pirate the signals the cards had originally been designed for.

"You got the card?" a man about the same age as Eric asked as he took his \$1200. Money that Eric had: begged, borrowed and worked hard for. Money he worried over paying back. Eric had broken only two laws in his life, both of which he considered inevitable and unjust. This was his third time, but he saw no other choice as Aaron counted the money and took the card.

Eric had never met anyone like Aaron before, or been in a place like this, a long black semi truck full of computer paraphernalia. He wondered over what purpose all this stuff was intended.

"So, what's all the computer stuff for Bud," Eric asked as he watched a bar scroll across the monitor in front of him. He had never heard of the program and found the sequences of numbers and letters laid out in a grid to be complete gibberish. Aaron however knew the hexi-decimal well as he fidgeted around with a program called ISO-Buster. Changing AA to FF and 01 to another sequence until Eric tired of watching the process and only paid attention when he finally saw the password prompt and Aaron finally entered DEADBEEFBADDF00D. Eric didn't understand the cleverness of the sequence. If he had he would have known that the two letter sequences were byte sequences that represented a

machine readable code. The combinations: from zero to nine, and from a to f; represented thousands of possible combinations of ones and zeros (like tiny virtual on and off switches), but only a few that would make any sense to the function and call lists used by the cards and readers.

"Well all that stuff my friend is for an idea me and some college buddies are playin' around with. Your money will be a big help for us too." Aaron said laughing as he handed back the card. There you go bud. You are once again a free man.

Eric finally knew what it was like having a second chance, something he had long since given up on ever having.

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The ride back home had left Eric with many worries, but at least he could go back to work on Monday. It was Friday night and Jen, he knew, would be at work. He hated the idea of his young bride working those late hours down at the bar, but he knew the money was needed too.

He was surprised as he pulled up to his cousin's trailer and saw the lights still on. David he knew was now busy each Friday with tribal business, his new position making him feel spread thinner than he had ever seen his already busy cousin spread before. He and Jen hadn't had many choices of where to live. Her father's or his cousin's were about it, seeing their limited incomes. It had been Jen's decision to move in with David. She had tired of living with her old man. Not because she didn't love him, simply because she had to spend her workdays with him.

He parked the truck in front of the trailer only to see Jen racing out as he did so. She flung open the driver's door and proclaimed, "Welcome home Daddy."

Eric's thoughts raced, "Daddy?" He exclaimed

with great surprise and trepidation, then again with a wide smile. "Daddy?" as Jen shook her head to affirm the good news. He pulled her onto the seat and into his lap. They kissed over the happiest news either had ever known.

Chapter 20 (December 2, 2026)

George paced nervously in the waiting room. He had paid for the finest Doctor's he could find. After all it wasn't every day your wife had a baby and George had heard that labor for a 43 year old woman might be difficult. He had been overcome with joy to find out it would be a son. A boy, someone he could teach and raise the same as his father had raised him. He couldn't wait to one day watch him on the gridiron. He promised himself there and then that his son would have every chance at success. He was already looking forward to watching his son become the fourth generation to graduate Harvard, the fourth generation to join the Army, even the

fourth generation to go into public service. He even hoped to be able to one day watch as his son taught a future grandson the same principles he had been taught by his own father.

He took pride in knowing that he had worked hard enough in his own life to secure every opportunity that his son could ever want. That the groups he belonged to would accept him with open arms and secure him an amazing future, possibly even President of the United States he thought.

"Senator? I'm sorry to tell you that your son is a breach. We're going to have to do a Cesarean," an aging Doctor told the anxious man.

"Well will my son be OK?"

"Yes sir your son and wife will both be fine. We do these all the time. Relax and go home if you wish we will call you when it's over and your wife is awake," the Doctor replied. Only momentarily wondering why the Senator hadn't asked about his wife.

*

George drove the twenty miles home thinking about his times in High School. His old man had been tough but George thought now on how this had better prepared him for the rigors of life and the pursuit of success. He had only a single regret from his teenage years, a feeling of guilt actually more than regret. He hadn't thought about Neal in years.

Neal and George had been inseparable throughout Junior High. They were both highly competitive yet had in each other found a strong friendship. They would spend Friday nights quite often at each other's homes. Times that now seemed so remote. George remembered little of those times; the details lost in a fog of years gone, he was now left with more of just a hazy feeling of something lost.

He knew that he had disappointed his father that one night, but his father had been right to punish him. What he had done he now knew was wrong. He hadn't gone to school for a week after that night, a week while his deep bruises healed and his heart hardened. He had been but just a boy, what did he know of love? He thought on it now, he couldn't have possibly been in love with Neal. Whenever he thought of that time he would struggle to forget the exact details yet he still missed his old friend Neal.

Neal's family had left the very next semester, but they had both stopped talking long before that. He wondered now whatever became of Neal.

George didn't go directly home, he made a phone call and hoped that the message would be received as he found himself driving out of town to the Motor Lodge he had been to so many times before. He hated himself at moments like these, powerless to control the desire he felt within. But at times like these there was only one person who could be counted on to make him feel better.

Anthony was younger than George, yet with Anthony, George could let go. He didn't feel like he had to always be the one in control. In fact it was usually Anthony who took charge. He had met Anthony while getting his haircut. His family barber had taken sick one day, three years prior, and George had been forced to go elsewhere.

They had been alone that day when Anthony had cut his hair and slipped him his phone number. A phone number George now knew by heart. George had felt the young man's crotch grinding into his leg the entire time during his visit at the posh salon and quickly found himself aroused. Feelings he hadn't known since Neal.

It had been Anthony who had told him of the old hotel, where they now met, all too infrequently for George. The hotel was a rundown place with bedbugs, dirty comforters, and broken air conditioners. It was Anthony that took control during their all too seldom encounters. It was Anthony that he regretfully loved. He wished he could control these feelings after all he knew that what he was doing was shameful and sinful and that's why he would inevitably always have to keep it a secret.

George pulled up to their cabin, he was expecting Anthony to already be waiting but saw no lights in the window. He waited a few minutes and then finally saw the light come on. That's funny, he thought, he didn't see Anthony's red BMW anywhere. He knew the car well. He had given it to Anthony as a birthday gift. Damn it I hope he didn't wreck that car too, he thought, as he went to the cabin door and entered.

"Senator Carpenter." George knew the voice all too well. It wasn't Anthony's though. He had already seen the two large body guards he knew so well, even as his friend Stephenson came out of the bathroom.

Chapter 21 (December 21, 2026)

Nahbil had been to the Mayor's office many times before, but never as the newly elected officeholder which he now found himself, never before had the office been his to keep or lose. He had immigrated to the US just before 911. His Egyptian upbringing and his American schooling had served him well as first a UN translator, and then as he grew more in love with his new found home, New York City, as a city commissioner and finally now as Mayor.

He had run a tough race based upon liberal standards of caring for one's neighbor and good human values and ethics. It had seemed unlikely at first that he would win the office but as his political adversary began to show kinks in his

character it quickly seemed nearly inevitable that a Columbia English Literature major, and long time city resident, who as a young child had survived the horrors of 911, would be the new Mayor.

It seemed now that Americans had finally come to realize that men were more than just the sum of their heritage as he won in a landslide victory. He had made promises to curb corruption and cronyism within the government as well as refunding social services programs, promises as well of cutting crime by investing in city infrastructure and supplying good jobs on the city coffers to get the work done.

A young son and a lovely wife at home were his driving force and the loves of his life. He prized them more than even life itself. They were in fact his reason for pursuing public life, a means of improving the city for all of its residents but most specifically for just the two people he loved the most.

His wife was an American woman with auburn hair, blue eyes and a caring thoughtful demeanor. They had met and fallen in love all those years ago at Columbia. He had very light skin for a Coptic Christian Egyptian man. His studies in Christianity went far beyond that of even most theologians; studies of scriptural books that hadn't made the cut in the traditional versions of the bible. America was his third greatest love despite the evils he knew it had committed in other countries. These too he knew he could help in healing and eliminating in the future if only he could reach a high enough station in political office.

His father had been a Sunni Muslim and over and over again he had seen the effects of racial profiling and intolerance during his childhood. The lack of jobs seemed to be an all too certain inevitability for his father, and his mother became the primary bread winner after 911. However his father never allowed him to blame America nor the American people for their problems. His father had taught him in fact that he would never have been

allowed to marry his Christian mother back in Egypt; a group of people whom had met with centuries of religious persecution themselves in the supposedly liberal and enlightened Egyptian government.

Nahbil had come to see that decisions born out of paranoia and reactionary policy had led to horrific events in many countries. Even in fact an entire war, it seemed, had been born not so much as a way to seek justice but as a way and method towards vigilantism. As a young college student he had taken courses in law, a study he once had thought would be his future until he realized that great literature contained so many insights and truths that many Americans had never known.

Truths like those of justice. He had quickly come to realize that justice was a thing that had to be metered and justified if not always adjudicated by a third party entity. When America had declared war on Iraq, they had done so irrespective of what the vast majority of the world had thought right or just. Thus their search of justice had gone far beyond what was just or right and approached what to him seemed to be a means to satisfy a new found blood lust born out of fear and paranoia.

In fact he saw too that by considering themselves the world's police force they were in fact justifying their vigilantism as any old Charles Bronson movie would want to do. Holding their view as the last, final and only right word on any given policy had elevated them to a status of almost Gods unto themselves. A position he knew most Americans did not envy to see their country follow but found nonetheless impossible to escape when hindered by political and religious leaders who longed solely for power, irrespective of their own methods. He knew that only by holding true to his own values and working to find common ground by seemingly disparate people that could he ever hope to guaranty a future of peace for his family and so many others.

He looked forward now to what he hoped would prove to be a productive first term.

Chapter 22 (December 2, 2026)

Jack Brewster had been surprised by the Senator's sudden turn. He had nearly gone off the road himself and lost sight of the black Hummer as it veered suddenly off the interstate. He counted himself lucky when he spotted it turning into the seedy hotel.

He owned a small independent newspaper now struggling to survive as the 'big boy papers' sought to eliminate their competition. Advertisers were now scarce, local businesses had been his bread and butter, spending freely to attract new customers. Now however with fewer revenues they had cut their advertising budgets and Jack had to cut personnel.

Now along with being editor and owner he was also Chief Investigative Reporter. He longed for a big story, something juicy; anything to sell papers;

a story that might once again bring big dollar advertisers and new readers.

He had been following the good Senator for weeks now, even gaining access to the man's beloved C Street House. He had convinced an old college friend to hire him on as a lobbyist, and armed with his new credentials found ready access to the most powerful men in the world. He was hoping that over time he might be made privy to all of their secrets.

Jack had heard the stories of the C Street House and knew it might prove a promising target for on expose. Jack knew the reports of members past transgressions well, and the promises which had been made that the group would clean up its act. In recent months they had even started, reluctantly, to pay their taxes.

The latest rumors seemed even more promising to Jack however. Whispers of state sponsored prostitution involving powerful and influential party members; prostitutes whom were, Quite often, supplied to both foreign dignitaries, but also used among the members themselves. Jack knew that invariably sex sold, but sex and conspiracy together? Well that was newspaper gold, throw into the mix religion and hypocritical men and Jack knew his story would unravel many careers and hypocrisies. Not the least of whom he enjoyed as a target, was a man he had come to despise, George Carpenter, his ex-brother-in-law.

Jack had started the paper when he was very young, just out of journalism school in fact. He had partners in the early days, but as things became a struggle they each inevitably had abandoned him. So much for them he thought, that would just leave more for him. He had been running the paper for ten years now. Ten years he thought, could it have really been that long? He loved his work more than anything else he knew. The long days didn't bother him at all, as he now wondered where that time had gone.

Jack fancied himself a still very attractive

32. Even if he wasn't exactly handsome he was attractive, and able to easily impress and attract others. Maybe it was his natural charisma he wondered. Many of his friends had commented to him over the years just how affable and friendly he seemed. Yet Jack knew it was mostly a guise, intended to allow him to get closer to those whose secrets he so desperately craved to know.

He had short dark brown hair, still cut in a spiked, youthful style and a deep authoritative voice that when used no one could avoid listening to. He had been told many times he should go into radio or TV, that his voice seemed nearly lyrical in its rhythmic nature, but Jack was in love with print news. As a boy he loved reading the paper and seeing how the ink inevitably stained his fingers. He observed how the story too, in this manner, seemed to stay longer in a person's mind when it was well written. It seemed to him that print was lasting, something for the ages, where as Television and even the internet was not. After all you could hold print news, touch it and as a result be part of it.

His eyes were dark brown and gave off nothing but good will, which was quite often nothing more than a clever disguise. Jack had perfected his distant gaze over the years in just such a manner as to not reveal anything of his thoughts to his would be prey, luring them in with his seemingly affable nature then pouncing at the last moment and revealing his trap. He stood five ten but his confident manner made him seem much taller.

He already knew of George's relationship with Anthony, having followed Anthony many times in the past. Still, this was not the story he wanted. His news hound blood told him that there was more here, much more. His shark like instincts could smell the blood in the waters circulating the good Senator. Too much of what he had seen in the man spoke to him of someone with deep secrets. He felt it with every inch of his being and he wanted to be there when the man finally slipped. So what if his readers might consider the homosexual affair

titillating, he himself didn't really care. He didn't judge men on such things, he wanted some real dirt. Dirt he knew he would eventually find if he just kept looking.

After all, he reasoned, he owed it to someone. A promise he had made to himself long ago to avenge someone who had never asked and who would most likely never know.

*

That's funny Jack thought as he watched the strange looking man in a long black trench coat and his two large associates leaving the hotel room. When the long black limo had stopped, he thought he saw a man trying to get out of the back only to be pushed back in.

His target had been Carpenter but now he had a new one. As the limo left the roadside hotel, they left with company not far behind.

*

He followed the black limo to a small private airstrip outside of Portland, trying unsuccessfully to also find it on his G.P.S. A Gulfstream 6 had been waiting as he watched a badly beaten Anthony leave the limo in the company of two large para-military looking men. He discreetly snapped off a few photos with his telephoto lens atop a nearby hill hidden behind a stand of trees as the three climbed aboard the plane. Jack paid careful attention to capture the limo's license plates as the plane left the ground.

Jack did not yet know it but he had also just snapped the last images anyone would see of Anthony.

Chapter 23 (December 23, 2026)

He stared at the first falling snows of the year as he sipped his coffee knowing there would be no work today. The large white flakes had already piled up over ten inches deep, weather reports were warning of icy conditions and dangerous roads. So be it, he thought, he would have one of those all too rare days to spend with his beautiful Jen.

Eric had taken great pride in the beauty his wife seemed to be radiating these days. An already beautiful woman now seemed even more so, filled with happiness and contentment in every graceful move of her body. A new found twinkle in her eyes and an omnipresent smile already told him that he would always remember these days.

"Eric, oh God Eric!" Eric's tranquility was suddenly interrupted by the loud, tortured screams of his wife. He bounded quickly to the bathroom. "Something's wrong Eric."

She lay on the floor in a widening pool of her own blood, her face contorted in pain and obvious sorrow; dark burgundy almost brown blood staining her white night gown. Eric looked first for cuts or injury, then picked up his wife and climbed through the deep snow with his precious package, his bloody boots staining the freshly made footprints. The old truck started on the first try; an uncommon occurrence for the 40 year old vehicle. Eric put it into gear and floored the gas.

*

"Eric she's very sick. I've put her on fluids but I'm sorry to say that I don't have much plasma here. I've contacted the Trauma Hawk in Fargo but they won't come until the winds let up. The next 24 hours are going to be critical. I'd like to keep her here." David said, already knowing that without immediate attention and transfusions soon, that she might not have 24 hours. This was the hardest consultation he had ever had to give. He wondered whether he should tell his cousin the rest of the news. He knew Eric deserved to know, but his own feelings of impotence gave him pause.

"She's had what's called a Placental Abruption. I'm sorry to say Eric but she lost the baby." David saw the obvious loss of strength in a man he knew so well, as Eric lost his balance and slumped into the brown foldout chair in the waiting room.

They spoke in low voices, knowing that in the small examination room adjoining David's cramped office lay a pretty young woman fighting for her life.

David said nothing to his cousin about his other worries. His clinic was very small and in it was only a small amount of frozen plasma. Jen's blood type was B- not exactly rare but also not all that common either. He would put a call out among the tribe to come and donate but with the snows now over a foot and more still falling he was already worrying over the effectiveness of those calls.

Chapter 24 (December 23, 2026)

"Come on Lisa, faster. Here grab my hand," Matt said as he leaned over the cold steel edge of the train car. Trying desperately to reach the last few inches and grab the arm of a woman he had come to care deeply for. "Come on babe you can do it. Pick it up girl. Come on this was your idea." He teased trying to inspire her to push that much harder.

They had shared many miles and numerous adventures together, over the course of their relationship. Most of them at Lisa's urging, but it was her adventurous spirit that had attracted Matt to her to begin with. A pretty young woman, completely in love with life and the world; she had been the one to inspire Matt himself to find a new life and forget the wounds of his past. Matt knew that without Lisa he would probably have given up on

life long ago.

Now they were trying desperately to hop a train headed to Amarillo. Promises of a better job and hopefully a better life were the impetus for this, their latest adventure. It had been Lisa's own idea to do it by train. Having read books of others doing the very same thing she thought it might be fun as she romanticized the idea.

Each flat car of the long train was carrying a single tube section. Passing by they had looked metallic but Matt had soon noticed, as he had gotten aboard, that they were in fact of some composite material, 15 feet in diameter and 40 feet long they would give him and Lisa good protection if it rained. Now however he was growing worried over Lisa as the train quickly gained momentum. He hadn't liked the idea of hopping trains but he knew it was impossible to talk Lisa out of anything once she had made up her mind.

"I got you Matt, shit!" Were the last words Matt heard as he lost sight of her while she slipped under the train, a moment later came her loud tortured screams.

Matt had never heard anything nearly as shrill or as loud. He quickly leaped off the train, leaving all of their possessions behind, possessions which now meant nothing to him, tucking and trying to roll as he did so. Still the sudden impact with the ground had inevitably been a shock, but his adrenaline was pumping so hard that his heart felt as though it would jump out of his chest. He quickly got to his feet and raced back nearly 200 feet, over loose gravel and broken, discarded railroad ties; to the woman he had come to think so much of.

Despite her controlling demeanor, Matt knew now that he was most certainly in love with Lisa. Realizing at that moment that it was his love for her that inevitably drove him over and over to do things he normally would not have done; reckless, sometimes even dangerous things. His skin went cold

as he neared where she had fallen. For a moment he thought his heart had stopped.

The blood, he thought, my God so much blood, he had never seen so much blood, and his love now dragging herself away from the tracks, dragging the blood behind her as she struggled to get onto her legs; herself not knowing what Matt had already seen, dark liquid covering her lower body and spattered across her face and torso, matting her pretty auburn hair and darkening her white blouse and blue jeans.

A full moon and a sky full of stars shimmering off the desert sand, illuminating her enough to see the most horrific thing Matt could ever imagine. No horror movie had ever prepared him for the reality of such gore, feeling fear he never knew could exist as he saw just above her knee, twisted and severed almost completely off was her leg. A gaping wound gushing torrents of blood out onto the gravel train bed. Matt rushed to her removing his shirt as he reached her, tears of fear filling his eyes as she fell to the ground losing consciousness. Her chest was still moving, he hoped beyond all hope that she was just in shock as he moved quickly to stop the bleeding.

He hastily tied a tourniquet the only possessions he still had a knife and his shirt. He twisted hard on the knife knowing his love's life hung in the balance.

"Oh God Lisa," he pleaded. He heard no response as her breathing became more labored. Pressing his fingers to her neck he quickly found her pulse. Positioning her on his back and getting to his feet, he ran the fifty feet to the road as fast as he could, stumbling up a small incline and onto the road itself. To Matt it seemed his only hope was of attracting the attention of a passing driver.

"God don't die Lisa. Please God don't let her die." Tears flowed freely down his cheek as he

prayed for the first time in years, hoping that despite his loss of faith, that there was a Creator who cared for his beloved Lisa as much as he did.

He ran into the middle of the road and was nearly hit by an oncoming car which had swerved to avoid hitting them, slowing only to yell an obscenity and continuing on. He knew this road wasn't that busy and worried over how soon another car would come along.

Under a clear desert sky full of twinkling stars and with two great plateaus looking on, as if the earth and heavens wanted to rubber-neck his pain, he waited. Minutes passed as if hours with the anguish of lost hope long past and the words of ridicule still echoing in his brain. "Get a room you fuckin' bums," he felt his love's last breath on the back of his neck and heard the gurgles which he knew meant that she had passed.

Chapter 25 (December 24, 2026)

"Police are now looking for suspects in the death of a local hairdresser," Jack had heard the words but recognizing the man quickly rewound the DVR to hear the whole story.

"The body of Anthony Driscoll was found in a dumpster near Oklahoma City. Construction workers at the new George W. Bush Federal Building were first to find the decapitated corpse." He listened to only bits and pieces as he struggled to find the photos he had taken just a few days ago.

He couldn't believe it, even as he watched the reporter explain the nature of the death, brutally stabbed. Wow, he knew right away something was missing from the story even as he saw posted on the screen the picture of a hitch-hiker, now thinking back to that all too recent night. His search on the license plate was a seeming dead end. The limo had been a rental and the rental shop would offer no information on the client. His bribes had been unsuccessful and now he wondered whether he should take his photos to the police, struggling between his moral obligations and his want of a good story.

"Who are you?" Jack wondered aloud as he watched the story several more times and thumbed through the newly exposed photos. Paying careful attention to the face of a man he hoped to soon get to know much better.

Chapter 26 (Early Morning December 25, 2026)

"Eric. Eric, are you here?" Jen's speech had become labored over the last day and a half. Eric had moved into his cousin's examination room to be close to his love. He hadn't slept in over 24 hours as he tended her needs each time she stirred. David had done all he could with what little he had. Giving plasma and medication to reduce her pain and hoping for a miracle. Despite clot factors the bleeding had only slowed, never quite stopping. Seepage and hemorrhaging had necessitated David's intervention for nearly 18 hours. Eventually the convulsions had stopped and Eric thought it might be progress even as his cousin knew it was just the morphine.

He sat close enough to stroke her hair and smell her scent. He said his prayers, prayers to two Gods hoping that one would listen. Inevitably however Eric had been forced to watch as the color slowly vanished from her face. Her skin now seemed so colorless and her eyes so lifeless compared to just a few short days ago.

Eric moved his head to her bedside so he could hear her strained whispers more easily. "Yes dear, do you need something?"

"Eric honey," she paused to catch her breath. "Remember...whatever happens," Eric begged her with his eyes to conserve her strength and stop talking. "It's okay to cry." With those last words spoken her eyes closed for the last time. Her life snuffed so quickly it seemed.

"David! David!" Eric yelled, knowing his cousin to be sleeping in the adjacent room. Both men keeping vigil over the most important ward either had ever worried over.

David ran right away to his patient's bedside. He had been dreading what he would do, what he would say, if it were to come to this. Yet knowing his patient's youth, strength and will to live, he had many times tried to put it out of his mind, choosing instead to try to keep positive thoughts, even as he had watched the snows piling up just outside his clinic. With each flake falling feeling his hopes diminishing, knowing that with each inch fallen the less likely help was to arrive. The Doctor pressed his ear to her chest and grabbed her small wrist in his large hand to feel for a pulse.

"I'm so sorry Eric."

Volume Three

Chapter 1 (December 27 - 2026)

"Sir, there's a problem with the assemblies," Stephen listened as he stood at the train yard with his brilliant young engineer.

He wondered over the unusual warmth and calmness of the day. Growing up he had known Amarillo to be both cold and windy this late in the year and even as he enjoyed the bright blue skies and the eighty degree temperatures he wondered why it all seemed so unnatural.

The train yard wasn't as busy as Stephen had remembered as a child, either. The high chain link fences were now rusted and broken in many places and the roof of the old freight warehouse was sagging over the bulging white walls of the aging building; the concrete loading dock was cracked with weeds and even short shoots of small shrubs breaking their way through it too. Long grasses were growing up between many of the less used tracks and Stephen soon realized that all of these things pointed to signs of eminent economic collapse.

Tracks that had been used for decades for the transport of both cattle and oil drilling equipment were now slowly decaying as the supply for one and the demand for the other quickly diminished. He hoped that with the wind generators, he hoped to erect, that the train yard and the local economy might find new life once again. Cheap electricity, he had come to think, was the way to make responsible farming and ranching profitable once again. He had seen the effects first hand of finishing farms and other methods of industrialized ranching that had promised low immediate cost but had detrimental long term effects. Stephen though also knew that the ranchers had economic concerns that drove them to follow these dangerous methods. Maybe by offering them an alternative with free grazing and cheap power they might return to the more traditional methods of ranching.

"What's the problem Mike? Is it anything that might hold us up?" Stephen had long ago realized that life was a series of solutions not problems. Problems to him simply didn't exist.

"Sir the generator housings aren't the right dimensions. They're fourteen millimeters too small in fact." The young man with thick glasses said with the look of anticipated catastrophe as he struggled to follow behind his boss; stumbling over the loose stone of the train beds and winding his way between train cars as he raced to keep up with a man who seemed intent on losing him.

"Inches Mike, how many inches?" Stephen asked, stopping long enough for the young man to catch up with him.

"About half an inch sir."

"Half an inch, well Mike let's make them work, okay? Find a way to make them work," Stephen said patting the young man's back and smiling. Something on the next train car caught his attention. Stephen walked over to inspect the small leather backpack sitting alongside one of the

assemblies. He wondered over the journey it had made and how it had come to be there.

"Mike have one of the boys bring that bag down to my cabin, will you? And remember my boy there are no problems just solutions. I have every faith you will figure it out bud, you always do." Stephen said as he walked off to inspect his generators and giving the young engineer a well needed boost of confidence.

It had already taken him several years to get this far. Years of fighting bureaucracy, greed and corruption, he wasn't going to let a half inch stand in his way now.

Chapter 2 (January 14, 2027)

Matt no longer knew where he was. For more than two weeks he had been drinking every waking moment, trying to forget the greatest loss he had ever known. Sleep had been replaced by drunken comas and each morning he awoke in an uncontrollable shaking stupor, with the intent of one goal each day; finding another bottle.

Every new day was the same as the last until now he was no longer even sure what day it was. He had left Lisa's body in front of a small hospital, and tried to not look back. He felt in large part to blame for what had happened to her. Had he tried hard enough to talk her out of jumping rails?

He awoke shivering and shaking as the melting snow began to penetrate through his thin spring jacket. The new day's sun was still coming over the horizon, and was casting shadows of the tall buildings across the park. Matt had fallen asleep on a park bench, blood still staining his T-shirt and his mind, he hadn't showered or changed since Lisa's death. He stood up and stretched his aching frame as he reached in his pocket to count his change. A thick, bitter tasting phlegm coated the roof of his mouth, which he tried in vain to rub away with his tongue; and hoped now that he had enough change for another liter of Vodka or Whiskey, anything that might wash away the phlegm in his mouth and hopefully his blood-stained memories too.

Deep in his left pocket he found a ripped and crumpled ten dollar bill and thought of how lucky he was as he wearily headed off towards the

liquor store. Knowing it would still be half an hour before they opened. No matter, he thought the wait would be worth it, thinking now how with each swig burning as it went down his throat, that at least for a short time, a moment with Lisa might be forgotten.

He passed by a local coffee shop, as it was opening its doors, and saw the newspaper vending machine. It had only caught his attention for a very brief moment, his picture and a headline, "Hitchhiker Wanted". At first he thought it might be about Lisa, but as he read, he soon realized something more sinister was afoot.

Chapter 3 (January 1, 2027)

They had married in the spring, in front of a judge and their families. They had found a love that couldn't be denied. They felt no shame in what many might have seen as immoral; for they knew that their love was of God's making and anything of God's making could not be wrong.

Their families never even questioned it. From the first time of seeing the two together they just knew that it must be right. They were happy for the two women as it seemed that in each other they had finally found that which many spend their whole lives never finding. No one gave them away. They stood as proud, independent, individual women, strong and as equals, and left as committed intent wives.

Christine's cancer returned in the fall. When the Doctor had broken the bad news, it had been the worst day of each of their lives. They spent an entire weekend together in bed, holding each other, consoling each other and making love to each other. It hadn't taken long this time; the cancer had manifested itself in Christine's pre-frontal cortex. Nicole was forced to watch as the smartest most caring and gentle soul she had ever known quickly began to forget the names of her family and their friends. She never forgot Nicole however. It had been tough on Nicole to watch as they both had to give up their volunteer pursuits as one lost all that made her special, and the other had to care for her each day.

Nicole didn't mind however. There was no other person in the world she would rather take care of, or be with. They had taken to having their

groceries delivered; friends and family were always more than happy to bring necessities, allowing the women to spend every moment they might have, together.

They had hosted a family reunion for Christine on Peirce Island where they had first found love. It seemed as though hundreds had come out to say goodbye. The permits had taken weeks to get, but both knew this was the only place for Christine to say her farewells. It had been one of Christine's all too rare good days. There had been no shortness of hugs, kisses, tears and smiles. They had long since come to terms with the inevitability of Christine's disease and seldom spoke of it anymore. Preferring to concentrate instead on whatever time they might have left with each other.

Christine passed on a Sunday morning, slipping away in her sleep. Nicole had cried for over a week, tears that did nothing to alleviate her loss and grief. Chrissie had left her the house and everything she owned. Possessions that now meant nothing to Nicole, art and trinkets that had at one time reminded both of so many good times, now serving only to haunt her memories with not only the pain of her loss, but also with the many regrets of her life that their love had for a time vanquished from her mind.

George had asked and quickly been denied the privilege of attending the funeral. No one in Christine's family wished for him to be able to harm their beloved daughter-in-law. He had long since become a non-entity in either woman's life anyways; he was never spoken nor thought of. Their love had conquered his memory and their regrets, until Christine's final departure from life. Now once again alone, Nicole found herself forced to confront feelings she thought were long since gone.

Feelings of culpability over the circumstances of her life, thoughts of lessons not learned and roads she shouldn't have taken; and again those remembrances of her mother's blame, of

the situations of her adulthood, and accusations of childhood flirtations, that had endangered her well being with a man of her mother's acquaintance. She struggled to remember that she was the victim, but years of being blamed now seemed to make sense when it appeared to her that love and God had abandoned her.

The in-law's departure from Portsmouth and her life brought Nicole even more emotional difficulties. Alone she now felt deeply the loss of so many great times. She roamed the house trying to find remnants of the feelings she now so missed. The scent of Christine and her perfume still hung in the air; the gentle aroma of vanilla and lavender set off by the mild tones of citrus; scents that had always proven an overwhelming intoxicant for Nicole. Nicole took one of Christine's soiled blouses from the hamper and savored the smell; she went to the bathroom weeping and started the water. She had often heard that the water had to be very cold to numb the pain and open the veins.

She found a package of razor blades in the medicine cabinet. A momentary shudder of painful remembrance passed through her body as she pulled out a single sliver of cold sharp steel, its shiny surface reflected narrows rays of light, rays that seemed to penetrate into the deepest recesses of her memories. She stepped into the old claw foot tub - a find from one of her and her beloved's antiquing trips - only pausing for a moment, and spread her body out in the bottom of its cavernous space.

"I'm coming to see you my love," were the last words ever uttered by Nicole.

Chapter 4 (January 2, 2027)

Jack Brewster struggled over the second hardest story he had ever had to write. It was short, obituaries always are, but he had long since come to see his sister-in-law as his second sister. Christine had never confided anything in him of her ex-husband, but he knew.

He had seen his older sister change quickly, soon after her marriage to George. Going into near seclusion and not talking to even him. They had been incredibly close throughout childhood, more like best friends than brother and sister. So when she stopped talking to him he would often wonder what

was going on in that big house, a few miles from his family's own. Why had Chrissie stopped coming by or even calling, he had repeatedly asked himself, as a teenage boy?

He had wondered for years, as a fourteen year old boy, if he had done something wrong. Had he angered his loving, caring sister? Jack had always looked up to his sister, during those childhood days, finding a lot to admire in the way she worked so tirelessly to help others. Looking up to her even, as to how he should model his own behavior towards others.

Soon though he came to resent George, even to question his role in the pains of his sister's life, he saw the way she had so completely closed herself and Nicole off from her ex-husband and he soon began to hate, even loathe George Carpenter. If Chrissie wouldn't talk of what had happened he was determined to find out for himself. He reasoned that the man should not be allowed to ever do to another person what he had done to his two sisters, but as he wrote the story of a caring loving married couple he needed to reflect on their lives and not on that of his adversary.

He reasoned and rationalized that prison would never be enough for George. Often wondering if he himself should avenge two deaths he had come to see as the fault of his prey. Sometimes going as far as to pull his forty-four from under his seat or from his desk and considering exacting his own justice. Eventually though each time coming back to the realization that his sisters deserved so much better. If ever a man should die for the enjoyment of an audience he reasoned it was George Carpenter. The world needed to know what kind of monster Senator George Carpenter was and be reminded of his atrocities as they watched him hang on their TV screens. So much fodder for the morning water cooler, interspersed with the images of precious junk hawked as priceless heirlooms.

Chapter 5 (February 2, 2027)

The second time Matt had hopped a train had been a hundred times scarier than the first. The first time had been a catastrophe in his life, the second he reasoned was a necessity. He knew that the police were looking for him and knew that hitching would mean a sure trip to prison and Death Row if he were stopped.

He knew all too well the stories of the corruption within Oklahoma's Criminal Justice system. Oklahoma he knew had fully embraced the new capital punishment legislation. Capital Punishment he thought now seemed to be a phrase that had taken on new meaning when profit through TV sales and commercials had been introduced into the process.

It seemed as though the media knew no bounds in their pursuit of selling useless and transcendent products to a public who had become increasingly jaded, requiring an ever increasing escalation of diversion. He wondered how it was that society could be seen as having been bettered since the times of

Gladiators and the feeding of Christians to lions. One question continuously nagged him; how were public executions and the ever present violence of mainstream media any different than what passed as entertainment in those times?

He had picked the train carefully, having slipped onto a locomotive engine and stealing a rail map and schedule. Knowing that this train was heading South and eventually over the border. Mexico he reasoned had always been where outlaws went to hide. He knew that this had been before the landmines and other obstacles had been planted there, but hoped that with its new annexation that the train wouldn't be searched as it might have been at another time.

He slept uneasily as the train lurched up and down and rocked uneasily back and forth, the shrill sound of metal scraping metal all too apparent in the cold steel box car in which he found himself. The thumping and constant lurching as it ran over uneven and long unmaintained tracks making it almost impossible for him to rest his weary eyes and exhausted soul.

He felt reasonably safe though, as the graffiti on the far wall had told him that others had used this very same car before. Bundling his thin jacket up into a small wad he laid it on the cold wooden floor and tried to rest his head as his stomach rumbled from three days of hunger. The empty Coca Cola bottle he had found was now nearly empty of water as he felt the dryness of his throat, but determined to conserve what he still had.

Only twelve more hours he reasoned as he tried in vain to get a few hours of sleep.

*

"What the fuck we got here? Fucking train hoppin' piece of shit," It was the voices that had awoken him, he had felt the train stop, but knew that the border was still a few miles away. Matt

heard the words and knew right away what was about to come.

He saw the desert print camo and knew they weren't just railroad cops. The first kick had immediately opened a deep cut above his right eye. The blood ran right away and stung as it flowed into his eyes. The sudden and repeated, crushing sensation of the man's boots on his head and shoulders was excruciating. He was actually relieved when the kicking had stopped and they began slamming him into the wall.

"Mother fuckin' train hoppers, I can't stand you lowlife bums!"

It was a different voice Matt realized. He could no longer see his attackers through his swollen and bloodied eyes, eyes that stung and burnt as he tried to determine how many men there were. Each breath through his nose was accompanied by the taste of metal as he grew increasingly nauseous and dizzy from swallowing his own blood with an all-to empty stomach.

All he knew now was that they were military, but who's military? They didn't sound Spanish and they spoke English. Matt couldn't understand how American soldiers could do this.

The punches to his kidney hurt the worse, as he struggled to not lose bowel control. The urge to vomit quickly became uncontrollable as the acrid and rotting stench came out, just water, Matt knew, and then dry heaves. Still the abuse didn't stop; his tormenters even laughing over the result of their abuse. They dropped him and he quickly fell back to the cold wooden floor, he tried to curl up hoping to present a smaller target, but soon felt his legs and arms stretched away from his body as two men struggled to hold him for another.

Then again the kicking, this time in the chest, he heard the cracking more than felt it. And then again back to sleep.

*

Groggily he tried desperately to open his eyes. Gingerly rubbing the dry blood from his left, he peered around to see grass and trees. He cautiously turned his neck to the other side. The movement was accompanied by shooting pains throughout his body and the beginnings of a sharp migraine that seemed to want to escape from the prison of his skull. Each breath was torture as he put his hand to his chest and felt two ribs moving up and down, not in and out as he knew they should have done. He took only short breaths; anything else brought indescribable pain to his chest and more nausea. He could just make it out through his blurred vision, about 50 feet away, the train track. He crawled not yet knowing where he was going and soon managed to get up on two shaky legs. Through two swollen and squinted eyes, he looked forward now, determined to never again look back.

Chapter 6 (December 24, 2027)

"Is this David Mahpiya?" The voice on the phone had become all too familiar to David. He no longer needed any explanation from the Sheriff's office.

"Yeah I'll be right over Deputy." David had already worried over what this anniversary might bring.

"It's not going to be that simple this time Doc. He ran his truck into the front of a Liquor store. The owner is pressing charges. We took his license and charged him with reckless driving and DUI." David knew the local Sheriff's office to be understanding in the past. Offering his Cousin rides

home before, when he had drunk too much, and calling with warnings whenever they saw him in town.

David saw his cousin only rarely now, usually after he was already long past drunk. He knew that these weren't the only days he drank however, and worried where he was spending the majority of his time.

David had long since tired of these calls. He understood his cousin's pain but knew the alcohol was doing him no good. He encouraged Eric to go back to work and even found him a few jobs, which Eric had inevitably sabotaged. Remembrances of his father's alcoholism, still too recent to him, made days like these all the more difficult for him and tried his patience. After all, he thought, Eric was still a young man. There was still time for him to rescue his life and save himself from the self-destruction he had seen to closely before.

Another trip to the Sheriff's office, how long would this last he wondered.

*

"God Cuz you know you've gotta stop this!" David had long since lost his patience while giving this same speech. "Find some help, AA or rehab I can't keep bailing you out every few weeks. This time ain't like the other times. You're in real trouble this time."

Eric knew what to expect as soon as he had gotten into the old rusted pickup. The look on David's face was, much more, stern than what he had seen before. But David wasn't his father and he wasn't a child. If he felt like drinking he most assuredly would.

Eric's words were heavily slurred; the alcohol still apparent in his speech, movement and his breath. David wondered if he had taken to bathing in the shit as the sweet heavy smell of stale Bourbon filled the small cab of the old Ford.

He rolled down his window in hopes that the cold winter air would overcome the stench that David had long ago come to hate.

"It's been a year David. A year since I killed her." Eric shook as he said the words. His tears were long since gone, replaced now by a hardened heart and a broken spirit.

"Eric, you didn't kill her. You...excuse me WE did all we could. She died, it happens every day. You need to find a way to move past it or you're going to end up killing yourself. The alcohol is just the start Cuz. If you don't get help your depression is going to kill you. You're the only family I have left Eric. Don't take that away from me."

"I should've taken her to Fargo David. I should've known better. I should've known you..." Pausing and stopping in mid-sentence knowing that blaming his cousin wasn't right. Knowing David had done all he could with what little he had, but still not able to reconcile the loss.

Instead of finishing the thought he stared out the passenger window, looking over the prairie and straight into the past. A past that at one time he thought would never end, a past which now seemed to have all been nothing but the Creator's way of torturing him.

"Cuz you both would have died if you'd tried to make that trip. You never would've made it to Fargo in all that snow and wind." David tried his best to point out the flaw in his cousin's logic.

"I had it all planned Dave. We were going to have it all, all the things that we deserved."

"Eric, you already had it all. In some ways you still have it all. A family who loved you, a wife who loved you, and I love you. We're all only humans Eric, the only thing we're really entitled to is our own death. You need to stop blaming

yourself." He said but in his heart feeling partly culpable himself.

"I can't do that Dave."

"Well if you don't get help I can't keep doing this either. I'm sorry Eric but get help or stop calling me whenever you get into trouble."

Chapter 7 (January 2, 2027)

Two weeks of sobriety had done nothing to alleviate Eric's broken heart. His depression had deepened as every sight and sound conspired to remind him of his love. His plans had been made quickly with only a few days of preparation. Plans he hadn't told anyone of, not even his sole living relative.

He awoke early taking care to not let the trailer door slam as he packed camping gear and his few possessions into the back of his cousin's old pickup. He was already regretting what he was about to do, but saw it as his only choice. If he stayed here thoughts and visions of his dead wife would haunt him forever, this he already knew.

He let the truck roll down the sloped gravel driveway almost 100 feet before turning the key and stealing it. He didn't want to wake his cousin. Eric had never been good at farewells and he knew that if he told David, that he would try to talk him out of it.

He had no idea where he was going or how he would even know when he got there, but now he knew for sure, this time he was running away. Running away from memories he could not escape. Running away from pain that seemed to be everywhere he looked, running away from way too many overwhelming regrets. Yet he knew if he didn't run away he would most assuredly go mad.

In his restless sleep David had barely heard the sound of the truck's engine. Sleeping had become difficult for him as he watched his cousin grow ever more quiet and distant in the recent few days, and worried he might do something rash. His last memory of his cousin would always be the departing tail lights of his own truck, but the loss of his truck meant nothing to him when compared to the loss of his family.

David wondered over whether he had done the right thing in demanding change from his cousin. It seemed as though every television show and magazine article he had ever read had told him that this was the right thing to do. But as soon as he had made the ultimatum he had quickly begun to question the logic of making such a cold decision. Yet he also didn't wish to be seen as enabling a real problem and now thought that maybe his decision had been born out of over-reaction.

Chapter 8 (August 3, 2028)

"Mr. Blake you have company." Bernard's intrusion was not well accepted by Stephen. Lately he had found within the pages of a beaten old journal thoughts he himself had been thinking many times. The words he thought, well the words seemed prophetic and poetic to him as he read. He had no desire to put it down for visitors.

Stephen loved his old study, remembrances of playing in here as a child, as his father worked, were never far from his mind in this room. If he had guilt over owning such a large home then this was the room that alleviated all of those guilty feelings. The rich burgundy Corinthian leather chairs and sofa sitting in front of the immense field stone fireplace; Oriental rugs placed over white marble floors. All of it seemed to hearken in Stephen imagery of long ago days and feelings of being protected. He would often, even in winter, keep the large French doors open so that he could wander out to the balcony and back. Even the buffalo head over the fireplace and the ancient muskets below it, though troublesome to him for what it said of his ancestor's past, still brought back memories to him that were always of great comfort. Especially at times like this, when he knew that what he was doing may not be quite legal, but was nonetheless for the greater good.

"Who is it Bernard?" Stephen tried to be cordial but his attention was still caught up in the

private thoughts of a man he had never met, but found himself knowing like no man he had known before.

"It's Senator Carpenter sir. I can ask him to wait if you wish." Stephen for a moment delighted in the idea of making the crook wait.

Fifty million it had cost him. Fifty he thought. Land he and his ancestors had bought many times over through government leases, but this; Public lands that would soon disappear. He knew the implications if he were to get caught, but also knew that Carpenter, crook that he was, would never allow that to happen. After all if he went down then so to would the good Senator.

He tried to rationalize breaking the law in many ways, but inevitably he would always come back to wondering what the writer of the journal would do; looking in its pages for some level of insight about breaking a law that would serve a greater purpose. Stephen had long ago determined the difference between a thief and a crook to be one of need. A thief, it seemed to him, took for need, whereas a crook took for want. He had always determined the crook to be the more evil of the two, but also usually the least prosecuted or persecuted. So which was he, he wondered, and if neither then what?

The passages that had finally reassured him that what he was doing was acceptable had been the story of Eric demonstrating for his election rights. Lessons of his father and grandfather telling him that all men needed a voice, reverberated deeply in his own soul it seemed, throughout that story, and the man's years of imprisonment. Civil Disobedience was not a new concept to Stephen, but was what he was doing the same thing; soon though he came to realize that hundreds, even thousands of people were depending on him to do the illegal, yet moral thing.

"No Bernard let him in. After all there's too much on the line to let that prick off the hook

now." Stephen closed the book confident now in what he must do.

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"Mr. Blake, nice to see you again," Stephen struggled to smile as he shook the hand of a man he despised. He had dealt many times with crooks like this and heard his father and grandfather talking about his ilk too. Stories of Enron and Standard Oil executives were never far from his mind whenever he had the opportunity to see this loathsome man.

Stephen was surprised though, he had not been told that the Senator would be coming with company. If Carpenter was a snake who resembled a weasel then the man with him looked like the weasel which had eaten the snake.

"I didn't know you were bringing a friend with you George. So what's your little friend's name?" Stephen's sarcasm was readily evident; he didn't enjoy surprises particularly when he knew what was on the line.

"No names yet Mr. Blake. Just let me say that I'm a man with a proposition. I know your family's interest in politics. What if I said I could help you in those endeavors?" The man was holding Stephen's deed. Paper that gave him ownership over the land he had already bought many times before. Just out of Stephen's reach, teasing him with it, taunting him with it even.

"Alright, I'm listening."

*

"Productive meeting sir," Bernard asked as he set down a tray with a single cup of coffee. Stephen, alone again, had gone to the balcony to think for a moment.

"Umm yes Bernard it was. Bernard, do we still have any investigators on payroll?" Stephen

didn't jump into anything without knowing all the details of the men he was to associate with.

"I'll look into it sir. Will it be the Senator or his associate?" Bernard asked as he set the coffee mug down and began to leave with the tray.

"Both Bernard and actually one other man, find out for me about Eric Mahpiya. Bernard he's an ex-felon so I'm sure he won't be easy to find. Tell whomever you get for the job to be discreet looking for him." Stephen paused for a moment; thinking again on an unexpected proposition. "Bernard what do you think of me working for the Republican Party?" Stephen didn't often confide in others but when he did it was his butler he trusted most often. He knew the man still held secrets entrusted to him by his father, secrets even he didn't know.

"Well sir I know it won't matter what I think, but aren't you busy enough already?"

Chapter 9 (August 3, 2028)

George had never been on a Gulfstream Six and now he found himself completely in awe. His old G4 seemed so quaint in comparison. He was in wonderment over the large Holographic TV screens and the sheer size of it. He knew that these planes were all fitted out to the buyer's specifications but found himself now quite envious of his surroundings. George had never put much stock in the commandment of not to covet, after all he rationalized, if people didn't covet their neighbor's belongings then America would not have been the success it had become.

He knew that his 'friend' had money even if he had never known the nature of his enterprises, but he had never thought he had this kind of money. The G6 was brand new on the market and George silently did the math in his head as he looked around at silk tapestries and leather seats with warmers. The brass and gold leaf alone he thought had to have cost in the hundreds of thousands. The wealth he saw boggled even his mind.

For weeks George had struggled with a question he knew he would someday have to ask.

Anthony had meant so much to him, yet he also knew what they had in each other had been wrong. Remembrances of Neal were there whenever he thought of Anthony's demise. George could no longer stand to not know, he missed Anthony as he had never missed anyone before. Had it been a hitch-hiker as the news had said?

"Mr. Stephenson, did you kill Anthony?" He tried to choose his words carefully. Wanting to not anger a man he was now coming to see in an entirely new light.

"Me personally? Senator you should know better than that. Just let me ensure you I will not allow even you to endanger all I have worked for. Senator you WILL be President someday, doesn't that mean anything to you? I can't allow you to jeopardize that any more than I can allow anyone else to do so. I have a lot invested in you after all." George wasn't sure if he liked the implications of what he had heard. But he did like the sound of President Carpenter.

"Senator just let me say from now on I will be taking care of your love life. No more prostitutes male or female. From now on that will be taken care of for you. We have people for that; people who won't be missed. People you can use however you see fit." George immediately worried over how much his friend knew of him and his appetites.

He was suddenly worried over the tone of the words. How dare this man act so brazen? Had he just said that he owned him? After all, George reasoned, he was a Senator who the fuck was this guy with such implications.

"By the way Senator, don't get any ideas of becoming an honest man any time soon. You simply don't have it in you and besides, I made you and if it comes down to it I'll destroy you too." Richard Stephenson said, his gaze immediately going again towards his two large body guards.

Chapter 10 (January 4, 2028)

Jack Brewster listened to the audio recording a second time to be sure. He knew there wasn't enough here to convict anyone, but knew as well that anyone with half a brain would know what was said even if it hadn't been directly spoken.

He had congratulated himself repeatedly in his cleverness. He had followed the Senator for several weeks. However it hadn't been until a few nights previous at the C Street House that he finally got the opportunity. The bug was quite small and had been easy to hide in the good Senator's attaché bag. He hadn't been sure what he might get

from it and his anxiety had nearly forced him to abandon the idea. But when Senator Carpenter had laid his bag down outside the toilet stall he had managed to muster the courage and plant the bug.

The first few days had been worthless information. Just run of the mill day to day stuff. A few clandestine conversations had been discussed and seemingly racist notions espoused, but nothing new for this group of men. Rachel Maddow and many others had tried to warn previously of this group and yet their warnings had seemed to have fallen on deaf ears. Reports he had watched as research when he first sought to infiltrate the Fellowship. Jack knew that he would need a lot more than the hidden dealings of a group that had so convincingly covered up for each other many times before.

He endured however, knowing in his well trained gut that the Senator could not possibly be clean. When he had caught wind of the Amarillo land scam he knew for sure. Stephen Blake was a big name, a name that would undoubtedly bring him a much larger readership and tons of advertising dollars. But now he wondered if there was even more. Talk of prostitutes and 'disappearances', all of it hinted at something so much more sinister.

Jack suddenly felt that all of his mistrust in his ex-brother-in-law had indeed been warranted. More now than ever he wanted to get this prick. He no longer cared if he found out what he had done to Chrissie as long as the fucker paid. Now he was anxious to publish but he had to see a man before he did so.

Chapter 11 (January 10, 2028)

Matt had been living under bridges and overpasses for so long he was no longer even sure of the month. His life had become one of forced thievery and surviving on pure instinct alone. He longed now to find a place to settle down, a place to hide for awhile, hopeful that someday this would all blow over. Some day he might be able to go into a town or even a city without looking over his shoulder. With no compass or map he wandered aimlessly, several times finding himself within sight of large cities and small towns but always wary to quickly skirt around them.

He remembered the words he had read of Eric's about the animals of the city. He remembered that night when he had lost Lisa. He saw that car clearly again and again in his memory and remembered how easily it had been for that driver to pass him by. Now seeing in that simple passage what he knew mankind had lost. His thoughts were seemingly so clear now. Left to his own pure will to survive he saw it all laid out in front of him. He wondered if it was necessary for other men to face the same fear

and forced survival to realize what he had come to see.

Matt had hiked for three days. Three days of stealing produce from farms and gardens. Stopping only to boil water and refill his water bottle. Along the way he took care to keep an eye out for objects that he might later need. Finding an old backpack and a fishing rod in an abandoned farm house, he had counted his blessings, but moved on worrying about unexpected company.

An old atlas and photo album had shown him where his new home would be. He recognized the potential immediately and knowing it to be remote set out for Miller's Pond. He had never thought himself a hermit but knew he could survive no matter what he had to do.

Memories of Lisa had finally turned positive, sometimes he even daydreamed that she was in fact still there with him. Pushing him on and helping him up as he would stumble. A few close calls with the Border Patrol had proven to him that someone was looking out for him from afar. Why not Lisa, he thought. His memories were still bitter sweet, but nevertheless he found comfort in them. Knowing that their love had been pure, not like that of so many others.

A love based on trust and honesty, he knew now that she would always be a part of his life.

Chapter 12 (January 14 - 2028)

Jack Brewster knew he stood no chance of seeing Stephen Blake on his own turf, but remembrances of his teachings in journalism school had taught him that it was best to catch a man off guard anyways, if you wanted the truth. His inspiration had always been Mike Wallace. He had watched the old videos of his ambushes so frequently that he had perfected the same techniques himself. Wallace to him seemed to hearken what was missing in the new twenty-four news cycle. Good men devoted to a tough story with a singularity of purpose, real newsmen more intent on the truth than their advertiser's dollars.

He drove his rented Land Rover across the long expanse of Texas prairie intent to catch the man he knew to be out here. His homework had taken him only a few days as he sought to learn the man's routine. He knew the man spent his weeks here, flying back and forth from Colorado to Texas by helicopter each time. The wind farm hadn't been hard to find. The locals seemed all too eager to brag about the good it would do for their farms and local economy. Thinking him to be an op-ed reporter they

had proudly pointed him to his prey.

He drove in hard over a long neglected packed earth road; he hadn't changed or showered since the previous day. Sleeping in the truck and chasing down information until now; when he found himself just feet from his target; seeing the construction site and the black Huey he had been told of before.

Jack had heard the stories of the man who fancied himself a modern day cowboy, but it was only now that he saw the old Huey that he actually believed it, a man worth billions in oil money who flew his own helicopter. He saw the gloss black beast with the gaping mouth sitting juxtaposed to the otherwise unbroken horizon and nearly chuckled thinking now that he might actually like the guy. The man was unique at the least he thought. For all his wealth he had flair and a style that Jack already liked.

The Land Rover stopped just short from the man he knew from only his photographs.

"Mr. Blake, I would like to talk to you about Dick Stephenson and George Carpenter." Jack shouted the words through the open window of his rented S.U.V., words that caught Stephen off guard. He stopped for a moment before he went about trying to appear as though he hadn't heard them. "Mr. Blake I have a story here I'll print it unless you help me out. After all don't you want the world to know your side?"

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"First, Mr.?" Stephen always liked to know who he was addressing.

"Jack, Jack Brewster sir, sorry to have to ambush you like I did, but I doubt I could have seen you any other way." Jack said extending his hand in the cramped one room cabin.

"Well Mr. Brewster, in that, you'd be right," Stephen said as he hung his cowboy hat and poured coffee for him and his guest. The thick black liquid seemed to almost ooze from the old copper kettle. Jack wondered how many hours old it surely was. The burnt smell hung in the air of the tiny cabin and engulfed and assaulted the senses like cobwebs to the nose. It played against the only other ever present odor of the place, the scent of dust from the dry dirt floor, the two scents seeming to battle it out to find a victor, for the most noxious.

The cabin was set up in a studio style, just a single bed and a counter with a hot plate, microwave and a coffee kettle. A small refrigerator held Stephen's meals for the week and Jack wondered now where the bathroom was, remembering the signs on the well-worn path that pointed to the showers and restrooms. It was all very Spartan, considering the man who spent the majority of his time here. Jack reflected now on just how real the man seemed. Could he in fact be the genuine article?

Locals had been all too proud to tell of Stephen Blake's plans for this land. Land that Jack knew had miraculously been lost from B.L.M. registries; telling him of free grazing rights and co-op electricity owned partly by the employees and the community. He had found it all hard to swallow until this moment. After all he had seen many men like Stephen Blake before, who, armed with promises, soon reneged on them. All of a sudden though, in this small cabin, he actually was starting to believe.

Jack took a sip from the thick burnt coffee, presented to him with no cream or sugar, wincing momentarily from the bitter taste, but still enjoying the first coffee he had drank in two dry days. "Sir, let me say first I respect what you're trying to do here. And maybe that's why I don't want to run this story. What you did may've been illegal, but that's not for me to decide, and if you help me no one will ever hear about it from me."

"Mr. Brewster, that sounds like you're trying to blackmail me." Stephen knew the implications of building on stolen land.

"No not at all sir I would just like to know what you know about Richard Stephenson and George Carpenter."

"Well I didn't even know Stephenson's name until now. As far as Carpenter goes, well what can I say, he's a fuckin' crook." George took a seat at the small table near the counter as Jack sat at the opposite end. "Tell me how long have you been following the good Senator?"

"It started just before Christmas sir...three years ago. I believe that he and Richard Stephenson are responsible for the death of a hairdresser in Oklahoma City. I saw him get on a plane with two of his associates." Jack Brewster hesitated before telling the man the rest of the story, but he had tired of keeping the secret to himself for so long. "Mr. Blake, the young man was having a homosexual affair with Senator Carpenter."

"Ummm Stephen chuckled, Hypocritical son of a bitch. Why am I not surprised?" Brewster recognized the question as rhetorical. "Mr. Brewster, what would you say if I asked you to be on my payroll? You can keep your day job, it shouldn't interfere, since my own investigators haven't found nearly as much as you have."

"Well sir I would say what are you offering?"

"Just that you keep following this story and I pay you to do it. After all three years is a long time, I would hate to see you abandon it for a bigger story." Stephen knew his reputation for paying well had already been heard as he made the offer.

"In that case I would have to say, thank you

and I accept." Thinking already of how the sudden cash infusion could be spent. New printers and better software were two items he desperately wanted. "But there's no way I would ever give up this story Mr. Blake. I hate that fucker with every fiber of my being." Stephen was taken aback for a moment but could see the rage in the man's eyes and didn't need to know anymore. He knew that this went far beyond personal.

"There is however one other task I have for you." Stephen thought back to the old journal.

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Jack Brewster drove his rented Land Rover and boarded his flight with visions of what a new silent partner would mean for his small newspaper. Knowing that he could add new staff and concentrate more on the endeavors he enjoyed much more. Chasing the story could now be a full time occupation for him as others did the more mundane, knowing now that money troubles would no longer be a concern for him. Thinking as well on how he could avenge the abuses he knew had been done to both of his sisters. Jack had wanted to get the prick for so long that now he had to wonder if the money would change his driving reason for nailing the fucker.

Still though a partner with someone of Stephen's weight and resources was a powerful ally and he was now looking forward to turning his small enterprise around. He knew his partner, if not always honest in his words and dealings, was nonetheless honest in his heart and intentions.

Chapter 13 (May 2, 2029)

Today was a big day for Private James McLeod, the culmination of 18 weeks of combat training. Today he would be graduating and soon be going to his advanced infantry training.

He hoped someday to join the Special Forces. With a young pregnant wife at home he knew the higher pay that came from combat would be able to afford more opportunities for his son.

She was eight months pregnant and had made her own plans to join the Army after delivery. They knew that the best way to secure chances for their soon to be born son was for the both of them to enlist and serve their country.

They had both been born to poor families and grown up just blocks from each other. Dating throughout High School it seemed to anyone who knew them where their paths were headed.

As James marched lock step with his company, over the expansive green Ft. Leonardwood parade ground, he felt sorry his wife was stuck five hundred miles away; yet he knew her thoughts and her love were with him. Soon he would have his leave and they could once again discuss their future. He really didn't want his young wife to join the services but she was dead-set to fulfill a dream and follow in the footsteps of her father.

Even now he wondered if his own parents were getting too old to care for their son for the next four years, but he knew that the benefits and party ties that came from military service would eventually pay off in spades for their new family. They had both grown up watching as the television and radio hinted at the great opportunities that would be theirs after their enlistments were over. He felt reassured though by his own upbringing, knowing that both of his parents had been loving, and attentive people. They had forgone many opportunities, he knew, just to be able to provide for him. They had also instilled in him values that he knew would favor him and his son throughout their lives.

James stood at five ten with broad shoulders and large round arms. He had excelled on his High School sports teams and always been the pride of his family. He had bright red hair and freckles with almost emerald colored green eyes. Private McLeod was proud of his Irish heritage and knowledge of his people's history.

He looked forward, four years he thought, and then college, one of the private schools he supposed. Law had always intrigued him, especially seeing as how it seemed to always be growing in need of new lawyers. Maybe even some day a judge he supposed.

Chapter 14 (May 13, 2029)

"Senator good luck with your budget proposal sir." Senator Carpenter looked back to the pretty young receptionist as he heard the words. If it weren't for Stephenson he would have already bedded the girl, he thought. He resented having to go through his 'friend' now for his sexual conquests; after all he reasoned that there was no thrill in it anymore, not that way. "Be careful Senator, after all it's Friday the thirteenth," she said smiling and straightening his tie. He knew now for sure that she was his for the asking but soon remembered his friend's promise of President and moved away from her, lest his urges overcome him.

The Senator's offices were quite comfortable with dark hardwood floors and dark wooden wainscot paneling. It had three rooms, one a reception area, one a small conference area and then the largest of three with a view of the capital building itself, his office; the room he and his staff now occupied. A large ornately crafted stone and dark wood fireplace, large dark wooden desk and dark leather furniture completed a picture of elegance that George had come to see as the culmination and the greatest benefit of all those years of hard work.

"Sean do you have the numbers?" He said looking to his new assistant. The man had campaigned for him tirelessly to earn his position.

"Yes sir, it looks like the votes are there. The President's support has put us over the top in fact. It seems the Education Secretary himself has even offered his support." The young man had worked many late nights to ensure that the proposal would win the support of Congress.

Senator Carpenter smiled. The last holdouts to privatizing the federal and state labor pools had been teachers. The N.E.A. had even taken to picketing and walkouts several times, but the nation soon grew weary of their antics and the news quickly pointed out how private schools and vouchers could replace public schools. The opposition that the nation's teachers union had offered to nearly all new education legislation now worked against them when Americans were shown the savings that privatization seemed to promise. They even heralded the 'No Child Left Behind Legislation' as the precedent for closing all public schools past the third grade.

Liberals - which there were now only a few of - had argued the Constitutionality of closing the schools, but upon a private commission - confirming that there was no Amendment guarantying education for all past the third grade - they too had eventually surrendered their opposition. The last few holdouts, themselves questioned the wisdom of fighting the bill, when the Supreme Court was so obviously stacked against them.

The private military schools had quickly stepped in contracting with the largest of the Labor Brokers and offering the best deals for vouchers. Those who could not afford the more conventional private schools could easily afford the R.O.T.C. schools, or so it seemed.

"Bernard!" Stephen's shout echoed throughout Vista Del Valle, "Bernard, get in here!" It was unusual for Stephen to ever raise his voice to an employee, Bernard reflected. He moved his sixty year old body as quickly as he could, knowing that it had to be important.

"Bernard, get me Senator Carpenter. Tell him I'll take the R.N.C. job. I can't believe those pricks did that. What are they thinking? Maybe the deficit is twenty trillion, but education, my God." Bernard had never seen his boss so upset by a news report.

"Sir, pardon me for saying so, and I know they were your father's party and yours, when you still voted," Stephen looked surprised, his own butler knew he had stopped voting, how had he known? "But sir what can you do from within the party?"

"Bernard it may be the only way to get them back to their original intention. With no competition I fear they have gone completely mad. God Bernard, I don't know I just feel like I have to do something." Stephen said looking out at his deteriorating city and showing an uncommon moment of self-doubt; seeing his city and his country in an entirely new light. How had he missed so much? Had he been asleep while the tent cities grew in breadth and population?

Many times daily he would look out the large window of his study, but never before had he noticed what was going on to his hometown like he did now. He remembered when the Mountain Transit had stopped providing service, and when the public library had closed, but he had paid no attention to what these things might mean to the city. His few donations, he knew, still went to help many, but even now - with all that seemed wrong in society he had to wonder just how long would it be before other vital services would be cut within such a large city.

The closing of the Air Force Academy and of Cheyenne Mountain Station had been of little effect

to the community. Now there was talk of closing the nearby Army base too, but many doubted over the likelihood of that happening. After all he knew these bases had been here for generations and with war now seemingly inevitability the military would be in need of Fort Henry for some time to come. Even if they were increasingly turning to private defense contractors they would still need soldiers trained in the traditional mold, wouldn't they?

Bernard had never seen the man like this before. His employer seemed angry but also worried, and worry was not something he had ever seen in any of the Blake men. He worried now over what the man's state might mean. "Sir, what about the Amarillo Project and your Colorado businesses? Who'll run those if you take that job?"

"Sell all of the projects the oil fields and the Aurora solar farm too. Wait Bernard, except Amarillo, don't sell the Amarillo land. Find out about donating land holdings to Indian groups, Lakotas most especially, but Bernard it needs to be in trust. No one can be able to trace the donation back to me. If Stephenson thinks he can run me he's in for a big fucking surprise."

"Bernard began to leave to busy himself to his new chores. One more thing Bernard, get me Jack Brewster on the phone, I want to know if he's gotten anywhere." In the back of Stephen's mind a plan began to form. Well, he thought, maybe not quite yet a plan, but at the very least a place to start.

Chapter 15 (May 2, 2029)

"Thank you for coming Jack." The small cafe, on the outskirts of Amarillo, had seen much better economic times. If it hadn't been for Stephen's endeavors the place would have closed several years ago.

Now however it managed to struggle to stay afloat with the business from the 150 construction workers from the wind farm and Stephen's regular visits. He loved the old place for the service more than anything else. Of course the pretty young waitresses and their warm smiles and flirty nature were always a welcome comfort to him as well.

Stephen had often been criticized for his seeming playboy style. He had been married three times but not one of those marriages had provided an heir. Many had speculated over marital infidelity being the cause for the three divorces and indeed they would be right. He hadn't loved any of his wives as much as his first, best love, his businesses. However when a single man he enjoyed pursuing single women and was completely unapologetic in those pursuits, he treated his lady friends well. Not so much in economic means and lavish gifts but with praise and attention. In this manner too, even those with whom the relationships had failed, would never speak an ill word about a man they had come to see as having a huge heart and a manner that didn't lend itself easily to being tamed by a single love or endeavor.

The small cafe wasn't much to look at, a greasy spoon really. Inside was a low curved counter, crafted of black Formica and thick chrome trim, ten short swiveling stools with white vinyl coverings sat just in front of it. Six tables on one wall, covered with cheap wood paneling, and black and white checkered tile floors hinted at the Art Deco style the designer had once intended. Coolers made of chrome and old neon signs, many of them now broken, gave it a feel of comfort of times long gone.

"Anything you need Mr. Blake. Mr. Blake I'm sorry but it's like I told you on the phone. Nothing new has come up and I'm sorry to say but I think they may be on to me. I haven't gotten a signal from that bug since the last time I saw you. If they're doing anything then they're doing a good job of keeping it secret." Jack Brewster had hoped to be able to offer better news than this. But at least he had a good breakfast and warm coffee to enjoy.

"Jack just find me Eric Mahpiya." Stephen was not a patient man and now he found himself anxious for a resolution to his troubles. "Jack I have an exclusive for your paper. I've decided to seek nomination as Head of the R.N.C." Jack Brewster swallowed so hard his coffee went down the wrong tube, causing him to cough, nearly spitting out the hot liquid.

Chapter 16 (December 25, 2026)

"Hello Michael, it's so nice to see that you accepted my invitation." George said opening the large wooden door of his home. "Mike I've got someone I would like to introduce you to. His name's Michael too." George said with a wink as Arianna came into the great hall carrying their infant son. George had hoped that the young man would know that the choice of name had been for his benefit. After all, George considered this young man to be a true hero. In the recent months he had done so much to advance the white race and George knew he would someday play an even bigger role.

The great hall of the house was over fifteen feet wide and led to an enormous Tera-cotta staircase at one end and large lightly stained oak French doors on either side. Today the French doors were all open in anticipation of the more than one hundred guests that George was expecting.

George was wearing his favorite holiday sweater, vibrant whites, greens and reds. The celebration had become a tradition in the Carpenter house ever since George's childhood. Friends that could help the families rise to power were inevitably asked to attend. Business was never spoken, but relationships were nonetheless cemented.

There were several party members in attendance and even a few lobbyists; power brokers that could help George as he pushed new legislation allowing for reinvestment and new support for the Echelon network. The old Crays had now become outdated and would soon need upgrades if they would be able to continue to produce the mountains of data they had over the previous decades.

The new network of supercomputers would now be able to not only eavesdrop on digital communications, but with other legislation being introduced, people's face to face private conversations as well. After all, he knew, the G.P.S. chip that he had implanted in his son, just after birth, had several technological uses that many had not yet been told of.

The small chips had been eagerly accepted by a paranoid public and worried parents, as not only a way to keep up to the moment tabs on convicts, but also as an effective means of getting back kidnapped or lost children quite quickly. George knew that the uses for such technology were limitless though. Even if the public wasn't quite ready to accept many of those uses, he knew that someday they would be.

"This is my wife Arianna, come in, there's someone else I would like to introduce you too." George was anxious to have the two most important men in his small social circle finally meet each other. The plans that he and Stephenson had been discussing he knew would go far toward ensuring a safe world for his infant son.

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"Michael, I've heard so many good things about you." Richard Stephenson said as he offered his hand.

Jack Brewster struggled to hear the details of the conversation between the three men. Anxious to be invited over in fact, yet still he was careful not to be seen as being too interested, after all this was

the closest he had gotten yet to the secrets between Senator Carpenter and Richard Stephenson. The story was in their relationship he was sure of that. He had found the man's name but the only other information he had ever found for anyone with that name had been a D.C. Stephenson. He wondered if maybe he was an ancestor of that early Klan leader.

He had seen too much in George Carpenter's character now to not know for sure that the man was a racist. He had followed him regularly to Klan and Mason meetings but the young man they were now talking to, he had never seen him before. The man didn't seem the type that either would keep company with. Jack Brewster had already determined he would have to watch this young man.

Chapter 17 (January 3, 2031)

"Sir, I've got a live one coming in. Big rig sir, are we to stop it? Over." First Sergeant Bill Bianchi asked as he lay in a prone position on the hot sands of the desert floor; like a gator laying on a lonely riverbank waiting for its prey.

"Yes Sergeant stop the vehicle. Over." Captain Rodriguez had quickly become disenchanted with this mission. When he was offered the job, visions of being on the front line of nuclear terror intelligence had swum through his brain. Watching the borders of Mexico had never been mentioned. Still he rationalized it, knowing that if a nuke was to get through, then it would most likely be here and at the very least it was good training for his men.

They had been tasked to close down the old smuggling routes. Some of them centuries old, going all the way back to the Spanish conquerors, and long used by banditos and pistoleros. Most of them only known of by word of mouth, like the one Bianchi now found himself on.

"Freeze!" First Sergeant Bianchi screamed as he stepped into the well-worn, almost completely vanished old road, just as two Humvees painted in desert camouflage cut off the truck's intended path. Twelve more men soon stepped out alongside him moving right away to the truck's doors and to the back, careful to point their M16's at the trucks cabin.

"Sergeant we got one here. Looks like heroin Sarge, lots of it too. God what a bust. Over." Bill Bianchi felt real pride in his team as he listened to the voice on his walky-talkie. Finally feeling like they were making a real dent in the over the border smuggling trade. Each week brought new busts just like this one and soon a newly closed means of bringing drugs and weapons over the border.

"Sir, hands on your head and out of the truck." Bill Bianchi shouted up into the open window of the semi-truck while switching the safety off of his M16. He wasn't worried about having to fire it, none of these guys ever put up a fight. After all, Bill knew, they were just trying to make a living too. These men would inevitably give up any resistance when faced with a life or death choice.

As the man came down out of the truck it was his age that surprised Bill first. He was easily over 50 and overweight. The next thing that shocked him was his race. He was American.

"Step over here please. Keep your hands on your head asshole or I'll shoot!" Bill exclaimed thinking that he had seen his target flinch.

As the man neared him, Bill frisked him quickly for weapons, never once letting his weapon stray from its intended target.

"Sir over to the Humvee." Bill said as he handcuffed the man. Look into the camera sir. Asshole I said look into the camera!" Bill already knew how to spot a man who was worried about facial recognition technology.

"Sergeant you should see this," a young corporal said from the passenger seat as he stared at his monitor.

`Wanted: Robert Smith leader Arizona Militia`: was plastered at the top of the touch screen monitor

along with an old photo of the man now before them.

That's all Bill had to see, he knew already what the man had done. Memories of the assassinations would never leave his mind. If 911 had made a nation paranoid then the events at the Supreme Court had killed its soul. "Down asshole down on the ground or I'm gonna' fucking kill you!"

"Captain, we've got heroin and get ready for this." Bill felt immense pride in his men. The most wanted man in the country was now in his gun sights. "Bob Smith sir, we got the fucker!"

"Good job Sergeant. Over."

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The old jail had been remodeled by the American military during the war. Even though victory had been declared, nothing had really changed. Drugs still flowed north, the new Democratic Mexican government was still corrupt as hell and now American soldiers, private security forces, and law enforcement still died in a vain struggle to stop it all.

Bob Smith sat in an old adobe brick and iron barred cell, one of three such cells. He was isolated from the jail's other ten tenants and was being watched by a single guard with an M16. Outside were four other men with guns and just past them was the unit's small headquarters building.

The buildings were all made of adobe brick, and even though old, were recently just repaired. The unit was now awaiting transfer of the detainees of their small prison, even as walls and landmines were being set on the old roads they had discovered. Cameras and radar devices were also set, all to track and follow trucks coming over the border.

Captain Rodriguez picked up his phone on the

second ring. The paperwork for Bob Smith's transfer, he had already known, would take some time as he busied himself in his cramped office. "Hello."

"Captain, this is General Mueller. Captain you are ordered to release Bob Smith and his cargo." The voice told him.

"Sir are you kidding?" The young Captain sat bolt upright on hearing this news. He had a very small office with an old steel desk painted OD green set to one side, just a single file cabinet and the six foot desk and two chairs nearly filled its cramped space; but Frank wasn't concerned with the accommodations of his office, he saw the battlefield as his office.

"Captain I don't like it either but those are our orders, something smells fishy to me too but we have no choice here. The orders are coming from very high up. I'm faxing confirmation now along with your new orders. You and your unit are to bug out tomorrow. Your heading to Pakistan Captain, congratulations, you're in the war."

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"I'm sorry Captain but this fucking stinks. We got the prick now we have to let him go? What about all that heroin you know that it's just going to end up on the streets. Kids are going to be shooting up and smoking that shit sir." Bill Bianchi had never questioned orders before. For a moment he even lost his military countenance as his shoulders drooped from parade rest and his usually pensive countenance showed of feelings of anger, shock, and surprise.

"At Ease Sergeant you have your orders. Break camp we bug out at 0500, did you hear me Sergeant?" If R.O.T.C. school and his movie Gods had taught him anything it was to not allow a subordinate to question his authority or his orders.

"Yes sir," Bill was upset by the news and

angered by the implications of what it might mean,
but still respected his Captain as he had only
respected one other man.

Chapter 18 (February 2, 2031)

John looked over the small stiff postcard once again. He had gotten dozens of them, over the past year, all in the same nature, and now as he awaited his first ever parole hearing he realized that it had been the handwriting and the thought of someone on the outside offering him encouragement that had given him the strength to get to this point.

His original sentence had been for just five years. The added time, he now realized, he was to blame for. The postcards were always simple. On the front a photo of some far off place, on the back a few words of encouragement, in a handwriting style he had come to know well. This one though was something else. He would quickly rip up and flush each postcard until he had received this one. Now as he waited nervously for the parole board's decision he knew he would soon be once again breaking the law.

For on the back of this simple piece of stiff paper was written nothing but an address, a New York address.

Chapter 19 (February 14, 2031)

"Mr. Mahpiya, thank you for taking the time to sit with me. My professor tells me that your knowledge of the AIM movement is quite extensive." Nina said pulling a small notebook from her purse.

Eric was just happy to be out of the kitchen for a change. He sat now opposite, what even he thought, was a very pretty young woman. Unfortunately thoughts of Jen always tempered any such attractions for him. He knew there would never be another woman like her.

He liked this new job despite the intense heat in front of the old brick oven. Making pizzas had come quick to him, he had even perfected a decent spin, yet his boss Alessandro would often remind him as how that inevitably only ruined the pizza, making it too thin in the middle and just getting flour in your hair. Eric wondered if maybe his boss took pizza making too seriously, even as he watched how eagerly the customer's would devour the big greasy slices.

He had never understood how people could enjoy the stuff so much, until he had first tasted Al's pizza. After several years of wandering through Mexico, Canada and back again; working quick one day jobs he would find standing outside the few remaining shelters and bus stops, he had ended up in New York City. He still wondered what had pointed him here. He had never liked cities, not even Denver, but it had all seemed so fortuitous.

Each new day awakening and meeting people and seeing places he felt he had seen before. As he analyzed his dreams he began to believe that in his dreams lay the secret to this recurring familiarity. Now every day he awoke he would try to remember the dreams of each night. It had been years since Eric had kept a journal, but now he did so again. His writings now though lacked the fiery purpose they once had. He wrote primarily of just his dreams and a few poems of his remembered love.

When he had first arrived in the city he had slept in the now closed Subways. Introduced to their safety and relative comfort by a man he had come to call Tex. Tex was a jovial man but was imbued with a conspiratorial nature, everywhere he looked he seemed to be able to point to one conspiracy or another.

Eric took little notice though as they and about three dozen others ate stolen food and warmed themselves by an open fire in a long deserted tunnel under New York City. They had illegal cable and power connections and as thus enjoyed a fairly comfortable existence away from those above who would want to judge or punish them.

Tex was at least fifteen years Eric's senior, but the two of them had felt a connection nearly instantly. Eric enjoyed the man's ever present sense of humor and sarcasm and soon counted him as a good friend.

After a few months living in this manner he had inexplicably found himself at the restaurant he was now in. Hungry, he stood outside for almost an hour trying to 'spange' enough money to buy a slice, his belly growling from a week with no food. When the police had arrived he had been thankful that the owner had stood up for him. Why had his eventual boss saved him from certain jail time; he wondered now many times.

Alessandro, or Al as most people called him,

had even invited him in, made him a pizza and offered him a beer. The beer he refused the pizza and company he accepted. Eric by that time had given up drinking for almost two years. The liquid had long since stopped being effective in helping him to forget, and had in fact begun to have the exact opposite effect.

They talked for nearly two hours. Al had a thick Italian accent, straight from an old gangster flick it had seemed. The kinds which were now illegal to own or watch, Eric thought. Short dark hair and a thick mustache completed a picture of a man that Eric thought nearly stereotypical, but Eric had long since come to learn that his look was crafted to impress his clientele.

Eventually the man had offered Eric a job, doing dishes at first, then moving him up to cook and then pizza maker. At first Eric had refused, worrying over his Social Security number showing up once again from a government database. Al however quickly said the magic words, 'under the table'. Jobs by private employers were nearly non-existent now; he knew offers like this one didn't come every day. So he took the job and now a year later had gotten close to the man and earned his admiration and respect.

The restaurant was very plain, simple red and white checkered, plastic table cloths; faux arched windows on one wall with hand painted murals of Venice and Florence in between them. Phony plants and fake flower boxes beneath each window and on the tables accented the all too stereo-typical surroundings. There were just twelve tables and a single white counter to order from. The pizza oven sat just behind the counter and the whole kitchen was in direct view as people ordered and ate. For all its simplicity though it seemed all the more real and sincere.

The interview had passed far quicker than Eric had expected. The professor usually seemed far more long winded and inquisitive than the young woman he had brought with him today. But then her questions

also seemed far more focused than his. Two hours had come and gone and now Nina Mjedved said her goodbyes.

"By the way Mr. Mahpiya. I understand that the Lakota put a lot of significance into dreams. I've had a few myself lately, I wonder if you could interpret them for me?"

"I'm sorry Miss. It's not like that. Each person must find their own truth in their dreams. The Great Mystery merely gives them to us to teach us about ourselves. They're there to help us overcome past regrets and help us understand our future. It's up to the individual to figure out what they mean. No one else can tell you that." Eric wondered over the words even as he said them. He knew he believed what he had said but did he feel it?

Chapter 20 (March 14, 2031)

Jack Brewster sat on the top of a small rise in a rented Hummer. He thought the vehicle a bit of overkill but the rental company had been out of his beloved Land Rovers. He had been on this stakeout three times now. Always the same place, always the same time, always following the young man named Michael Ryan as he met a long semi-truck.

Michael would always arrive with a pickup or van, usually an old beater, and the two men would switch vehicles after a few short words. Jack often wondered how they managed to pass back and forth so easily over the supposedly newly secured border.

The truck driver's identity he had discovered as soon as he had developed the first photographs of him. He immediately wondered whether he should report their actions. Jack listened intently to his telephonic microphone hoping that he would catch something of use for his story but also for his partner whom he knew was now growing impatient.

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"You got the cash?" Bob Smith looked around warily, always concerned about the Border Patrol, despite repeated reassurances from his associates.

"It's in the van." Michael was anxious for his

cargo. The heroin he knew hid something far more sinister.

He was now anxious to get to the abandoned pharmacy where he did his real work. Knowing that in the back of this truck were precisely shaped plastic explosives and one of the last pieces he needed to ready his work.

Explosives material that was now very rare in America, but readily available in Latin America. The charges were shaped to exacting details and specifications that he himself had provided a practical use for his studies in physics.

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The two men swapped keys and vehicles and drove off in opposite directions. Jack Brewster was still no closer to his story.

Chapter 21 (April 1, 2031)

"Mr. Marcy, my employer would like to speak to you." John Marcy had seen the Mercedes as it had passed, stopping just twenty feet in front of him. Years spent in prison had made him inevitably paranoid of such things and now he struggled to pretend as though he hadn't heard him. He looked around, now knowing freedom in a way that he had never experienced before.

He had no money, but was intent and determined to make a new life for himself. His plan was simple. Steal a car and drive to New York.

"John Marcy, we'd just like to talk to you. We'll pay for your time." John looked this time. The man yelling his name was well into his sixties, he wondered if he was worrying unnecessarily as he approached the small bridge in Rifle.

The creek, which one time ran below it, was now nearly dry. John still remembered when there had once been a powerful fast moving river here, staring out at it from the window of the bus that had brought him to prison. He wondered how much had changed and saw now that the grasses and trees here were all

dying, dried and burnt by the sun. Another victim of years of ecological disaster he already knew.

He turned and walked back to the large luxury sedan, his curiosity and the promise of much needed cash now enticing him "How do you know my name and what can I do for you?"

"Mr. Marcy, please get in and I'll explain everything." Stephen Blake now felt a sense of accomplishment. He knew his search would soon lead him to the man he had come to now see as a kindred spirit.

Chapter 22 (April 2, 2031)

Nina more and more enjoyed these private after class discussions with Professor Ackerman. She found his knowledge of the American Southwest and passion for the Native Americans to be very exciting.

She was studying for her Bachelor's in Political Science and doing her thesis on the politics of the Lakota nation and the A.I.M. movement. Drinks after class had started a few months ago and the more often she and the 35 year old professor met, the more she felt attracted to him on a much deeper and more personal level. She had not yet broached the subject with Ack -as his students had come to call him - but if he offered her a ride home again tonight, she had determined she would make the first move.

Nina had only ever had one boyfriend, back in her freshman year; a relationship that had ended badly when the young man learned of his homosexuality and broke it off, before they had consummated the relationship. She knew that the same would not happen with Alex. After all he was an older more secure man and was so confident seeming that there was no doubt of his sexuality.

A real man's man, she had thought him, as he told his stories of having met Lakota leaders and having excavated Apache ruins. She had fantasized

many times of someday joining him on such an excursion.

She was a stunningly beautiful Woman of Eastern European descent with a now diminished accent. High cheek bones, blue eyes and blonde hair gave her a look that most men found intimidating and made her seemingly hard to approach. At almost five ten, with long slender legs, she had the looks for modeling, but her mother had emphasized her education and had successfully, throughout her childhood, sheltered her from the many boys whom - in her mother's eyes - would jeopardize her chances at something more.

She had long since determined that Ack was the one for her. She found herself often fantasizing and daydreaming of a man she had long since come to see as so much more than other men.

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Alex Ackerman was now in his first tenured year at Columbia. He had studied hard his whole life and was now looking forward to being able to settle down and be able to put off the months long excavations that had characterized his youth; months away that had destroyed his marriage and robbed him of the opportunity of children.

He knew however that he still had his youthful looks and an easy going yet provocative manner that many women found enticing. Alex was only now beginning to realize that many women found him to be a very handsome man, despite his many years of looking at himself otherwise. He had always taken great pride in his wit and intellect, but had been seemingly insecure in his looks. His features to him seemed wholly unremarkable but now out of the field, and again newly single, he soon realized that the many young women of the N.Y.C. social scene thought more of him than he himself.

Ack stood just short of six feet tall with a

slender build but with broad shoulders. His face was starting to show a hint of wrinkles around his eyes and seemed, to many, to hint at the thoughts that lay there. Big gray eyes, that seemed to show of a deep intellect. He had dirty blonde hair cut very short but kind of spikey on the top. He still wore his wedding ring mostly out of habit.

Ack stopped in front of the split level ranch style home and turned to the young lady in the passenger's seat. "Here you are young lady; I appreciate you keeping this old man company." He reached over to hug the pretty young Nina. Nina held him back and leaned into kiss him. Her lips met his but didn't find the response she had so hoped for. His mouth was unresponsive as he pushed her back and offered his apologies.

"Oh Nina, I'm so sorry I must have given you the wrong impression. I just think of you as my student and friend. I didn't realize you had mistaken my intentions." The Professor said even as he felt the pangs of guilt within his heart, knowing full well that he had overstepped the bounds of their relationship.

Consciously or otherwise he knew he had been mistaken to let their relationship develop in the manner he had, he reflected internally if he had intended to do so or not. He knew that he had enjoyed the attention that he received from the pretty young woman - as a newly divorced man - but had he knowingly failed to follow the advice of the teachers who had inspired him; advice to not allow your professional relationships to become entangled with your personal ones. He wondered now if those that had inspired him would have found flaws in his behavior.

Nina at first looked distraught and surprised but finally left the car, slamming its door behind her. She didn't go to class at all that week. Ack would never know it, but she had thought of dropping out of school many times during those days. She would soon cut herself off from nearly everyone as she

began to question herself and started to find fault in her looks, thoughts, and much more. She turned heavily inwards and buried herself in her studies to avoid confronting her feelings of homeliness, after all, she reasoned, two men, two failures. She worried even now if she was at all worthy of love or if she was doomed to never find someone.

Chapter 23 (April 1, 2031)

"Mr. Marcy, are you sure this is the right address?" Stephen Blake looked out upon a small Italian restaurant from the window of a rented limousine, now wondering if he had been right to pay an ex-convict to bring him here. He had known that he was aiding in a parole violation but had already begun to question a criminal justice system that had long since gone awry.

"This is the address Mr. Blake. Maybe you should let me go in first though. By the way call me John or better yet Wildman, that's what they called me in prison; no one calls me Mr. Marcy."

Eric had seen the limo pull up, he still had mixed feelings over the vehicle, but it wasn't often you saw the things anymore he reasoned. When he saw the face from so many years past, the surprise nearly overwhelmed him, at first he considered running, then remembered the postcard he had last sent. Eric had become paranoid that someday the law would find him, he knew that back home there was still a D.U.I. case open for him and someday he might have to face up to the inevitable.

Eric walked out into the small dining room and with a huge smile hugged a man he hadn't seen in far too many years. He had often wondered if his friend John might ever get out of prison and saw now that the stress had not been unfelt in the man's life as

he saw the first wisps of gray over his ears.

"Eric I have a friend who'd like to meet you. He's got somethin' of yours." John said as he stepped back and Stephen entered through the swinging glass door accompanied by the sound of a ringing bell.

"Mr. Mahpiya, I've waited a very long time to meet you sir." Eric had long since become leery of any man knowing him, whom he had never met. "I have something of yours." Stephen continued as he produced the beaten old journal and presented it to Eric.

Years had passed since Eric had last seen the thing. Years that now seemed to conspire to separate him from whom he had once been. Still the sight of his old journal nearly brought tears to his normally pensive demeanor.

"Thank you sir, I thought I would never see this again."

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The day's business done, the register closed, and the small restaurant cleaned in preparation for the next day, two men sat at a lone table at the front and talked by only the light of the rays of the outside street lamps; as they cast their warm yellow rays and shadows into the empty business.

The white walls and muted colors of the murals had now gone down to drab yellows and grays. Eric often reflected as to how, minus the crowds from the day, that the little Pizzeria didn't seem the same place, despite the ever present spicy aromas of garlic and pepperoni and the whirling noise of the refrigerator compressors.

"Mr. Mahpiya thank you for meeting me. I have a proposition for you." Stephen Blake had waited until closing to speak to the man he had searched so long for.

"What would that be Mr. Blake?" Eric still had not come to trust the man before him. After all he reasoned what nature of man would have spent so much time and effort to find someone he had never met before?

"Well it seems I'm in possession of certain lands I now find myself having to, well, let's say dispose of. My plan is to offer those lands to the Lakota nation in a trust. On the land is a wind farm, still under construction, owned by the community, and right now me, but I'm going to relinquish my control over those shares too; to the Lakota nation and to several non-profit agencies. I want you to run the operation and complete the construction there. I ask you to do this as my agent, but no one can ever know of our deal." Stephen had spent many late sleepless nights constructing the details of his plan.

Even as he had accepted the Media Relations position for the Republican National Committee he knew that eventually he would have to find a way of cutting Richard Stephenson out of his life. He had quickly determined however that the position could be used to propel himself into a much more powerful and envious position. Stephen had already determined the best way to ward off the intentions of a man he knew might become an adversary. Now he meant to implement those plans.

"Mr. Blake thank you for the offer but I can't take a job right now. I'm trying to put my life back in order and figure things out and I'm needed here. Besides I don't know anything about wind farms." Eric offered his excuses, his mind made up long before he had even met Stephen Blake.

Stephen sat back perplexed; he was unused to being told no. "Son you have construction experience that's all you really need to know and judging by your journal I know you to be a leader. I need a leader; I'm tired of book keepers and incompetent men. My father once told me you can train a man to do nearly anything, except lead. It's something you're

either born with or you aren't. Leaders, good leaders, will always have a role in society, politics, and business. Men who realize that what we're missing in society are good old fashioned human values; not family values, Christian values, white values or any of the terms and phrases the corrupt use to try and separate and divide us. Eric I need a man like you to run this wind farm. A man I can trust to always do the right thing; a man with strong moral fiber and personal responsibility; a man who understands that personal responsibility and civil responsibility go hand in hand with values and ethics."

"Mr. Blake I'm not your man. I don't know who you think I am, but I'm definitely not your man," Eric responded, still feeling his own blame for the death of his wife.

Stephen sat back and stared through the man in front of him. Not looking at the man but looking into him. "Wow, I guess you're right. You aren't the man who wrote that journal." Stephen suddenly saw what Eric was too close to see for himself. "The man who wrote that journal," Stephen glanced at the brown leather book Eric was resting his hand upon. "That man was a leader, that man was full of life. You know Eric there are lots of ways for a man to die. But without a doubt the worse way to die is to die inside. If you ever find that man, the man who wrote that journal, then please let me know." With that Stephen left a business card and removed himself from the table.

Chapter 24 (April, 2031)

Eric began to wonder if he had made the right decision to turn down a job that seemed so right for him. Stephen Blake had seemed a good man and the job seemed so right for him in retrospect, but he felt indebted still to the job he had. Unfortunately though, cuts in education funding had trumpeted the death knell for government funding of Universities.

The announcement that Columbia would be forever closing their doors had come as a shock to Al, more than anyone else. He knew that without the students' money from nearby Columbia University that his small restaurant might not survive.

Another friend of Eric's was also feeling the pressures as he busied himself looking all over the country for a professorship or even grant money to return to the field. The private colleges though were not interested in men with his training so Alex

Ackerman was quickly beginning to worry over his own future as well.

Soon after the cuts made in the university system, many liberal arts colleges too had decided to re-frame their programs to offer those programs that were most in demand. Many colleges that had focused on less in demand and 'more frivolous' schools of thought such as ethics, philosophy, cultures, and sociology seemingly vanished almost overnight. Teachings that had once been the focus of many High School programs, and for centuries before, the primary focus of all schooling completely disappeared as many in academia questioned the role and the necessity of these teachings in modern society. Ackerman himself credited his studies in ancient Greek philosophy and other studies as better preparing him for how to act as a teacher.

Ack and Eric had discussed what the loss of these schools of thought would mean to those who hadn't learned such concepts from their families. They could never however come to a conclusion between themselves as to whose role it should be to teach such things. Was it the job of schools to teach such things in an environment where many parents themselves didn't understand such concepts? Was it the moral obligation of all people within the community to ensure that the young would learn these good values and ethics through their good examples? Or even absent the parents influence of teaching these values, if the parents themselves were culpable to the crimes committed by the children they had raised to act immorally, and if they should be punished as well for their part in the cycle?

Eric was however happy for his friend John. John had seen a job with Stephen Blake as a new lease on life. He had thought a lot recently of the friends he had made all those years ago in prison and began to wonder over what had happened to each of them.

Chapter 25 (May, 2031)

"Mr. Whitehouse I understand through an associate you have a very unique set of skills." Stephen Blake was in awe of the computer hardware stacked throughout the semi-truck. "My friend here has a record, he would like to start a new life, can you do for him the same thing you did for my friend Eric Mahpiya? After all don't you think everyone deserves a second chance?"

Aaron hadn't heard the name in years and was now in shock. How did Stephen Blake know Eric Mahpiya? How had this man found his whereabouts so easily? A host of questions had played through his head when he had heard the rotor of the old Huey and, coming out of the trailer to investigate, had met a man whose reputation he had never completely trusted.

"Yes, Mr. Blake I think we can do something about that." Aaron Whitehouse said as he looked at the two men he had just met. "But maybe you can do something for me too. I have an investment proposal for you, more of a public service really." Aaron had come to learn that no matter how good your ideas might be that in these modern times you needed much more too properly implement most of them. You needed at the very least friends in high places.

Chapter 26 (May 25, 2031)

"Nina Mjedved," announced the older man, dressed in black, standing on a stage with nearly three hundred others dressed all the same way. It was Nina Mjedved's graduation day. A day that she once thought she would never see. A day she herself had once jeopardized.

Having immigrated to America when she was fourteen, her mother, her lone parent, emphasized every day, or at least each time she brought home anything below a 'B' on her report card, that education was the doorway for her future. Her mother had brought Nina to America through the Legally Authorized Immigrant Directive; a newly formed adjunct to the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

A government agency established not long after the Republican National Committee began infusing millions of dollars into poor Eastern European countries, to assist pre-qualified and pre-selected individuals of all ages, mostly females, to immigrate to America for better work opportunities.

Work opportunities which were, more often than not, nothing more than ruses in the form of a sex slave market for high profile politicians looking for mistresses and escorts for events like lobbyist fundraisers and get-away working vacations. Nina's mother had waited six years on an immigration list

before she received her travel papers for her and her child.

They had settled in Portland, ME, a place not completely unlike their own small city in Bosnia. Nina's mom had worked two shifts at the local manufacturer where she worked at a bench inspecting leather shoes - one of the few shoe factories that were then making a comeback in America after the great collapse of the global overseas manufacturing economy. Nina came home from school each evening to an empty house and awoke to that same silent house each morning, her mom having been long since gone to her job.

Sitting in the audience now - Nina could see from her position on the stage with the other graduates - her mom raising a hand slowly to her eyes so as to partially cover the tears that swelled there. Nina smiled. She knew she had fulfilled her mother's dreams and wishes and that her mom, at this moment, knew that all those long hours she had worked for so many years, were paying off in this one defining moment.

Nina crossed the stage with confidence and with an air of dignity; an air that had earned her High Honors and ranked her in the top five percent of her high school graduating class and with all the respect from her fellow classmates that came with that honor.

She had majored in Political Science with an emphasis in Native American Studies. Despite lowered standards of testing and lowered expectations in several fields of study she had tried to find the truths in what she was taught. She learned to question nearly everything she had been taught as her mother warned her of times past in their small home nation of Bosnia. Teachings of how the Communists, and the Nazis before them, had changed the history books to best serve their own agendas. In this manner she also began to question America's role in many of the debacles of the past.

As she received the maroon and white, gold embellished album, she turned slightly, looked out into the audience one last time, and raised one hand, pointing to her mom. Her mom, looking on proudly, raised her hand in turn, and pointed back.

Chapter 27 (May 31, 2031)

"Greetings people and Happy Memorial Day." Arthur climbed to his pulpit. "Today is supposed to be a time to remember all who have died in service of our country. Well I say that this is narrow minded. Today should be a day of remembering those who through their personal sacrifice have shown their heroism. After all not every man who has done things with the intent to do service for this country has done so with the intention of helping humanity." Arthur O' Connell had become accustomed to having his words immediately misunderstood by many, but he also knew how to play this crowd, his crowd.

His 'church' had started small; a handful of the homeless of New York City and some ex-convicts. He had marketed it quite cleverly as a church with no walls or barriers, either literally or figuratively, and preached his convictions from atop the exposed bedrock of Central Park surrounded by the tall glass spires of New York and the comforting trees of the city's heart, his 'pulpit'.

He preached of every day human situations and how various scriptures told men how they should act in such situations. Arthur preached in chapters: of the Bible, the Koran, the Torah and other scriptures.

Finding comparisons most had never thought of and always ending with a rousing ovation.

He took no pride in the applause as it being for him, he knew he was preaching the Creator's message and now as Eric watched, listening to a sermon many had told him he should go see; he too knew the message was from the Creator. Eric had come not even knowing that the preacher he had heard of, so many times, was indeed his old friend, but upon reflection, in what he had been told, he soon realized that it would have had to be. After all Eric had only ever met one man with these kinds of convictions as he eagerly awaited to hear where his friend was going with the sermon.

He wondered right away if the message had gone too far. After all he knew Americans didn't like to hear that soldiers are just human and that quite often politicians don't care for those who elected them. Or those leaders should not be chosen for appearance but rather substance. And most especially, that they as individuals, also played a role in the never ending cycles of abuse and corruption when they chose to revel in their own lack of moral obligation to each other and the environment; and most especially Eric wondered if these people would be as upset as he had seen so many become before when their manner of lifestyle were brought into question.

The past had taught Eric many times that those who expressed thoughts that went against common wisdom were soon marginalized from society. Or indeed that those who spoke of the need to judge those based on their convictions and values along with their transgressions were quite often themselves ostracized along with those they defended; and that inevitably those with human flaws but with the greatest humane notions were quite often the most punished as to best serve the public's want of justifying their own indifference and lack of moral character. He knew that to express any idea now that went against the majority's common sociopath ideals of self-justification and rationalization of selfish ideals

were quite often accused themselves of being heretical, anarchical or anti-social.

"But I offer this truth to you; every man who has spent their life doing service for others has inevitably strengthened our country." Arthur often started his service in just this manner. They never passed an offering plate either. In every aspect this was a church like no one had seen before.

Donations to the church were accepted at its local offices, a recently restored hotel that housed six hundred homeless people, families, and ex-convicts. They had battled litigation from the government over and over to keep their doors open to people many would say were worthless and would want to cast out if given the chance.

At the hotel men and women were offered vocational rehab, if they chose to attend, and most did too. The tenants would learn the trade of catering or long forgotten and recently sought after crafting trades like silk screening. The model of enterprise was actually successful too as the products, offered at a lower price than what was traditional were quickly snapped up by the community; thus completing a positive cycle for the men and women in need and a community also much in need.

His congregation had grown fast; many from the hotel would spend their Sundays in the park. The services attracted men and women from a wide cross section of faiths, backgrounds and economic circumstance. If asked Arthur would only offer Christian baptisms to those who came to at least three consecutive bible studies at the old hotel. On this Sunday his audience was nearly three thousand.

He wore simple street clothes, usually jeans and a collared shirt, and explained that the Creator made you naked so what did it matter how you dressed in front of him or her? When asked he would even go so far as to say that clothing was in fact the abomination of the purity of man from the Garden of

Eden. So those who put too much emphasis in their appearance should be those to look most inward to find the Creator.

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"Eric, my God it's good to see you again. How have you been old friend? You know your cousin is really worried about you, you should call him." King hadn't been able to withstand the need to hug his old friend when he saw him approaching at the end of his sermon.

"I've been OK, Chaplain. It looks like you've done pretty well too."

"I was sorry to hear about your wife Eric, I'm glad to see you're doing better though. Actually all of this was your idea buddy and it's done very well. These sermons allow our church to do the real work of God. Sermons are not God's work after all, God's work is helping your fellow man and that's what I try to teach."

"Arthur you know I'm worried that you might get in trouble with this. Is the risk really worth it? You do have convicts here right? What happens when the Feds tire of you inspiring those they have sought to isolate and destroy?" Eric was quick to point out what he saw as an inevitable problem in Arthur's logic.

"Eric I'm really surprised to hear you say that, what happened to that young rebel I once knew? Why aren't you still the guy who wanted to change the world?" Eric again wondered if he had indeed changed so much.

Chapter 28 (September 12, 2031)

New York City was George's least favorite place on Earth. He saw it's still liberal nature as a mark of what he was trying so hard to fight against. He knew if things were allowed to go the way of the New York liberal elite then inevitably there would be more attacks on US soil.

At least the Cardinal had picked a decent restaurant in which to meet, the Senator thought, as he sampled the lobster tail and filet mignon. Even far away from his Maine home he couldn't go long without his favorite meal. Ordinarily the price might have given him pause, knowing the shortages in the lobster market, but this time he wasn't picking up the check.

The restaurant was more dimly lit than what George was used to. Dark cherry paneling and dark wool carpets with a repeating swirl pattern seemed to suck up what little light there was. The table cloths were white and burgundy with cloth napkins, much fancier than George preferred. Back in Maine his favorite places were the little fish shacks with vibrant colors and even more vibrant smells. To him a seafood restaurant should smell of the ocean and of lobster, but this place smelled of chemical roses and lavender.

"Senator, these rallies are undermining the fiber of Christianity in New York." The man had worn his collar to affirm to all his position of power.

"Cardinal are you certain you aren't

exaggerating the danger?" George had come to realize of late that having the support of the clergy of more than one church could serve his aspirations well. Even though he had never liked the Catholic faith he now at least saw that they could help him gain the support of certain demographic groups, and he desperately craved their backing now.

"Watch this video Senator and see if you don't agree. He is preaching the Torah and Koran alongside the Bible. When his followers were just cons and bums I chose to ignore it, but last Sunday my people told me there were over ten thousand people there. Many of them, people of the area Christian churches. We have already seen a decline in donations too. As a Christian man I would hope you can see the dangers he represents to the business of the various Christian churches." The Cardinal's demeanor had turned to one of heated and impassioned feelings. He had long ago tired of certain neo-Christian movements and now he could see that the teachings of this single man, whom he had once excommunicated, had now become far too dangerous to allow a voice anywhere.

"We can have D.H.S. pull him and his followers in for not having the correct permits. We can also charge him for attracting convicts to a public park. He should get seven years. Will that satisfy you Cardinal?" The Senator said while sipping his wine and internally congratulating himself for once again securing the Conservative Christian vote for his district.

Chapter 29 (Late October 2031)

Saturday nights at the restaurant no longer seemed the same, lately it had become so slow that inevitably Eric would have his hours cut. However Saturday night was still Alex's night. Alex Ackerman had been a regular visitor to the small restaurant for several years, going as far back as his days as a student when the place had been owned by another man.

He had become good friends with Alessandro over the years and now they would play cards and debate religion nearly every Saturday night. This night was no different, except now Ack was unemployed and quickly starting to feel himself as possibly unemployable. The private colleges had gone to a system of teaching primarily 'skilled' professions. Mathematics, Accounting, and Law had become the hot new careers, and private colleges were intent on teaching them.

Eric brought them their carafe of Sangria and tried to go back to the business of closing shop.

"Ack, Eric's been offered a job building wind farms, what do you think of that?" Al asked as his employee poured him the sweet concoction of fruit and wine.

The three men were all nearly the same age, yet Al had taken to seeing Eric in a role of protector and had begun to address him informally. Kid, kiddo, and boy were all normal terms Al used when addressing a man whose work ethic and values he had come to admire.

Al was five years Eric's elder. He had grown up in the restaurant industry and had quickly grown to love it. He had seen the endeavor of feeding others as a noble pursuit. Teaching others how to prepare food and run a successful business was now his second greatest joy and he looked often at Eric as a kind of protégé.

"Really? Hell I say take it, this city's going to hell now anyways, seems to me that would be a good use for your construction and leadership skills." Ack said as he sipped his Sangria and inspected his newly dealt cards.

"I don't know; I feel like I owe something to Al. If it hadn't been for him I'd probably still be living on the streets." Eric tried to offer his best excuses, yet still whenever he thought of that opportunity he would inevitably feel conflicted.

"Nonsense kid, you don't owe me anything. It's every man's job to help out those he sees that need help. That's what being Christian was supposed to be all about, hell even if you aren't Christian it's just the right thing to do." Al said, while he looked at Eric over the edge of his cards; His wire rimmed reading glasses dangling at the end of his nose.

"Eric have you written anything lately?" Ack

had often noticed the brown leather journal Eric kept with him. Several times they had even discussed philosophical and sociological ideas and Ack had eventually come to see him as a man with simple yet powerful ideas.

"No not really. Can't really think of anything to write about."

"Well seems to me living out West and doin' something completely new might inspire you to write again. Being human isn't about finding a comfortable place; it's about pushing yourself and bettering yourself all the time. If humans never pushed themselves we would all still be monkeys living in trees." Eric thought about the words of a man he had come to admire greatly during their discussions of Native American Archeology and culture; a man whose credentials proved his own words their best advocate.

"Eric take that job bud, there's nothing for you here anymore." Al said hoping that Eric would heed his advice.

Chapter 30 (November 26, 2031)

"Sir, the rabbit is in my sights. Over." Bill Bianchi sat in a fourth story window, obscured by a fluttering pink cotton curtain, overlooking a nearby cafe in Quetta, Pakistan. The room was sparsely furnished and its tenants, a young dark-skinned couple with a toddler, sat timidly on a small couch as Bill signaled for their silence. The war was now in its eighth year and still showed little promise of an eventual resolution.

Bill's small squad of men wore the local dress of the Pakistani people, long robes and head dresses to hopefully cover their American heritages. The city had never completely rebuilt after the earthquake of 2008. Many of the older buildings still sat in ruins, in fact, as the US government began to make cutbacks in their funding against the Afghanistan Taliban regime. With the cutbacks came rising dissent in Pakistan and soon the tiny Democratic government was taken over by Taliban sympathizers both within the government and within their society at large.

Quetta had always been known as the Fruit Garden of Pakistan, due to its diversity of plant and animal wildlife, but with nearly two decades of earthquakes, war and ecological destruction it was now largely void of natural life. The city had always been a major stronghold along the western frontier of the country, as it lay in the valley formed by four great mountains. Sitting on the border of Iran and Afghanistan it had also long been home to a smuggling network using mountain passes that had long proven troublesome for the American and Soviet military.

"Copy, Sergeant. Give the rabbit some room. Over."

"Copy Captain. The dogs are on the leash. Over." Bill said referring to his men who sat in wait to follow their target, a young blond haired man they called 'Rabbit'.

This was a hunt for them. Billy and his men were the hounds out for the kill. The target or rabbit was a nervous young American man they had followed through Europe and Asia. The prize? Well only rarely were they ever told. They simply knew that they were the last line of defense in troubled times against an unthinkable eventuality.

Bill Bianchi had begun to understand that nuclear deterrence in a terrorist world was about more than just stopping the spread of nuclear material. After all if all they did was to get one part of the group, then that group would quickly reassemble, he reasoned. What they really needed was the smuggling network and the buyer. With those two elements out of the way loose material would be of no harm at all.

"Remember Sergeant, we need the carrot too. Over." The Captain said reminding his men of their goal.

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Ali Atta wouldn't have raised much attention in any major American city. His hair was cut short in a military fashion and his skin was very light for a man of Arab descent. His brown eyes though quite dark, also seemed very unaffected by any particular event or action. After all he had been trained since a child and hardened by the circumstances of his youth to be what he was, a cold calculating killer. A man who could take another life, even his own, and destroy it without any worry of future turmoil or conscience. A man who knew that all life was inconsequential when compared to the future of his faith; a man who understood that Allah required blood of the unbelievers to be assured of the faith of his followers.

He was a new breed of fundamentalist, raised in a post 911 world to understand that heroes were made by their actions towards the infidels. Some day he knew his opportunity too would come and when it did he was prepared.

"Michael Ryan?" Atta asked a young American man as he grabbed the back of the cafe chair.

"Yeah I'm Michael Ryan, have a seat."

"You got my money?"

Michael swung his laptop to face his newly arrived visitor. The browser page was open to the website of a Cayman bank. The account page showed only one recent action, a deposit of ten million Euros.

"It's supposed to be twenty million where's the rest of my money?" Atta asked worried now that he had been lied to.

"Relax you'll get the rest when we get the package."

"How do you want it delivered?" Atta asked referring to a package he would soon be delivering.

"An associate of mine will be stopped in a delivery truck one mile from the North Gate of the base at 9AM tomorrow morning. You are to deliver the material to him there." Michael wrote down a series of numbers and handed it over to the young Arab man. "This is the bank account number. The driver will give you the password when we receive the package." The young Arab man took the slip of paper, already thinking of how he would spend his share.

Michael had already realized that this man was nothing more than a Gopher doing the bidding of other fundamentalist-military men more senior than him. He wondered who it was he was really paying, perhaps a Pakistani General or a Colonel, but all he really cared about was getting his package. His employer, he knew, would not be happy unless they got what he had come for.

Michael Ryan always had a bad taste in his mouth when forced to deal with non-Christians and non-whites, but found this deal easy enough to stomach when realizing that it would bring about an end to the Zionist conspiracy. He had long ago rationalized that the non-whites were basically unintelligent and self-destructive and would someday bring about their own demise. The Jews however, they were something else, they had conspired against white America and the Christian world since their creations, Michael reasoned. Without immediate intervention, he knew they would someday own everything and rule everyone.

In childhood he had learned that it might have been Arabs who killed his parents, with that plane, but they had been unknowingly working for the Jews. Secret deals between past administrations that would someday make the Jewish race the en-slavers of all men. Their evil knew no bounds as Michael saw it. Raised on hate and conspiratorial scripture, he had come to know that, without intervention from good

Christian men of value, like himself, that someday the Zionist conspiracy of world domination would be inevitable. He knew they would continue to kill Christians, promote race mixing and steal American land if he did nothing to stop them. Michael knew that history would mark him a hero, when the events he would set in motion would be seen in hindsight.

Michael didn't like Muslims either but he knew with the Jews out of the Holy Land, a new Crusade could begin. He envisioned a crusade to rival even that of Pope Urban II. He knew the accounts well and often thought of what it would be like to march out under the Red Cross of the crusader. Knowing that what he was doing was God's will. His favorite story from those days was regular reading for him.

Pope Urban II was responsible for assisting Emperor Alexis I of Constantinople in launching the first crusade. He made one of the most influential speeches of the middle Ages, calling on Christian princes in Europe to go on a crusade to rescue the Holy Land from the Turks. In the speech given at the Council of Clermont in France, on November 27, 1095, he combined the ideas of making a pilgrimage to the Holy Land with that of waging a holy war against infidels.

Accounts of the first holy war had spoken to Michael deeply of the great success of the early church. He had read the accounts of the historian Raymond of Agiles and found in them much to take hope in it.

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Some of our men cut off the heads of their enemies; others shot them with arrows, so that they fell from the towers; others tortured them longer by casting them into the flames. Piles of heads, hands and feet were to be seen in the streets of the city. It was necessary to pick one's way over the bodies of men and horses. But these were small matters compared to what happened at the temple of Solomon, a place

where religious services were ordinarily chanted. What happened there? If I tell the truth, it will exceed your powers of belief. So let it suffice to say this much at least, that in the temple and portico of Solomon, men rode in blood up to their knees and bridle reins.

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It was in accounts such as these that Michael found his greatest hope for European Christian supremacy. Accounts he knew had been the world's first mention of shock and awe tactics. Something that had been promised in retaliation for what had happened to his parents, but were never really delivered as he saw it. Instead he had come to see an Administration that had conspired to minimize damage and make more money for their Zionist puppet masters. His conspiratorial mind came to even question the reports of the death of the man who had planned the murder of his parents. He could not bring himself to trust the words of what he saw as a mud-man, a man of mixed blood, questionable birthright, and shady religious beliefs. The pictures presented he knew were only fakes and the accounts of Pakistanis unable to believe cemented for him the facts of a conspiracy to promote more Zionist programs.

With his foot under the table, Michael slid over a small metal box with a gas cylinder attached to the top. "When you have the package, put it in the box and then turn on the valve. The tank is full of argon gas and will keep the package from becoming radioactively unstable."

Michael had designed the container himself. His years of learning nuclear physics would soon pay off, he knew. The titanium / carbon alloy had been easier to get than he had thought it could be. It seemed as though with the vast resources of his employer that all he had to do was ask and he would receive.

*

“Benji, The rabbit is on the move. Over.”
Billy reported to a subordinate waiting on the street just outside the cafe.

“Benji here, I got the rabbit's scent. Over.”
James said as he began to follow behind Ali Atta down the quiet dirt road back into the city.

Captain Rodriguez listened as he knew that their goal would soon be realized. They would track each of the individuals as presented to them until they knew all of the players and then set their trap.

Chapter 31 (November 25, 2031)

"Hey honey need a date?" The phrase for Amanda Bianchi had become all too common within her vernacular.

However the craving was simply too much for her to withstand. She barely resembled the once beautiful Italian / Greek women of so many years ago. A life that now seemed to have not even been her as she struggled to forget all of the regrets of her past.

She had long since given up the Oxy's when she had come to discover the superior highs of black tar. Now she spent her nights standing on the corner by a lonely alley between Little Italy and China Town.

She had never seen a man with as large a frame as she was now propositioning. Inevitably thoughts of his endowment ran through her mind until he finally offered her his business card and an offer of a bed and a warm meal. An offer she would have normally refused but this time thought twice on when she considered the coldness of the night and the growling in her stomach.

Chapter 32 (November 27, 2031)

"Captain we're under attack. Repeat we are under attack!" Bill Bianchi screamed his words into his radio hoping they would reach his commander, despite the high barren and rocky mountain walls.

Their technology now seemed utterly useless in this ancient environment, a fact that Bill had only moments ago come to realize. Yet his prey had realized this long ago. Their ancestors had taken advantage of this fact for more than three millennia. Going back even further than recorded history their ancestors had used the same land to their advantage against the greatest military minds of history. Alexander, the Romans, and the Crusaders and modern military giants like the Soviets and the Americans had all failed to completely conquer the inhabitants of this land. Bill was quickly coming to see why after eight years and despite the most recent and advanced technology that this war might never be won.

They had used one of the new Memengwa helicopters to tail a package they had become certain was radioactive. The box had left the back of the old pickup truck not far outside of the city and was now being carried by a tribe of Pashtun militants using

mules, over a long forgotten smuggling trail through the mountains. Craggy rocks and high spires served well to protect the men in robes as they moved quickly over the same trails that their ancestors had used for centuries.

The Memengwa was unmistakable in appearance. Being unmanned it was a fast moving, highly mobile surveillance vehicle. It was also sometimes used as a gunship but here and now was fitted with only cameras, G.P.S. and infra-red surveillance equipment. It was considered to be the Army's greatest achievement in autonomous aircraft and plans were already underfoot to build tens of thousands of them, after all the benefits of using the platform for gunships had often been pointed out and they were far cheaper, faster and more reliable than the much larger traditional helicopters that had been used for nearly one hundred years now.

They were built simply and cheaply and carried no heavy armament as they had no human cargo to be concerned with. The tail of the machine was just tube steel attached to a squat elliptically shaped motor housing on the front. Underneath were the landing skids and above were the spinning blades. Painted a dark gray the entire machine looked completely unnatural and alien to the wilds of the area.

"Shit take cover, everyone down!" Billy shouted over the ever present noise of explosion and gunfire.

Bullets seemed to be coming from nearly every direction and soon the group of six found themselves scattered and cut off from each other as they took cover behind boulders and in a deep rut near the narrow old path.

"Breathe slow Jimmy, here hold this. Keep it tight to stop the bleeding bro." Bill was now unsure where the other five men he was leading were. He and James had taken cover behind a large rock soon after Corporal James McLeod had been hit by the first

rounds.

The blood was spouting from his lower right torso. The dark color had immediately signaled to Bill that the man had been hit in the kidneys, a wound that brought with it great pain as the young man's screams had quickly testified to. His desert camouflage had quickly taken on a new pattern and was rapidly turning from its light tans and beige colors over to a dark red.

Bill tried desperately to quell the young man's worries. He himself worried that the screams may lead their combatants to their location. "Jim shh, you gotta be quiet bud."

Bill knew right away that someone had discovered their surveillance. He wondered immediately if they hadn't in fact been betrayed by their commander. Thoughts of losing his men in the mountains of Pakistan now emboldened him to find out. Memories of their past betrayal in Mexico were still fresh in his mind and this had the same feel.

"Here Jim hold this tight." Bill said as he applied field dressing to his subordinate.

"Sergeant retreat, retreat now! They're on to us, over!" The radio crackled back with the voice of his Captain. Bill had no way of knowing if the other five men in his charge were dead or alive, but quickly pulled James over his shoulder and began making his way out of the mountain pass to where they had earlier determined they should regroup if they met with trouble.

He hunkered low and moved with determination as he weaved between small, ancient scraggly trees and behind boulders, the sound of bullets whizzing by hastening his retreat.

"Captain where are the rest of the men?" Bill asked as he carried James straddled across his back, running up to the waiting Humvee.

"I'm sorry Bill no one else has returned; we need to assume they're either dead or captured." Frank Rodriguez said as he drove out quickly over the bumpy desert road.

"Shit. McLeod needs medical attention Captain; he's been shot in the gut." Bill said pulling off the field dressing and finding underneath: green pussy flesh, fresh maggots and human flesh smelling too nearly like rotten hamburger.

"There's a M.A.S.H. unit about 2 clicks from here. Will he make it that far?"

"I don't think he's got that long Captain."

The hike out of the mountains had taken Sergeant Bianchi nearly two days. Two days of carrying a bleeding man and fighting off enemy combatants. Forced to find cover about every one hundred feet or so, coming out had proven far more difficult than the hike in.

Night time had been the most productive time to hike, but he also had to contend with the possibility of hyena and leopard picking up the scent of blood. Loose rock, and traveling by only moonlight had further impeded his progress but now he sat at the back of the Humvee and was hoping desperately that something might be salvaged of their mission, as he changed the field dressing of the man whose head was in his lap.

He could feel McLeod's breathing slowing and his screams had long since become mere moans. "Hold on there James we'll get you help soon." Bill said the words, already worrying in his heart that they were lies.

Suddenly his labored moans stopped and then his breathing too. Billy felt for his pulse but knew he wouldn't find it. Death in combat was nothing new to him, but holding a man for so long; stewarding him for nearly forty-eight hours was. When the last breath went out of Corporal James McLeod the last bit of compassion went out of Bill Bianchi.

Chapter 33 (December 1, 2031)

"Eric I'm glad you decided to take me up on my offer. You didn't have any problems at the airport did you?" Stephen Bake said as his new foreman entered his study.

"No sir, it seemed almost too easy." Eric said, still remembering his difficulties at the bus station all those years ago.

"Well like it or not money in this country means that you can cut a few corners. You won't be having any troubles with that D.U.I. back in Fort Thompson now either. Here sit; let me give you the run down on what you'll be doing. I'll spend the next week with you showing and teaching you how to construct wind generators and then you'll be on your own. How does that sound?"

"Well to be honest it makes me a bit nervous sir. I haven't done construction in a long time." Eric sat back in the rich leather chair. He had never seen a house like this before. This one room he saw could easily swallow up the entirety of his family's old trailer.

"There is also some paperwork I will need you to fill out and some I need filled out by your tribal council but I promise it's all legitimate, nothing for you to worry over." Stephen said as he poured

Eric a cup of coffee. "You see Eric I got myself into a bit of a pickle so now you're also giving me a way out. Money has it rewards but sometimes it has its problems too, but inevitably it is quite often a trap either way."

Chapter 34 (December 1, 2031)

Michael couldn't decide which hurt more, his broken ribs or his broken arm. All he knew right now was that he would soon be a hero, he had done God's work and when it was all over, his rewards would be great. If it meant he would have to die to get the justice he deserved then so be it.

"Answer the question mother fucker!" Michael was now so bruised he heard the punch before actually feeling it. He wondered, what had been the question? Had he even been asked a question?

He took comfort knowing his name would live on just as they had in the legends and stories of the great men who had preceded him; knowing that his actions would rival that of even the great and mighty Hitler. Would they build museums to his greatness as they had his?

Michael had once been to The Holocaust Museum and had splendor-ed as to how it served to immortalize the greatness of the final solution. A resolution he had come to see had not gone far enough to eradicate the pestilence of the inferior races. His actions, he knew, would serve to burn in the minds forever the contemptible nature of the hated

and dirty Jews. He saw it all laid out now, all the histories of great white men leading up to him.

His day in the sun would be immortalized by the fires and winds in one overpowering moment that no true American could ignore. His name would be spoken by true Christians for centuries to come as they talked of how he and he alone had avenged the death of Christ.

He could no longer open his eyes even if he wished to. Thick clots of blood held his eyelids closed. His nose was twisted and broken in two places and a broken jaw made breathing nearly impossible. So be it with breathing, he thought; each breath brought new torture anyways, as his broken ribs moved freely in his chest. With each labored breath, hoping and praying that death would come soon. A martyr he thought, there was real glory to being a martyr.

How many of them were they he wondered one, two? He smiled at their taunts, all the time finding comfort in knowing he had succeeded. His attackers rage giving him a sense of power and internal strength.

He had been tied to the small wooden chair so long now that the top bar was beginning to dig into his upper back sending shooting pains down through his spine. So many pains emanating throughout his bloodied and bruised body he could no longer discern where each of them began, nor where each left off. He knew he would most likely die right here in this position, but to him that no longer mattered. Soon the Jewish conspiracy would be broken.

Michael had seen the beat up old hatchback but had been unable to react. They had jumped him with a canvas bag and beaten him with the butts of their rifles. All he knew was that they were American. One of them most likely Italian, he thought as he tried to determine their accents. Fucking Wap bastard he thought; He would soon see. Michael took solace in knowing the beauty of the plan he himself had put

into action.

Then a new sensation came with yet another hard blow from the butt of a rifle, a snap then the metallic taste of blood as he swallowed two teeth; nausea and then the darkness once again coming over him. He prayed silently that this would be it.

*

"Wake up you fucking piece of shit!" Same voice he thought: same voice, same smells and same pains but now, so much more intense. He began to question how long it might last. Hadn't he already done God's work? When would God take him, he thought, as he imagined his rewards in heaven.

Wood hitting him in the gut; the butt of a rifle he knew now. He was beginning to wonder now why his God was forcing him to endure so much; finding solace though in knowing he was not the first to face trials and tribulations in service of Christ.

Or was he in fact now dead? He no longer knew what time it was, had long ago given up trying to figure out even what day it was. A perpetual foggiess lay over his mind as he struggled between conscious thought and nauseous delirium. Had it been night or day when they grabbed him? Had he in fact died when they had busted his arm with that, what was it he thought, most likely a sledge hammer? The pain of his arm suddenly brought him back, so much pain, he wondered; had he been lied to? Was he in hell? If he wasn't in hell then why wouldn't God take him now?

No questions this time, good he thought, he was tired of the voice anyways. Death, sweet death would be his reward, death and then finally resurrection and an immortal existence twice: his name once in this world and his spirit in the next.

Crack, this time he heard it without his ears, a crack inside his head as he felt warm liquid flowing down his face and through his hair. A

tingling as the liquid quickly cooled, this time even dizzier than before as he began to hope that his skull was broken. Fading again, like a sensation of drowning. Struggling to breath as he felt the waves of life washing over him.

*

"Bill, Bill what the hell are you doing?" Frank had searched for three days for his subordinate. Even going against S.O.P. and not reporting him for desertion. Three days and now he saw everything he needed to know.

Bill sat in the corner of the small broken one room house, the walls and ceiling hung on the verge of collapse from a recent bomb blast. Deep piles of dirt, debris and dust covered the floor and an unrecognizable 'rabbit' tied to an overturned chair. Billy was standing in the corner rubbing his hands hard in a bucket of water, placed upon a stack of discarded wooden crates; water which now more closely resembled Grenadine. Drops of blood on the Sergeant's green T-shirt and spattered across his face. Burning rage and hatred filling his eyes as his arms and hands shook noticeably.

"My God Bill you didn't kill the fucker did you!"

"Huh, not yet Captain, but soon." Bianchi said as he exhaled and smiled. A sinister smile like Frank had never seen in the N.C.O. before; Twisted and contorted in contempt and hatred. The Captain himself began to feel fear of his onetime friend as he saw the blood lust filling the man's eyes.

"Bill no, you need to stop! We need to know where that plutonium is going." Francisco said holding the younger man back as he readied himself for another round of attacks to a newly recovering 'rabbit'.

"Bill this ain't the way, we need him still."

Captain Rodriguez had never seen his friend in a state such as he saw him now: wild eyes, sweaty with aggression, and heavy angry breaths. He began to wonder if the heroes he had seen on his TV so many times had been correct. He had always known Bill Bianchi to be a reluctant warrior. An introspective man who fought for peace, now what he saw seemed to mark him the villain of so many of the imagined stories he had witnessed in his youth.

Chapter 35 (December 8, 2031)

"Order please, everybody I want to hear what he says," the old Lakota man said as he banged a small wooden gavel. Stephen had just explained his intentions, and the late afternoon meeting - held in the auditorium of the closed town schoolhouse - had quickly erupted into hundreds of simultaneous conversations and questions.

Stephen hadn't expected it to be so difficult to give away his land. Now he and Eric found themselves in front of nearly the entire tribe and he was worrying his gift might not be accepted. His own future plans hung in large part on the tribe accepting his gift.

"What're we going to do with a wind farm and land in Texas sir?" The question was asked by Eric's own cousin. The wounds between them had still not healed and Eric wondered if they may never. "And my cousin what's his role in all of this? We haven't seen him in years and now he comes back with this plan promising us new wealth from some new technology?"

"Mr. Mahpiya I can assure you and the good people of your tribe that there is nothing new about this technology. It is in fact the cutting edge of centuries old technology. Your people will own the lands, but the locals too have been promised free grazing rights into perpetuity. Profits from the wind farm will be split between employees, the local community and your reservation. It's a good deal sir with no down side for your people." Eric had previously warned Stephen just how difficult his cousin might be.

"Mr. Blake we have heard all of that before, why should we trust another white man?" David had seen too often now the lies of rich men like Stephen Blake.

"Because like many of you I was raised to believe in living in harmony with nature; I gave up using gasoline long ago, when I realized that industry and mass market consumer goods depended upon cheap petroleum bi-products to make plastics. My house is heated by solar and my vehicles, whenever the technology is available, all use alternative fuels. I am a man who lives up to his words, deeds and principles. I practice what I preach and I don't live by hypocrisy. I too believe in using everything that was given to me, to not waste anything and that by living a simple honest life you can find reward in this world. My family taught me values that many have long since forgotten. Values similar to what your people still try to teach your own children. I can assure all of you that I will make nothing from this deal. The land is yours to do with as you wish. Live there don't, live there, it's up to you." Stephen was not a man prone to debating matters he saw as trivial.

By the end of the day a vote by show of hands was taken. The land deed was accepted by a narrow margin, yet none of the tribe could agree on how to use it. They had worries over taxes and other concerns, but Stephen had promised to send

accountants and his own lawyer to set up the transaction to minimize any obligations that the new found asset might mean to them.

Eric left with Stephen by helicopter later that day, still without having talked to his cousin. He wondered even now if David might someday forgive him for his actions and for making him worry so much over all of the intervening years.

*

"What's this?" Richard Stephenson said as he sat at the small table in Stephen's cabin, drinking his coffee and holding a copy of Jack Brewster's paper.

Stephen had gotten to his cabin in Amarillo to meet a man whom had never wanted him to know his name. The man had not announced his visit nor been invited, but Stephen had quickly learned that this was his nature. Basic etiquette meant nothing to the man he saw before him; a man who presumed to be so important that his actions were always warranted.

"It's a newspaper, Dick and what the fuck are you doing in my cabin?" A part of Stephen had been eagerly awaiting this moment, the moment he could twist the knife into the man who had intended to do the same to him.

"Yes I know it's a newspaper, but we never agreed on head of the R.N.C. and we most assuredly never talked about releasing the news like this. I just hope you can remember Mr. Blake I own you. If it weren't for me you wouldn't own this land." Richard said, surprised that Stephen had learned his name.

"I'm sorry Mr. Stephenson you don't own me and I don't own this land either. It's in a private trust I think you will find the paperwork and ownership quite difficult to untangle but the long and short of

it is, I don't like you. I don't know who you work for, but I know you're no good and I intend to fight you anywhere I can, whether that's with votes and ballots or with fists and knives. Now like I said get the fuck out of my cabin before I shoot your ass for trespassing." Stephen said as he revealed the shotgun he kept hidden just under the 'kitchen' counter of the cabin.

Chapter 36 (December 7, 2031)

Dear Billy,

I'm sorry for all of the years of our distance. I suppose in my want to blame somebody for my abuse I chose you. I realize now how wrong I was. I ask you to please forgive me for forgetting about you for all of those years.

The new preacher I have been talking to has taught me that abuse can confuse and until you choose to overcome that turmoil you will inevitably end up causing pain to yourself and to others. He is a lovely man Billy. I know I was raised Catholic but what this man teaches is so true.

I have chosen to forgive my abusers and have now found a measure of peace within my heart and my life and now I wish to once again be a part of your life. I hope you can forgive me and we might at least be friends someday.

I know it won't be easy for you to forgive me but I am willing to work and wait as long as necessary until you do.

Love your Mom,

Maria Bianchi

The letter, Billy saw, was postmarked three weeks earlier. But he had long since gotten used to having to wait for the few pieces of mail he received. At the very least it was a nice Christmas present though. He had always longed for this opportunity, a chance to reconcile with his only family. A broken tie now nearly fifteen years in the making that hopefully would soon be rectified.

He opened his last piece of mail. It had no name and no return address and soon he learned why. Eric had always been a careful man, he remembered.

"Good news Sergeant?" Frank recognized immediately the change of mood in his non-com. He had worried for days about what his state would be as they had made their way back to the States. Relieved of duty and soon to be on leave, and finally relieved of the burden of a man they had both come to detest.

Frank was hoping now that two weeks leave in Fort Worth would do them both some good. They had already talked of local bars and joked of hopefully picking up a couple of cute Texas girls in Cowtown, USA. Fort Worth had been originally established as part of the Western Frontier during the Indian wars. Situated on a bluff overlooking the Trinity River at one time, it had quickly seen boon and bust cycles that were closely tied to the cattle and oil industries. Once again it was struggling as the housing market of the early part of the century and banking crisis soon became hard felt by the construction industry of the area.

In the late twentieth century a new focus was put into construction. An endeavor that throughout the centuries had been the marker and product of a good economy suddenly became an 'industry' unto itself and inevitably when it failed, took hundreds of thousands of decent paying jobs along with it.

Then a lowering of wages and the value of the dollar along with the sudden influx of cheap illegal labor, made the few remaining jobs left, within the construction sector, hard to find at best. Add to this the Day Labor organizations who sought to gain control over a wide range of labor markets. These pseudo-employers would siphon off upwards of fifty percent of the labor dollars spent in the industry; money which soon went to enrich men who sat in board meetings in white shirt and tie, rather than on high steel in T-shirt and jeans.

Communities who had depended on construction as their chief industry soon found out their own folly as a cycle of increasing unemployment, loss of tax dollars(from property and income), and other factors all conspired to steal revenues from nearly everyone. Soon Tightening housing markets made it even worse as individuals looking to buy homes chose cities with more viable industries. Another cycle of lies, apathy and short sightedness had once again come full circle as lack of business and workers soon conspired to destroy Fort Worth and America from the inside out.

The balance between labor and business had always been a delicate one. So when faced with lowered wages, businesses inevitably lost consumers for their products. For a short time the lowering of the American dollar served well to entice new consumers in overseas markets, but they too soon felt the effects of a workforce and a culture that was way out of balance and out of touch with reality. A business and industrial culture that was 110% in favor of those businesses which strove to take advantage of its employees and the public.

The real travesties were the millions of people who looked blindly upon these cycles and chose to blame themselves and other laborers instead of the constant escalation of executive pay and bonuses. They bought the lies of their leaders, politicians and media personalities asking for more manipulations the next day.

So in fact the public itself and individuals themselves became part of the conspiracy to rob the American worker and enrich a select few as they looked upon celebrity as something attainable for them too, not ever even paying heed just how unlikely those opportunities would be for them. Choosing a fools dream of future riches within their lives rather than a livable wage right now and washing down their ever growing despair over their failures with the promise of riches in a fantastical afterlife; or dulling their mind to their daily worries with even more lies. By sucking up hundreds of more hours of advertising each week that promised them happiness just by buying this or that product, device or service they really couldn't afford and didn't even need. None of them even realizing that, cycles come and cycles go, or that the most productive cycles are those that we come to believe are inescapable and therefore perpetuate ourselves.

Soon people faced with real economic hardships invariably did things they would never have considered doing before. Breaking the laws of man and spirituality quickly became inevitable for many when faced with no other alternative. Rodriguez himself had seen the effects of this kind of corruption when the military had begun to privatize.

Men he had watched enlist for economic gain rather than principle; men who were more beholden to their employer than to their ethics, values or even their own country. Or also the men who choose to follow leaders full of rhetoric instead of following the principles of spirituality, the Constitution or of common sense. Frank had joined the military for what he saw as principles, to protect America and further freedom. As the military became more and more privatized he was soon feeling as though his own principles were conspiring within himself to hide lies as truths. And that the propaganda he had seen so many times was now beginning to manifest itself as the inevitable and just path to follow.

Rodriguez had worried over what would happen to their prisoner now that he was in the base prison. He had come to mistrust his senior officers and most of what he was told now. Feelings of betrayals both in Mexico and Pakistan, he knew would always weigh heavily on his mind, if he chose to continue his military career.

Military career he thought mockingly. His studies in Roman history during childhood came back to mind. Thoughts of how military service had been conscripted duty men had been tasked with. A dreadful yet sometimes necessary chore, but it eventually had become a 'career' choice in those times; A career field full of men who had fought for money rather than principle, many of whom who had been raised since birth to fight and kill with absence of thought or remorse. Had it hastened the fall of that culture? He wondered now what it would mean for his own country.

Chapter 37 (December 8, 2031)

Matt had hiked for weeks finally reaching the place he had seen in only photos. It seemed to him one of the last pure places on earth; one of the few places that was still largely unspoiled by the devastation of so much indifference to the environment. Just a few miles outside of San Antonio was Miller's Pond.

He had thought he would have to live as a hermit when he was to reach his destination, but instead found a proud, peaceful group of about a dozen people there. They grew their own produce and herb and Matt knew immediately he had found a new home. The place they lived was called Walden Pond, between themselves. Founded on the principles of shared chores and free love it was the closest thing Matt had ever seen to a Utopia.

He was the oldest of the group, but they were quick to accept him. His hair had grown for several months now and it hung halfway down his back, while his beard had grown full, bushy and ragged. The young people of what they called their 'tribe' had immediately taken to calling him Paz. Not a one of them was older than twenty-five, Paz was soon to learn.

In this simple quiet place they had built a home of huts and tipis and were making a life for themselves. A life free of mass commercialization, consumer greed, societal hypocrisies and all of the

other ills of a culture they had all come to find to be out of balance with nature and being. They owned no televisions and had no interest in the mindless diversions that so many structured and scheduled their lives around. Blogs, newspapers and hapless chat rooms did nothing to fuel their imaginations.

Their inspiration came from themselves, nature and the herb they grew. Nights of playing music for each other's enjoyment or debating philosophical thought and days of gardening, painting and other artistic endeavors fueled their passions and brought them happiness. Sometimes Paz even found time to fish.

Chapter 38 (December 8, 2031)

Captain Fransisco Rodriguez approached the glass enclosed desk of the base prison. White concrete walls seemed to suck the life and hope away from those who entered the area. The room was small with only about a dozen chairs arranged along two walls and the guard's station at the farthest end. It had the deep scent of despair which can is seemingly best obtained through a combination of heavy dust and liberally applied cheap pine oil.

"I'd like to see Michael Ryan." Captain Rodriguez was still worried, even one week later, that he might be betrayed once again.

It seemed all too easy for their surveillance to have been exposed. He knew they had been careful and followed every measure of secrecy they could; and was despairing over the five men he had lost in the desert. Were they dead or simply lost? Frank had received no word either way.

He figured, if they had been captured, the local guerillas would have claimed credit. If killed, the American soldiers would have most likely found bodies. Too much of recent events simply made no sense to him anymore.

"I'm sorry Captain we have no Micheal Ryan here and no record for such a prisoner." Frank's jaw dropped as he heard the Duty Sergeant speak.

*

Bill and Frank had wished that they could have been given two rooms, but it seemed as though nearly every hotel they could afford was busy this weekend. Hotel staff had told them of how much the business was needed in Fort Worth, but that did nothing to make the forced roommate situation any easier.

Both men began carefully unpacking and laughing over their plans for the coming two weeks. Two weeks they thought, neither had seen an American city in over two years and Bill was thinking of how nice it would be to visit New York once again and see his mother, hoping that there would be time for all he longed to do. Their light mood and boisterous spirits were quickly interrupted by the sound of a knock on the door.

"Captain Rodriguez and First Sergeant William Bianchi, I have orders to arrest the both of you." The MP said as Frank opened the door and now both began to worry over the nature of their crimes.

"Arrest for what?" Frank asked, to the best of his knowledge neither had done anything illegal. At least nothing he would ever tell of. He knew right away the inherent issues with a man who had been pushed beyond the brink, but felt that his usually very professional NCO deserved another chance.

"Treason sir, that's all the arrest warrant says."

Bill wasted no time, he had no desire to return to prison as he lifted the thirty eight revolver from his open duffel bag and pointed it at the MP. "Down, mother fucker!"

The young MP realized right away that he had allowed the situation to get out of hand. Looking down the barrel of the revolver he quickly put his hands on his head and knelt on the floor.

"Sergeant what are you doing?" Captain Rodriguez asked, worried that he had misjudged his NCO.

"I won't go back to prison Captain." Bill Bianchi said as he pushed the MP into the bathroom, handcuffed the young man's arms around the base of the toilet and took his weapons.

"Sergeant we didn't do anything, you won't go to prison."

"Captain, don't be stupid. If they wanna' hang us they most assuredly will. I'm going Captain I recommend you do too." Billy said looking back through the open door of the hotel room.

*

"What's your plan Sergeant? I mean how do you plan on getting out of the city? And then what?" Captain Rodriguez asked as Bill drove the Humvee out of the parking garage.

"Captain what if I told you I did nearly three years as a kid in federal prison for killing a man who was raping my mother? There's no way I will ever go back there Cappy. I've worked too hard trying to put that period of my life behind me. The military was supposed to be my second chance. Now I see though it just made me a convenient patsy for them." Billy was unsure just where to begin in telling his story.

"You said there was no arrest record for Michael Ryan? Well I think I might know why. I was supposed to kill him," he paused for a moment while the truth of his statement was allowed to sink in with his Captain. "That was supposed to be my job. I

was told the plutonium would be stopped in Afghanistan," Sergeant Bill Bianchi knew now he would have to come clean, else he worried that people would die.

Bill reached into his B.D.U. shirt pocket looking to find the letter he had just received the day before. An address, just an address and a name he hadn't heard in years, but nonetheless was the name of the only man he had ever trusted. He already knew, one way or another, he was going to Amarillo.

"I think you need to tell me everything Sergeant," Captain Frank Rodriguez slowly began to realize just how deeply he had been betrayed.

Chapter 39 (December, 2031)

Jack always loved the process of assembling a paper, his favorite part of the week was when he could get fresh ink on his hands, as the newsprint ran off his small press. Wednesday's were his day, each early morning enjoying the fruits of his week's labor in the solitude of the offices as he listened to the print drums and cutters doing the work he had tasked them with. For him it had been a productive month. First Stephen Blake's announcement and then two big stories in the space of a few short days.

The photos he had published of a meeting in the desert between two apparently divergent personalities and now also an interview that would mark a new era in the once free press. He knew that it had only been his integrity to the truth that had secured for him the interview. Even now he was worried about being subpeonead, but determined that the truth greatly outweighed the risk.

The second story had also been on the insistence of Stephen Blake, it seemed he had another new endeavor and wanted to, what was it Jack thought, brag about it. No he thought, he knew better of Stephen now, and soon learned, that what he thought would be a small technology piece, was really something so much more important than that.

Aaron Whitehouse had been very cordial when showing the inner workings of what Jack had quickly come to call the UnderNet. In the bowels of nearly a dozen black semi-trucks hidden in back alleys and parking lots all over the country, he knew, now lay the last best hope for the free press.

Jack had seen right away what the newly tightened internet was now doing to a once great resource for free information, but the promise of safety from cyber-terror had led a reactionary public to once again leap without thinking. Rationalizing that their loss of paper profits meant more than their ever dwindling rights, freedoms, and privacy.

In 2020 the government had passed what at the time was heralded as the most powerful law yet to curb cyber-terrorism. This law gave broad powers to the Department of Homeland Security's cyber-crimes unit and allowed for the government to suspend indefinitely all non-government websites in times of emergency.

It had also required that all code writers be government licensed. The law was enacted just in time, so it seemed, when just the following year the Federal Reserve was apparently hacked. A massive banking crisis was narrowly averted as the internet went into lock down mode. Aaron and a few friends had worried that the lock down would never end and now, the more time passed, Jack, and it seemed even Stephen too, were also beginning to wonder.

The article was brief and told the story of a small group of friends from the now closed M.I.T. who had come up with the idea of an Underground Internet, an UnderNet as Jack Brewster had quickly coined their enterprise. Aaron had explained in depth as to how they were illegally piggy backing on old forgotten government servers, using spoofed IP addresses and tricking otherwise legitimate proxy servers into allowing them access. Jack could only hope that the organization might find a ready clientele looking for

services and servers to further their endeavors. He could even now imagine a vast array of script kiddies and would be hackers working late into the night in their parents basements, apartments, and dorm rooms.

When he envisioned them all devoted to keeping the signal alive he knew that freedom might some day be restored. Dozens, possibly even someday hundreds, and even thousands of disenchanting and disenfranchised men and women working with a singularity of purpose for a common goal. All for the love of a better future with no promise at all of economic gain and the ever looming threat of government pressure and jail time hanging over their heads. Men and women most in society had come to see as troublesome and destructive working together now to ensure a brighter future for even those who would call for their arrests.

They used, what was now, illegal open-source software. Software that had become nearly defunct because of government collusion with modern software giants.

Linux had long since offered hopes to those looking for a superior product that was not prone to intruders. The government however, always leery of what others might want to do in private, had come to see Linux based operating systems as posing a threat to the new Trusted Computing Technology. Technology that promised to allow snooping on private PC's and portable devices by government agencies as well as copyright holders and those wishing to secure sales of their proprietary software.

The technology behind the idea of Aaron's was not a new one, they used distributed packets the same way they had been used in the past for peer to peer connections and telephony services. The technology was tried and true and would offer a reasonably fast connection even on outdated internet connections. The article explained all of this in terms that Jack hoped the reader could easily understand, even though he didn't completely understand any of it himself.

*

He awoke to the sound of breaking glass, the overpowering stench of kerosene, an explosion, and a print room quickly becoming engulfed in flames. His newspaper had never had the most prestigious of offices. Just an old converted warehouse with remodeled offices, but the dusty old print room still had it's original exposed steel beams and grayed and worn wood floors. He knew the place was a tinder box full of chemicals and kindling in the form of news print. Quickly he realized the inevitable.

Jack covered his mouth with his shirt collar and carefully but quickly plodded his way down the stairs maneuvering past flames, which licked their way up the walls and across the ceiling, and falling burning wooden beams from the ceiling above, until at last he found himself in front of the old red brick warehouse that had become a raging inferno. He stared into the remnants of what had been his life and his love for over an hour, in the cold night air with the rain pouring down.

Chapter 40 (December 10, 2031)

"Mr. Stephenson, it's been a very long time. What brings you to Mexico City?" Bob Smith asked as he sipped his Pina Colada.

He had come to enjoy the perks of Mexico that a decent income now afforded him. A big house a pretty senorita and a cheap labor pool for household staff. All things he knew that white men had been intended to have by the Constitution of his forefathers. He had long reasoned that those great men had had their own slaves, big houses and stacks of cash, why would they not want that for all white men down through history?

He paid no attention to the writings of Jefferson that told of him being only a reluctant slaveholder who actually hated the institution of slavery and the social injustices of his time. He just concentrated solely upon what he felt was right in his own heart. It had long been this way though with men who sought to rationalize their evil and unjust deeds. They saw what they wanted to see, read only what fit into their narrow minded views and sought to destroy that which did not help further their agendas.

He had a large hacienda, close to the beach, but not so close to be noticed by the wealthy tourists who still came here. Funny he thought, the Mexican War seemed to him to be the most civilized war he had ever heard of. He never thought of what the implications of all too easy aggression might mean in the future. Bob just knew that privatized military force seemed to make war all the more palatable for the wealthy and powerful. Battles rarely made the news when private industry controlled both the media and the battlefield. Reporters now had to have permission from both the government and military contractors to be able to report on battlefield events. Both entities knowing full well the effects of showing Americans honest and accurate portrayals of a modern battlefield. Instead they showed them bombings and air missions that more closely resembled Forth Of July Fireworks displays than the horrors of death and destruction that were far more distasteful in American living rooms during Dinner time; with Mama and Paz having to explain to young Jack and Jill why young soldiers were screaming and writhing on their TV screens, between ads selling the latest breakfast cereals, or the benefits of clean coal.

He spent most of his days just as he was now, resting in his hammock in the courtyard of his mission style house. The calls of the birds and the gentle rustling of the palm trees an ever present comfort in an uncomfortable world.

A world he knew well through experience of battles long gone but knew too that would be dangerous to show to the vast majority of cowardly Americans who could not even face the horror of the world's truths. Those who watched horror movies for diversion, never even giving thought of the real horrors just down the back alleys of their city streets. Horrors that too were well hidden from a public who longed to see only pretty people, with phoney smiles and attitudes, and physical augmentations, on the boxes that brought them relief

from their own personal regrets and personal longings.

"Mr. Smith I have another delivery for you, but an old friend of ours will need to be dealt with too, Micheal Ryan. An associate was supposed to have eliminated him in Pakistan but he failed to do so. I'm sending him along once more but this time I want you to kill him and meet another associate of mine at these coordinates. It's just south of San Antonio." Stephen Blake said as he handed the ex-militia man a slip of paper with a series of numbers printed in pencil.

"I don't know Mr. Stephenson. I really don't know the kid that well, what's in it for me if I do this?" Bob Smith had long since come to realize that death and money could quite often go hand in hand.

"Listen you greedy fuck, I own you. You want a thousand troops coming in here tomorrow and arresting your ass? How about that pretty senorita of yours? You do this because I allow you to send drugs through the border. You do this because you would've been dead long ago if not for me. You do this because I fucking told you to." He said and then got up to leave.

"One more thing Mr. Smith I understand you have been driving alone with no troop support. That's not what I've been paying you for, now is it? For this package I will be sending some of my own men with you."

Chapter 41 (December 11, 2031)

Stephen Blake's Amarillo cabin had never been as busy as it was on this day. A meeting arranged hastily, when three men realized they all held the piece of a puzzle. Seven men now stood in his small cabin, all with information to offer but none knowing who should go first.

"Man I know this prick Jack. We went to M.I.T. together, racist fucker." Aaron's usually calm demeanor was now broken by the realization that something sinister was afoot.

"Jack you're sure this is Bob Smith?" Stephen still had trouble believing the implications of what they seemed to be learning.

"Sure as a heart attack." Aaron looked at the

final issue of Jack's paper, "Silence No More". The realization that it really was, no more, had still not completely hit Jack or Stephen.

"Sir, we know them too. Bob Smith and Micheal Ryan, we had both of them in custody. Both of them were released by more senior officers." Captain Rodriguez was just now coming to terms with the lie that his years of service suddenly seemed to have become.

"Jack do you think you can get me the coordinates of where you took these photos along with dates and times? Including when they are to meet again?" Stephen was beginning to formulate a plan. He had already begun to wonder over the government's commitment to capturing a man they all considered to be dangerous.

"One more thing sir," Captain Rodriguez wasn't sure how to tell them the last piece of information he knew they lacked. "Micheal Ryan just bought two pounds of plutonium-239 in Pakistan a few days ago."

The room went silent as five men breathed a heavy sigh of worry and fear, finally the silence was broken when Eric asked. "What kind of damage could two pounds do, Bill?"

"A city Eric, a whole city will be gone and radioactive fallout will spread for thousands of miles."

Stephen looked at First Sergeant Bill Bianchi, a look of sternness and knowing. "Son, I think you need to tell us everything you know. I'm not a military man, but I can tell when someone isn't being one hundred percent honest with me."

*

Bill's story of betrayal went back years in many ways. He struggled to think where to begin to

tell it but eventually decided on his first meeting with a man whose name he was never told.

*

It started in prison, I needed a way out and my lawyer introduced me to a man from Mili-Tech. All I was told was that they were a start-up military defense contractor. The man told me of his service in Iraq for Blackwater and how the privatized military had won that war for America.

He told me he could expedite my enlistment and get me out of prison if I played ball with him. He needed people inside he explained, people who would be both Marines and private soldiers. He did what he promised and then I didn't see him again until just before I joined your unit Captain. All he told me was that I would be offered a new mission and that I should take it and he reminded me of how my mother might come to some trouble if I didn't.

Then a few months ago I saw him again, it was just after we arrested Bob Smith. He just gave me a picture of Micheal Ryan, and told me that if I killed him my service to him would be over and my mother would be well taken care of.

I was supposed to kill Ryan back in Pakistan Captain, but it had to look like Taliban insurgents. They told me to beat him to death. To make it look bad, they even joked that I should behead him to make it look as real as possible. They promised to send my mother two million dollars if I did this and to give me my discharge.

*

Bill now felt as a child who had misbehaved. He felt the eyes of Eric and his Captain burning into him as if to judge his duplicity and treason. Two men whose respect Bill had always longed for.

*

Sir, the carrot was never supposed to leave Afghanistan, no one told me that my men and I would be attacked. None of it went as I was told it would. Now I'm wondering if there's someone out there with my number waiting to blow my brains out. They promised me that the package would be stopped just over the pass into Afghanistan. But now I'm worried, if it's in Mexico City then that's where Bob Smith is working from and his smuggling route is still open. It's coming here sir, I'm sure of that now.

*

"Jack we need information, we need to know where that material is going. And we need to know yesterday. Aaron we need you to be ready to report this story on the UnderNet." Stephen had quickly come to enjoy the term for his new enterprise. "Eric what would you need to lead twenty men through that desert and stop Bob Smith? Do what you have to Eric, kill him if it comes to it but that stuff may already be weaponized, if it gets to LA or New York then millions of people will die."

For a moment Frank was surprised that Eric would be chosen to lead what he saw as a military campaign but soon lamented when he realized the nature of their mission would be unlike anything he had been trained for. They would go by horseback, nonstop through the night to reach an early morning meeting they knew would occur in just two days. Thirty eight hours, even Eric wondered if it could be done as Stephen called out to the small community of Amarillo farmers who had come to think so much of him. Weapons, food, and horses arrived in large numbers and in just a few short hours.

Chapter 42 (December11, 2031)

Senator Carpenter had been surprised by his friends limo, as it pulled up to next to him. Leaving his office late, he had determined that a good night's rest at the Fellowship House was in order. A late night prayer meeting, he was hoping, would alleviate his mind of the burden of a goal he knew was necessary, but still was conflicted about. He had come lately to worry over what their plans would mean to a young man he had come to think so much of.

Unfortunately he also knew that Micheal's motivations were not inline with the motives of their own plans. He knew that there were times for ideology, but it was not always in a person's best interest to express those thoughts. Ideology aside, George had long since come to realize that doing things in secret could also serve a purpose.

"I assure you Micheal that this is still your mission. Yes, go to the rendezvous and see to it that all goes as planned. I know something went wrong I'm looking into that now. You have nothing to worry about, you will be a martyr I promise." Stephenson had long since tired of dealing with the young ideologue. When he had first called, he had wondered whether he should even accept the call.

Richard finally hung up the phone. "George this young man will ruin everything. You know that we can't be seen as having a part in any of this. It has to appear as though it was Muslims who did this. I know you like this young man but if he lives he'll brag to everyone what he did and then our plan will be destroyed." George Carpenter was beginning to have doubts about their plan, but was starting to believe again as his old friend spoke.

"The only way we can ensure a future for the military defense industry and ensure safety for America is to keep Americans worried over future terrorism. Unfortunately they are jaded and desensitized now. Too many years of constant media attention focused at the most egregious actions has made them inattentive. We need to wake them up to the dangers that're out there. Be-headings and hijackings are useless in an era of nuclear proliferation. We need to remind them of why we are fighting these wars." Stephenson had learned, through many years of careful study, exactly how to pull men's strings. Fear and paranoia was but just one way he knew, but quite often it was the best way.

"I thought he would be disposed of in Pakistan?" George was beginning to feel uncomfortable in his increased involvement in an affair he knew could spell an end to his career if it were discovered.

"Our friend failed in his mission. Now he's deserted along with his commanding officer. We can only assume that they've talked and now two men are out there who could endanger our plans. I need you to

find them before they get to Micheal." Stephenson was relishing his now found control over the US Senator.

"How do you know they'll go after Michael?" George himself was a runner when faced with trouble, he could not understand those who would seek anything else but a safe place to hide in times of turmoil.

"Because that's what they are trained for. They are hunters."

Chapter 43 (December 13, 2031)

They had ridden hard from Amarillo to the outskirts of Juarez. A trip many of them thought impossible on horseback, but now they awaited a meeting they knew was to happen at any moment. They lay prone in the already too hot sun, hoping to avoid detection until the last possible moment. They knew that their only ally was the element of surprise.

As the white unmarked semi-truck pulled up to the meeting point, they immediately realized something was different. This time the truck was accompanied by four Humvees. All heavily armed and each carrying four soldiers or more and their uniforms seemed different from the B.D.U.'s they had all known so well.

The camouflage seemed to move in response to the changing background behind each of the men. The 'cloth' seemed to be much tighter across their skin as well, all of this served to make the opposition force nearly invisible except when they moved. The shifting pattern had an inevitable lag to it, but still made an accurate counting of the opposition

force difficult at best.

The semi stopped and now Eric watched through binoculars as an old white Chevy Tahoe pulled up in front of the delivery vehicle, the S.U.V. had long since been faded of its original color and luxury. Now it seemed odd that at one time someone would have prized this vehicle so much as to pay \$100 or more at each fill up. It's passenger door was now gone, the rear windows were missing and it's many dents and rust spots conspired to hide the make and model from even the most knowledgeable auto-file.

Eric held back the call to attack, knowing they had the element of surprise going for them and hoping that following the younger man when he left in the semi would prove easier than attacking fifteen men or more. Soon both drivers left their vehicles and approached each other. He had been told how these meetings always preceded, an exchange of vehicles and that was it. Now he determined he should wait for the trade and follow Micheal Ryan.

Through his binoculars he could see that the young man was still badly beaten and holding his chest with one good arm in an unusual manner, while his left arm laid across his torso in a makeshift sling. He glanced at Bill for a moment but looked away when he saw his friends look of disgrace. Eric knew right away something was different and called for the attack as he saw the semi's driver pull a black and silver Smith and Wesson .357 from inside his thin jacket.

Eric and twenty other men mounted their horses quickly and rode hard, directly into the sights of the larger force. Firing with rifles they placed their shots carefully. Realizing right away that something wasn't completely right. Their shots, even their best placed shots, seemed to do no damage to their combatants. Eric watched as a handful of his men fell from their horses grasping open wounds and writhing in pain.

"Eric, in the head, shoot 'em in the head!" Captain Rodriguez called out over his walky-talkie, using the common channel that they had all agreed upon earlier. Eric was beginning to wonder if they had failed their mission as the semi began to turn hard to leave down a dirt road and headed South at a very high speed.

Captain Rodriguez had long heard the promise that nano-fiber military wear held for future soldiers. He had never expected to see the technology within his own lifetime though. The promise of nearly instant active camouflage had seemed the stuff of Science Fiction when he had first heard of it. But now seeing that very thing in front of himself he knew already what they were up against. The suits, it seemed to him, had promised to make future soldiers nearly invisible, invulnerable, and invincible.

He knew the tiny molecular fibers could become rigid quite fast to protect from most small arms fire and could also seal minor wounds until a medic arrived. He also knew the best bet to take down soldiers protected in this manner was close range shots to the head.

They shot wildly at the retreating Humvees and even chased them for a few short miles, but their tired horses were unable to keep up. Eric and Frank however had stopped where young Micheal Ryan lay with a gaping wound in his chest, gasping for breath. Eric could only hope now that they could keep the man alive at least for a time; time enough to learn whatever the young man could share.

Chapter 44 (December 14, 2031)

"Mr. Smith it's nice to see you could make it. The package it's intact too?" The soldier wore no insignia but his age and demeanor told Bob right away that he had to be significantly high up.

"Yes everything is there."

They were meeting in a wooded area that served only to make the high strung Bob Smith all the more anxious. Not being able to see what might be lurking in the shadows, the dark of the early morning hour, and the nature of the men who had accompanied him, served to unsettle his nerves more than he had ever known before. On top of it he had never driven so far into Texas and was now wondering if he had made a mistake in accepting this delivery.

He had dealt with Micheal Ryan many times and knew that if it ever came to it he could easily take care of that young man.

"So our business is done then, where's my return vehicle?" Bob Smith was anxious to now put some distance between himself and the men he was now dealing with.

"It's not going to be like that this time Mr. Smith, you must pay for your crimes." These were the last words Bob Smith heard, just before the bullets entered his body, seemingly from all directions, rocking and twisting him back and forth until he could no longer stand.

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Paz had hiked out to see there would be intruders as soon as he had heard that they may have company. Now he stood in shock as he watched a cold blooded murder by American soldiers.

Chapter 45 (December 17, 2031)

"Eric, he's coming to. I'm just amazed that he survived his wounds. Besides the gunshot he had broken ribs that could have pierced his lungs at anytime. Hell, he even had a cracked skull, but I've got him in casts now and he'll live. That young man definitely has something driving him. If it's hatred then he's got a lot of it for sure." David Mahpiya told his younger cousin as he walked out of his clinic and struggled to focus his eyes to the bright sunshine.

It seemed much warmer to all of the men than what they considered normal for late December. The grasses of the reservation had browned and the trees had lost their leaves yet the bright sun and warm weather seemed to be completely unnatural with Christmas quickly approaching.

Eric, even now, worried over having asked Stephen for his assistance in flying them all back to

Crow Creek, but there was only one Doctor that either trusted to attend to the needs of both their men and their captive. The old Huey had been cramped but had at the very least provided a fast retreat.

Three men had died and several were now struggling to overcome injuries from gun shot and shrapnel, but Eric and the two military men, whose opinions he had come to think so highly of, were now counting themselves lucky. After all, they reasoned, with an ill-trained force, the terrain and other conditions against them, it could have gone far worse.

"Give him a little more time Eric, remember he's been through a lot already. Win his trust and I'm sure you'll learn the information you need." David said as he pat his cousin on the back.

Old wounds had healed hard and still both men wondered if they would ever heal completely, but the last few days had served them well towards finding some level of trust again.

Chapter 46 (December 21, 2031)

"Young man I'd like you to tell me where that bomb's headed." Eric asked as nicely as he knew how, as he carefully gave the young man food and water. Fed to him in small drops and in tiny spoonfuls.

"Yeah right Chief, like I'd ever tell you." Micheal Ryan struggled to say the words through the searing pain of his broken jaw.

"Hmmm, that's funny Mike, mind if I call you Mike? Seems to me that your friends used you. They even tried to kill you back in Pakistan, if you don't believe me I can have a mutual friend tell you the same thing. Oh yeah you don't like Italians either do you? Well then I guess you could always give your employers another call and find out for yourself." Eric paused to give the words time to linger. "It doesn't mean anything to you that millions of people will die does it?" Eric said as the hateful man turned his head away.

"A lot of them women and children, some of them white, just like you." Eric did his best to keep his tone and demeanor, that of a man who wanted to be friends. "Before I leave young man think about this, those people wanted to kill you to see a plan come to fruition. They wanted to steal your glory in fact. How about you tell us where that bomb's going and who hired you and then we can stop them and you can still have some of that glory."

Eric looked at the I.V. drip connected to the

man's arm, feeding him the life giving juice his body silently craved. "You know my wife died on that very same bed. A victim of medical shortages to my people in fact; but I guess you were lucky that we're the same blood type." Eric paused, letting his words hang on the air and in the young man's mind. "Not so different after all, are we?"

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"Sorry I left you for so long. I was at a Christmas party, here this is for you. It's not much, but it's for you." Eric said as he laid a hand knit sweater over his new ward. "Just think someone thought enough of you, despite your hatred for them, that they made that with their own hands, just for you. It's funny hah, just how good people can be even when confronted with so much hate." Eric paused for a moment. "You know what? It looks pretty good on you too." He smiled putting his hands down quick to his knees and proclaimed. "Well I'm going back to the party enjoy your Christmas present."

Eric wondered if had he seen a flicker of something in the young man's eyes. He turned to walk out the door of the examination room but felt the man grab his hand with his still very weak and shaking hand. Eric stopped and leaned in to hear the man's words.

Chapter 47 (December 21, 2031)

"Where's the signal coming from damn it?" Richard Stephenson was not at all happy as he watched thousands of illegal websites now posting a plan he had tried desperately to keep secret.

Access to the communications room of D.H.S. had long since been allowed only to those with the very highest of security clearances but inevitably those in positions of importance to national security would be granted access as need be. In this manner and through his affiliations with high level military and government people, the head of Mili-Tech and it's nearly three hundred subsidiaries - including privately funded learning institution, advertising agencies, oil exploration companies and other corporations - now found himself in a large room cluttered by computer workstations and nearly fifty D.H.S. agents working hard to thwart what they saw as the greatest risk to internet security, his businesses and the country that they had ever seen.

Richard Stephenson had invested his life savings into his private military force, and with each small contract he had acquired, quickly built it up to a level that had put him in direct competition with his previous employer Blackwater. Other men with prior military experience had joined him too, as investors, consultants, and employees. Even several powerful Washington men had invested their money into what they saw had the possibility of becoming a very lucrative investment.

As he built his business he invested into other ventures that would benefit his core business. Private schools, advertising companies, media conglomerates and many other businesses quickly found themselves in his targets for mergers and acquisitions. His company now owned private schools in thirty-two states, national news outlets,

newspapers and a controlling stake in a major microchip manufacturer.

His endeavors of acquiring subsidiary businesses had escaped the scrutiny of the S.E.C. and other government entities because he had no monopoly in any one industry. The fact that each subsidiary would benefit dozens of others, he also owned, went completely unnoticed as it didn't violate any laws.

In a government that had long ago given up enacting new business and industry laws, the old laws had quickly proven ineffective. Yet laws, that would have seemed common sense to many, were never pushed forth in a legislature that was entirely beholden to lobbyists, political action committees, and special interest groups. Besides many of these questionable deals offered great promise for investors who had gotten in early enough to guaranty themselves enough wealth that they could continue to contribute to their favorite politicians. And so a cycle was allowed to complete itself that was of great benefit to a small minority of rich and powerful men.

"Sir they're using government servers to provide DNS and IP addresses. Literally thousands of servers but we think we have a lock on the wireless carrier and have mobilized troops to their location." The young intelligence officer said as he looked at his computer terminal.

Craig Phillips saw this position as just another stepping stone in his intelligence career. Recently relieved from field work he had soon come to see that new technology would replace traditional field work and quickly determined to learn as much of it as he could. Electronic eavesdropping hadn't been anything new, but with the closing of the previously naive idea of a free and open internet, inevitably hundreds of clandestine servers had sprung up. Each of which had necessitated legal action until now this. This was something the young man had not been taught how to deal with.

Special Agent Phillips had dark hair cut in a crew cut style and wore thin wire framed glasses with round lenses. He still had his field agent physique and tried hard to always find time to include regular exercise in his weekly regiment. After all he thought, if you wanted to be successful in your field then a carefully polished appearance was an absolute necessity.

"Good kill that signal, kill it now!" Stephenson demanded.

Thousands of newly illegitimate servers, now finding new life on an illegal network, had all simultaneously posted the same news bulletin.

"NUCLEAR ATTACK, New York City January 1st 2032."

The race was now on, the clock was ticking, and the sands were about to run out for over 20 million people.

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"I repeat the news posted on illegal servers this early morning was in fact a hoax, perpetuated by a clever group of hackers. These men violated numerous federal laws in the process. The authorities ask anyone with knowledge of the whereabouts of Aaron Whitehouse to please call police or DHS authorities immediately." The young reporter had just recently been handed his 'copy' from an F.C.C. official who the studio paid to be sure that they would not be in violation of any regulations.

"Aaron Whitehouse is known to be involved with an unnamed terror cell operating out of Texas and affiliated with the Arizona militia leader Bob Smith. Federal agents successfully fought off Mr. Smith and twenty other men near Juarez Mexico just a few days ago. Mr. Smith and three of his followers died in the process. There were no military casualties. Department of Homeland Security personnel tell me that these men are armed and very dangerous

and that they need your help to apprehend them before they can be allowed to breed panic in other American cities."

"I repeat these warnings are pranks performed by non-licensed hackers. Dangerous men who would seek to wreak havoc an an unsuspecting public."

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World News Network had been playing the story at twenty minute intervals throughout the day. Even as Aaron was moving his rolling communications vehicles at one hour intervals to keep their signal alive, it seemed already that their message was doomed to fall upon deaf ears.

'Hackers', had become an idea that had been manipulated into the most loathsome of words ever since the start of the twenty first century. Yet few people ever thought on the original meaning of the word as it applied to the PC revolution. Instead the word conjured images of virus writers and dangerous people. A notion perpetuated and nurtured by a dishonest media and a government collusive with software giants. If they had bothered to educate themselves, to the word's origins, they would have known that the earliest uses of the word simply signified a person capable of clever solutions to daunting problems. Or a person capable of making systems and programs do things previously not intended. It had never exactly meant criminally minded or irresponsible people or behavior, and that several early computer pioneers had in fact credited themselves as hackers. People like Steve Wozniack and Steve Jobs who had soon found the name maligned by a competitor who had quickly come to see the profit potential of proprietary programs and didn't want any of his previous associates, many of whom had actually done much more to further the PC revolution, reeking the benefits of his hard work. He had no desire to share credit on any of his own endeavors even as he sought ways to make a buck off the work of others. And so, as many notions went in a paranoid

society, the meanings quickly became twisted to suit the purpose of men who would promise to know what was best for others.

Aaron fancied himself and his men white hatters, a term born in the late twentieth century to overcome a growing tide of backlash over the word hacker. The term white hatter meant to use your knowledge of technology to do good. Even if some others might claim that what you were doing was illegal. Aaron took comfort in the knowledge that throughout history men just like himself had been forced to break the law in order to serve the public good. Great men of history, including the country's forefathers, had once been seen by others as criminals. He hoped that the endeavors of his men would someday be seen more favorably than they were now.

Aaron looked on proudly now as his 'hackers' did their jobs to the topmost level he had ever seen. Young men and women whom through their association to him and to their commitment to the truth were now hunted people. Individuals working with a singularity of purpose in a fight against what they saw to be a bleak future; not just for what they had prized as a way to connect humanity but also for humanity and freedom itself.

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"The signal is still getting out though isn't it?" Stephenson said, growing angrier by the moment.

"Yes sir, yes it is. They seem to be mobile sir, every time we get close the signal jumps several hundred miles away. It looks like we are dealing with ten or more mobile units. We can only hope to get lucky and someone comes forward with some information." Craig Phillips knew his words would not be well received.

Richard Stephenson was tiring of government incompetence. After all he reasoned, hadn't the

internet security bill been meant to stop just this kind of attack? If they could so easily corrupt A.R.P. tables and spoof legitimate servers then what good were the laws meant to thwart this very thing now? These were phrases and terms that Agent Phillips had tried his best to explain to him, but had fallen on deaf ears. Stephenson cared little about technology unless it could be used to control others to his liking. Something he had, up until this very moment, considered himself a master at doing.

Chapter 48 (December 22, 2031)

Ack and Al sat watching television, neither of them rarely did anymore. The restaurant was now out of business. Ack and Al had taken to playing chess in the park or cards at Ack's small SOHO apartment. But they had overheard the news while getting a hot dog across from the park, and soon went to a nearby bar to hear the rest.

Neither man watched much television anymore, having long since tired of it's lies, hypocrisy and seeming revelry in the most terrible of human conditions. Yet they had to watch this, having gone to the sermons a few times, they knew that what Arthur O' Connell was teaching might have repercussions and now they knew for sure.

At one time Al had loved World Network News. Now he no longer trusted them, but this story he knew was to mark a new dark era in America. Were they in fact warranting an end to freedom of religion in America as people had known it?

At the very least they seemed to be promoting only sanctioned churches in the commentary leading up to their lead story. Government collusion into churches to guaranty that only state approved churches had a voice and that hybrid or neo-Christian movements would now be illegal. A seeming partnership and validation between government and the big 'official' churches in order to promote the business

of God.

They seemed to be espousing the very same dogma that the Puritans had escaped the Church of England for. Government supported 'churches' that would ensure that only the most widely accepted notions, beliefs and ideas would be allowed to be heard by the public.

They were talking about using old laws to protect the public from unpopular, non-traditional and inflammatory preachings. Taking advantage of a reactionary, easily manipulated public by playing upon their paranoia.

Alex Ackerman and Alessandro sat and discussed all of these implications knowing that everything they once knew was about to change.

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"And now to Bart for our lead story, where are you Bart?"

"Hey Charlie, I'm in New York City, just over there is Central Park, where police tell me they expect twenty thousand arrests today. This city has long since become a problem for DHS personnel. It is poised on the verge of economic collapse, A police siren caused him to temporarily pause and then continue in a louder voice. crime has risen 700% in just the last ten years and businesses all over the city are now closing their doors, as the last colleges of the city close their doors. Subways and public transportation have been closed for three years now; and the city is a powder keg waiting to explode."

"Now here comes what many in the Catholic, Baptist and other state sanctioned churches are calling the Anti-Christ. His name is Father Arthur O'Connell, his followers kill him King. His crime? Organizing unsanctioned public events and assembling convicts in Convict Free Areas such as Central Park

behind me. Police and D.H.S. personnel promise me that they have enough jail space for these massive arrests. Yankee stadium has been annexed as a temporary jail and now we wait to see if Father O'Connell will indeed speak his heresy during this all holy time of year. We are sorry to say but we will not be able to report the sermon as it has been deemed to be obscene and inflammatory by F.C.C. officials."

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Arthur climbed to his 'pulpit' once again, knowing already what was in store as he did so. He had practiced the sermon many times. A speech, an idea, that he had thought many times but worried over as being too inflammatory, but if this would be his last sermon then so be it. He would rather have his 'church', for lack of a better word, go down in a final blaze of glory than to see it die with a whimper. He had already determined that God and the congregation deserved that much at the least.

Arthur took a moment to clear his throat and take a sip of water. This was by far the largest group he had ever spoken in front of and suddenly he felt anxiety that rivaled even his first sermon; but the unseasonably warm day and bright blue skies, this late in the year, seemed to reaffirm to him that God was smiling on the endeavors of the day.

"Greetings my flock... A flock? I've always had trouble with that word. We are told to be like sheep to Jesus not to a church or a preacher, yet this is what we are told we are by those who would presume to know what God had intended. An intention that is based upon misreading itself. For Christ compared himself to a shepherd of men. The allusion was meant to show the value that he put into the well being of all men. It was never intended to mean that we should follow blindly."

"But misinterpretation and felonious men throughout history have so maligned and twisted

scripture that the original intent is nearly gone; Fundamentalist preachers and cultists who would tell us we should follow other men blindly as they promise to be the only ones to know what God intended. They take what few texts they have studied and ignore the vast number of writings from other religions and spirituality's and promise that theirs is the last, final and most right word on the subject. Meanwhile they borrow as they see fit from these other faiths, and use them to support their nefarious goals."

Arthur paused for a moment, to catch his breath more than anything else. He was already feeling a hesitation over what he was to say next.

"They do this in hopes of influencing others to their faith and their teachings for a single purpose. To build upon their power base by building as large a congregation as they can. Their purpose in many ways is to exclude through promising inclusion but an inclusion based upon biased principles that others quite often disagree with and sometimes even find offensive, and that they offer the only path to God and heaven."

"They tell us that Thursday is Christ's birthday, but historical fact tells us that this is not the case. So what was the significance of December 25th? December 25th was a pagan holiday and one of those very same pseudo-religious men sought to bastardize even the Christian religion by including pagan rituals into the faith. Arthur took another pause, this time for effect. In fact many of the texts of the ancient Christians tell us we are not even to celebrate the Birth of Christ but to rather celebrate his resurrection as the holiest day of the year. Many people would promise to tell you why Constantine would do this, but no one can know for sure. What we can do however is try to find some connection between their spirituality and how it connects to our church and to our values. As we should do with all of God's teachings. Be he called Wakatanka, Allah, Yahweh or just God. So today let's determine what connection lies in Roman Paganism and my beloved Christianity."

"The celebrations of all pagan religions were meant as a reaffirmation of life. The winter solstice, December 25th was their most important; Acknowledging a time when once again the days would grow longer, the life giving sun would be renewed and a chance for men to find renewed vigor would occur. It was also a time to acknowledge man's connection to the earth, something even my very own beloved Bible failed to ever really do."

"My beloved bible says only that man should have dominion over all things of the earth, but what kind of dominion should that be? I say that in large part we have lost our role as responsible stewards over man and beast. Choosing instead to rob and rape the land and nature and in turn also rob and rape each other. We have lost our human values by choosing instead to revel in our basest desires of greed, intolerance, lust and apathy."

"So even though today may not be the birthday of Christ, maybe just maybe Constantine hoped that by connecting the best of what the pagans of his time saw as responsible and thoughtful; with what the Christians saw as the best of what was decent and right; that maybe something new might be forged from two schools of thought; both of which failed to go far enough in their teachings of either." Arthur could feel the minds of over 20,000 people now hanging on his every word as over 40,000 eyes stared upon him.

"Unfortunately those teachings though have once again been bastardized. This time by media and the big business churches. Churches which say that no matter how hard we try we will always be sinners so don't even worry about trying and media that tells us that our sins of greed, apathy and intolerance are justified and that we are all entitled to consumer gratification and our basest desires. Both agencies telling us through their deeds and speech that men are intended to take what they want irrespective of what it will do to nature and fellow man."

"Supposed 'men of God' who would rather see us all separated into our own groups and separate theologies so that they can keep the power that they have. They have no concerns to bring men closer together as this doesn't serve their own greedy purposes."

"Even now as you see those helicopters overhead and have heard the warnings that we will soon all be arrested, I tell you it doesn't have to be this way. That we can find common ground and once again move to a new era of peace, hope and happiness for all men, as God had intended. Yet there are those who say these are dangerous ideas, immoral thoughts and would want to call us heretics. This makes us all now wanted men, but I say alas we have all always been wanted men. Wanted by God, but as we are wanted by God he wants us to want for each other too. To want for a better day for each other as brothers and to want for a better day for the Earth as well." Arthur paused once more.

"So I say to you now, God Bless This Solstice, as we welcome back the sun and the new days."

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The first explosions of Tazer bombs occurred just overhead, as Arthur was leaving the pulpit to a rousing orchestra of applause. The small round metal orbs erupted fifty feet overhead darkening the sky with their tiny sharp projectiles. Each projectile, in fact, a tiny innocuous looking dart. Thousands of sharp darts, each carrying a ten thousand volt charge of electricity, piercing the flesh of the congregation, sending many of the revelers wriggling and writhing on the ground. Then came the crowd suppression grenades exploding within the crowd. Spewing forth thick gray clouds of noxious fumes. And then the screams, coughs and gags of over twenty thousand men and women as they struggled to breath under the thick haze of the insulting fumes.

Arthur struggled to breath after he inadvertently inhaled from a CS grenade that had landed near his feet. His eyes quickly welled with tears so heavily that he could only wander aimlessly as he sought to find his way away from the torment of the thick gray gas. Thick green snot began to hang from his nose as he began to drool uncontrollably from the thick heavy and bitter taste that was filling his mouth and throat. His skin burned and itched in a sensation he had never known before. He quickly wondered if he was dying and worried over the members of his 'church'.

He knew many of them to be elderly or disabled, and whether the gas was poisonous or not, he knew that it might indeed be deadly to those with pre-existing breathing conditions. Or that possible stampedes of people might lead to many unintended injuries. It seemed to him now as though he was indeed being setup for a far worse crime than first told of.

Chapter 49 (December 23, 2031)

"Well, we've done all we can Eric. Those who believe it will get out I'm sure. We even posted Micheal's confession but Carpenter is denying everything, even knowing Stephenson. Those who believe will get out and that's all we can hope for." Stephen said hoping to sway Eric's mind to trust in him. He had tried repeatedly to warn friends, but missed phone messages and dropped connections had conspired against his best efforts.

In fact in some ways it seemed to him that something just wasn't right in New York. Busy signals had plagued his calls for the last twelve hours and now he was wondering if something else might be happening.

"Eric have you seen this?" Bill rushed into the now out of business saloon holding a USA Today. It's front page proclaiming 20,000 arrests in Central Park. The second page listing each name, near the top of the second column was a name Bill Bianchi had dread to see, Amanda Bianchi, his mother.

Chapter 50 (December 23, 2031)

"Miss Mjedved?"

"Yes"

"This is Mr. Stephenson. I represent Sen. Carpenter's office here in Maine. After scanning the databases of all of the recent graduates for academic excellence your name has come out near the top of the list. We would like to offer you a job." The voice on the phone seemed very cordial, she quickly imagined an aged aide working in some lonely public office back in DC.

Nina gasped in astonishment at the proposition. It seemed the kind of job she had studied so hard for all of her life. A chance out of the little coffee shop she had worked at for so long and the beginning of a real life based upon a real career. Promises of so much yet to come now ran through the young woman's overactive imagination.

"Are you kidding me? Shane is this you? If it is I'll never speak to you again."

"Ms. Mjedved. This is not, ...Shane. I assure you I am who I say I am and that I represent Sen. Carpenter from Maine." The man seemed honest and sincere enough or so it seemed to the naive Nina.

"What kind of job?"

"You will be working under Sen. Carpenter on foreign dignitary trips. Do you like to travel Ms. Mjedved?" Again Nina was left speechless.

"Um, yes. I mean, I've never traveled anywhere before."

"Ms. Mjedved, can you be ready by tomorrow morning to catch Sen. Carpenter's personal jet here to Maine? By 8:00AM?"

"Yes, absolutely. Yes."

"I will presume you have accepted the position then. Sen. Carpenter will be very happy. A car will come by your house at 7:00AM to drive you to the airport. You will need an overnight bag only. It's Christmas and Sen. Carpenter likes to indulge his perks on new hires. Are there any questions Ms. Mjedved?"

"Ummm, no? Well I guess not. Ummmm, I guess I'll be ready." Someday the off-handed comment would eventually cause her to wonder why it hadn't risen suspicions in her. But her mother had sought and done an admirable job of hiding and protecting her daughter from the seamier side of life. Even though well educated, Nina, by her mother's protective nature, and through her own seclusion towards anything of a romantic nature, had become very naive of the nature of some men.

"Ms. Mjedved, you have made your first political decision. One you will not soon regret."

Nina hung up the phone, stood there for several moments, then screamed loud enough for the whole neighborhood to hear. Only her mom responded.

"Nina, what on earth is that for?"

"I'm working under a Senator mom. I'm in politics!"

Chapter 51 (December 25, 2031)

"Mayor we need help out there, the city is tearing itself apart. My men are outnumbered by the sheer volume of rioters. It seems that damned preacher was a lot more popular than we first estimated." The New York City police commissioner had come into office just after a massive corruption scandal.

He was a young man for the position he held. At fifty-three he stood tall at six foot one and still had his military physique. Hours spent daily in the gym served well to keep him alert and ready for action.

Patrick Silverman was the product of a marriage between an Irish flatfoot and a Jewish District Attorney. He had grown up listening to his mother's stories of busting drug dealers and keeping the peace, and quickly fell in love with the ideals of To Protect and Serve, and determined at a very young age that he would follow in her footsteps.

Patrick's black hair was now quickly receding from the stress of his new position. Yet he was not a man to tolerate bad decisions by bureaucratic incompetence. A hero of 911 his ascendancy seemed a certain inevitability in the years leading up to the

corruption scandals of his predecessor. In fact, right now he would have rather been out on the streets quelling the massive riots that had swept over his city than to be in the Mayor's office demanding and begging for him to call the governor for National Guard support.

He had known the previous Mayor to be an effective leader and a highly competent official. His absence from the job had sparked an intense campaign by dozens of would be replacements. Many of them with little to no real leadership experience. Including the man in front of him.

The new Mayor had won his support, so it seemed, by his mere media celebrity. A one time internationally known real estate developer, TV personality, writer and casino owner; he had quickly found himself in favor of the local media covering the election process.

"Damn it Mayor, we need those troops now. My men are dying out there. And on top of it, now we have that internet prank to deal with. Nearly two thirds of my men have deserted the city. Without National Guard support this city will burn to the ground." As he yelled and demanded he wondered how the public could have elected anyone so indecisive.

However he knew the man to be likeable, as he made rousing speeches to great effect, to sway public opinion in his favor. His leading opponent, during the circus that had concealed itself as a campaign race, had called him a celebrity C.E.O. with no real experience at the job he coveted. He had even gone so far as accusing the new Mayor of buying votes as he collected unprecedented levels of money to fund a campaign that had narrowly escaped investigation by the Attorney General's Office. Now Patrick realized finally what the other candidate had meant. Seeing a man in front of him whom seemed paralyzed by fear of being seen as ineffective. His care for his public image now coming back to bite him in the ass as Patrick saw a man who obviously had no substance. A

shiny veneer but a hollow suit nonetheless.

Patrick Silverman left City Hall with just a promise that the Mayor would sleep on it. Later that night the Mayor and his family would quickly leave the city in fear of another major terror event.

The Commissioner knew that all over the city buildings were ablaze, so many fires that the now depleted FDNY had decided to concentrate solely on Government buildings and let privately owned buildings burn in large part. He imagined now that the fires might be visible as far away as Newark. His city, his home going up in flames even as the UnderNet seemed to be promising far worse yet to come.

He had never seen destruction of the likes before. Even 911 now seemed to pale in comparison as he watched normally sedate happy liberal people as they overturned cars and threw Molotov cocktails at homes, businesses and churches.

Mostly churches it seemed to him, over one hundred churches burning all over the city and even in the boroughs. Saint Patrick's had been the first to be attacked. It had done its best to fight off the flames. Being built of a marble veneer and a brick frame, it had taken three days for its structure to weaken enough to finally cause its collapse. He wondered this time how the investigations would precede as to the cause of the destruction. Maybe this time they could forgo the forensic testing of the causes, he supposed, in light of how obvious it was to the cause.

He already knew the loss of the once great church, that had only recently celebrated its 150th anniversary, would be felt for many years to come. The area across from Rockefeller Center, he knew would no longer be the same as the great Gothic style cathedral with its 300 foot spires would no longer pierce the sky as they had for so long. With the local economy in such desperate states too he

supposed that it would possibly be decades before anything replaced it, a vacant lot that would soon fill with rats and debris, both the literal and figurative kind he supposed. Manhattan would never be the same with the inevitable rise in crime in a place that had once attracted millions of tourists each year.

He wondered how many people would die before it was over. Worried over friends and colleagues as he watched his men struggle against overwhelming odds and a seemingly endless escalation of violence. He knew there would be no annual New Years celebration now and wondered how long it would take the city to heal from so many losses at a time of year that men had been meant to reflect on peace and love. Hope to him now seemed lost.

Who were these people tearing his home town apart? He already knew; they were his friends, neighbors and even those who had voted for him. A cycle of panic, fear and betrayal brought upon by the decision of Washington men to arrest a beloved local figure. And the riotersmen and women pushed past the brink until they sought to break the inevitability of the cycle.

Chapter 52 (December 31, 2031)

They had prepared for three days. Stephen had supplied the cash, Billy and Frank had procured the guns and ammunition and the tribe supplied other necessities. Enough to lead 20,000 people out of Manhattan. Eric and his group of twenty men wandered the old subway tunnels of New York City looking for a man he knew would be hard to find. But in a lonely abandoned subway train they finally found him.

Thick cobwebs and new root systems grew down through the concrete and brick lining above them. Dust seemed eternally suspended in the air as they struggled to not inhale too deeply. Tunnels that had long since lost their original purpose and now served as housing for transients and the homeless. The city's lost and forgotten, most of whom had no idea of what was to come. As they passed men and women they would quickly explain and warn of the impending doom but continue upon a mission that no one else would have attempted. Until they saw it up the tracks. Men working, dressed in shabby clothes, working hard at an endeavor that many would have thought impossible, in dim lights under 145th Street and St. Nicholas Avenue.

"Paul be sure it works and send four men up the tracks to be sure and clear the way. We take anyone who wants to go, okay?" Tex yelled to a man busying himself inspecting the old train.

"Shit, Eric Mahpiya, I ain't seen you in ye-ahs brothah." Tex said looking down a lonely train tunnel at a man he had supposed he would never see again. The two men hugged as if long lost brothers. "What the hell you doin' here? Ain't you heard it's the end of the world?" The man spoke in a slow gravely Southern drawl that had always to Eric seemed to reflect a deeply caring persona. "You come to roast a few marshmallows with me and watch it burn?"

"Tex we need your help getting into Yankee Stadium."

"Eric what the hell are you thinkin'? Do you know how many cops are there? Fuck man we all loved Father O' Connell too, but forget about it." Tex began to walk away, supervising the work being done to his train.

"Mark be sure the barricade is down within the hour, we leave by eight." Tex shouted up the long tunnel to a man plodding his way down the tracks.

"Come on Tex I need your help. Those people don't stand a chance, they'll all die if you don't help. Some of us have family and friends in there." Eric said as he glanced to Bill.

Tex thought for a minute and with a smile that Eric had missed for so many years said. "Fuck man you know I can't say no to a chance to stick it to the fuckin' pigs."

Tex was now in his mid fifties his blonde hair was quickly going to gray and a large belly conspired against his greatest want to appear serious. He had a thick bushy mustache and walked on a cane, due to an injury he had sustained falling from a roof.

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"Alright men, we're going to have company."

Keep the train here until 11PM if we don't make it back then beat it out of here. That damn bomb ain't supposed to go off until midnight so you should have time." Tex gave orders to his hastily assembled group of men. "Paul we need at least three more trains ready to go, can you get 'em here?"

Paul had once been a rail worker, but with the importation of cheap labor had soon found himself unemployable. Eric had come to find out that many of the men Tex now called friend were like this. Men who at one time had worked jobs requiring highly skilled professional people now forced to survive on their wits alone.

Industries and jobs lost because of society's demand for cheap products and cheap houses irregardless of the craftsmanship, quality or workmanship. After all with everything being disposable anyways what was the point in making it attractive and durable?

They had brought their families with them as they felt the loss of first their jobs then their homes and cars and finally their self-respect. Paul had a wife and son and did the best he could to provide for both. Late night raids into the city's markets and daylight shoplifting sprees provided them their basic necessities in a city whose churches had long since turned their backs on the poor and needy.

Good men who rationalized their crimes by their feeling of entrapment in a city where there seemed no hope nor means of escape. Paul himself was a third generation train worker, but as Tex explained their group of over 200 men, women and children, also included two sandhogs, an electrician and many more skilled people. Now all working hard on their only means of escape.

Paul was of African ancestry, very dark skin and tight shortly cut curly hair that was slowly beginning to turn prematurely white. He was a well spoken man who sought to teach his son right from

wrong in a world that had seemed to all of sudden gotten turned upside down during his own lifetime. His wife was Jewish and the family was agnostic at best. They did however choose to follow values that even most Christians were incapable of practicing.

Eric wondered if four trains would be enough to carry upwards of 20,000 people but Paul quickly beat him to the punch. "Yeah it'll be nuts to butts by I think we can get 'em all in. We should be able to find three more trains at Grand Central and with these riots no one's there to stop us either."

Chapter 53 (December 31, 2031 21:08)

They came up through an old forgotten sewer tunnel in the middle of a hastily built city of tents housing the newly arrested prisoners. They moved in quietly, just fifty men, and worked their way through the crowds asking after Arthur O' Connell. A man they knew would prove to be of little difficulty to find as he stood nearly a foot over any average man.

"Father, I need you to gather your flock." Eric said to a surprised preacher. First tapping the large man on the shoulder. "We're going to get you out of here."

"Eric we can't go we need our day in court. We've been falsely imprisoned we need to fight this injustice in the courts." Arthur said, he now saw himself as the same as great religious leaders before him, fighting against an unjust law through civil disobedience.

"Father that's all well and good but in less than two hours you'll all be dead if you don't follow me now and do as I ask. I need you to make one of your speeches. A speech to gather and rouse your flock." Eric said in a low whisper as his men started making rounds to the other prisoners, hoping to spread the word of an impending speech and a possible escape.

"Eric my boy what do you mean two hours?"

"Father there's a nuclear bomb somewhere in the city, if we don't get out of here before midnight you and all of your followers will be dead. There's no time to waste, there are only a small number of guards here and we have prepared a means of escape. The plan is to go out past the old Hard Rock Cafe and through the subway tunnel. Get your people together and tell them they need to fight or they'll all die." Eric was quickly tiring of trying to explain the situation to a man he had long respected.

Chapter 54 (December 31 2031 21:30- 22:30)

Paul Van Steenburg was beginning to worry, only ninety minutes and he would have to make a decision. His recon unit as well had yet to arrive with the final train. He worried now that none of them might in fact make it out. He reflected on the last week of hard work clearing and repairing nearly fifty miles of track all the way to Far Rockaway and worried that it would all be for naught.

The families were all beginning to show signs of anxiousness as the minutes seemed to fall from their clocks and watches all too quickly. Men and women whose home and city would soon be lost and their lives too if they didn't leave soon.

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King for the first time in his adult life now struggled to throw off the mantle of preacher and embrace his ancestor's noble tradition of warrior.

"Hello again my congregation." He spoke as loudly as he ever had, hoping that his voice would carry to those at the outer edge of the crowd that now surrounded him. Knowing too that the guards were now anxiously watching as their wards moved into a group they were quickly growing leery of. "Ordinarily

I would tell you all to be calm and to be peaceful in the face of your enemy. Not this time however. If we don't fight now we will all die, there is a bomb in New York City, a nuclear bomb, as a trusted friend has told me. Relax, quiet please." The crowd took several moments to come back to attention. 10,000 conversations abruptly broke out until Arthur began to shout. "Quiet, everyone please listen!"

Eventually the voices lowered back to a mere murmur and he was able to finish. "If I was a cult leader, as so many have accused me of being, I might say that this is the time of God's return and we should wait to be bathed by the all powerful force of our returned messiah. But this is not God's work, this is the work of men who would proclaim to know what God would intend. So now I say is the time to rise up and throw off the shackles of those who would want for us to die. I say now my friends to follow me into battle and to liberty."

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"Commissioner we have a situation here. Over." The voice of the young Police Captain seemed noticeably upset as Patrick Silverman picked up his vehicles transmitter to respond.

"Copy Captain. Sending backup your way. Over. All units in the vicinity of 1 East 161st Street, assemble at the Stadium's main gate ASAP."

Patrick Silverman raced through the dark city streets trying to avoid overturned, burning vehicles, downed power lines and injured and dead men. A thirteen mile trip that stretched circuitously to now over thirty miles, he raced through side streets and areas that he knew had already been subdued, as an eerie quiet hung over a normally rowdy, raucous city. He had never seen the city in a state of quiet as he did now. Not even during the blackout of 2002.

An uneasy peaceful quiet more in line with that of a cemetery than to anything else he could

readily imagine. He wondered on that, his beloved city, a cemetery, a graveyard for so many people. During the blackout he had seen thousands of men and women work together and show the bright side of the city that he had so come to love throughout his life. Men and women of all different backgrounds and cultures coming together to comfort and protect each other in a time of turmoil. What was the difference now he wondered, as the very same people struggled now to rip the city apart. As he saw the dark side of the city, the only light he saw was from the growing number of fires illuminating the city in an eerie crimson glow. The light of humanity, the spark of heroism and courage he had seen all those years ago, in the aftermath of 911 and during the blackouts, had seemed now to have been completely snuffed from the city's conscience.

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Twenty thousand men, women and children fought as one, quickly overpowering the guards on the ground. Shots were fired into the crowd and there had been a few casualties but the overwhelming number of prisoners quickly proved too much for the guards on the ground.

The guards on the high outer wall of the stadium fired at the targets that presented themselves but quickly found their bullets nearly useless against a force so large and so determined. Soon the bullets started flying the other way as the larger force brought their newly acquired arms to bear on those on the wall.

Many of the guards quickly fled, others laid down their arms in a symbolic measure of surrender and a few actually joined in the ranks that were now moving toward the long abandoned Hard Rock Cafe. Men and women who had stood post even as they wondered what might become of their city, unsure whether there was a bomb or not. Individuals who had long ago begun to mistrust their media, their government and their leaders.

The gates were offered no resistance to the sheer weight and intent of the crowd. They seemingly flung themselves open as the crowd pushed their way through.

Eric had taken lead and the fifty men who accompanied him stayed on the flanks assisting the crowd and pointing them out the gates and over Macomb's Dam Bridge towards the A train station. The elderly, the injured and the disabled finding help offered readily by others within the crowd.

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"Freeze. Halt or we'll shoot." The voice boomed through the empty canyon that had once been New York City, over a police megaphone. Echoing as it reverberated against the tall vacant buildings.

Over one hundred policemen and cruisers blocked their path over the bridge, the group came to a halt as Eric held up his hand. He and he alone moved slowly towards the lead police cruiser. As debris and the smell of smoke blew over the blacktop of the empty bridge in response to the winds cutting there way through the wind tunnel that was Manhattan.

"Sir, these people will die if we don't get to that subway station." Eric said gesturing ahead to the descending stairs of the subway station.

"That's nonsense young man. The bomb is a prank." The Police Commissioner's response came back through the megaphone but had the hollow ring of a man who was questioning his own knowledge.

"No sir it isn't. I've met the man who built it. I've even been within a few feet of it myself. I can assure you it is very much real. And if I'm right then you will be responsible for the deaths of every person here. If you believe in a Creator then how will you explain that to him?" Eric asked as cordially as he could hoping the man was capable of an original

thought.

He stood breathless for what seemed an eternity and then heard over the megaphone. "All units fall in alongside the crowd to help the elderly and disabled down to the subway platform. Repeat all units fall in with the crowd and assist as needed."

Patrick Silverman had in those few moments confirmed for Eric the basic goodness in the majority of people. One man had showed twenty thousand a spark that many had thought long gone. He knew now what had been missing in society for so long.

Chapter 55 (December 31, 2031 22:55)

"Paul we gotta go. They ain't goin' to make it bud." Mark tried to point out to a man he had quickly taken to following. He hadn't known Paul very well but in the recent few days had come to admire a man who seemed to have knowledge that he hadn't expected from another.

"It's Tex I know they'll make it. If there's, a way that old son of a bitch will do it. My watch says five more minutes so we wait five more minutes." Paul countered as he stared intently through the windshield of the lead train; sweating bullets of anxiousness but steadfast in his faith and determination.

Chapter 56 (December 31, 2031 22:58)

"Shit Paul, I don't think we got room." A frazzled forty-ish year old man said as he looked down the subway platform at the approaching teems of people now bearing down upon them, yelling through the open door of the lead train car.

If someone fell, others quickly pulled them up, pulling and dragging those who had tired from the run. Men and women working together for the common benefit of their neighbors of past. Children carried by strangers, homeless helped by the affluent of Central Park West, ex-cons and parolee's helped by policemen. No man without a brother, no woman or child without a savior.

"Then get out and push em' in, we're not leaving anyone behind." Paul screamed back as he left the trains engine to assist the crowd, running forward to help those who seemed to have trouble. Paul was quickly beginning to worry that the 75 foot metal tubes would become mass coffins if they didn't get rolling soon. Eleven of the tubes to a train he wondered even now if the old neglected tracks could

handle the weight, yet knew they would have to.

Eric arrived first with Tex and Arthur close behind they stood at the doors each pushing and coaxing the large group. Like Drill Sergeants, they barked the order for the first arrivals to push back. Quickly the cars filled with people even standing on the seats to make more room for a crowd that seemed to never end. Many of them struggling to get their arms and legs behind doors that seemed as though they would bulge from the burden of their load. As one train swelled well past capacity, Eric and others led them to the next down the tracks, until finally they reached the last car of the last train. Pushing men and women in as if packing a bulging suitcase for a long trip.

"Put em' in the engine cars if ya have to." Paul screamed down the tracks over the bustling noise of the crowd.

Paul kept check on his watch as the subway platform began to empty of the last few stragglers. Quickly he pulled out his walkie-talkie, calling to the 'conductors' of the other trains. "We go full out guys. Push the throttle. We ain't got much time."

"Commissioner come on." Eric said as he leaned out the door, holding it open for the last man on the platform.

"I'm sorry young man. My job is here. If this is a prank then I need to stay to clean up the mess." Patrick Silverman had long figured that he had been saved from the fate of his squad during the crash of World Trade Center One by some unseen force. A force he figured that had spared him for something yet to come.

Eric stood surprised for a moment then responded, "Good bye sir and good luck," knowing already he would never see the man again. He took one last look trying to burn the image of the man's face into his mind. Knowing that if there was a heaven

that his new friend would undoubtedly be there when he too arrived.

"Everyone aboard, the A train is now leaving. Destination Rockaway Park. No stops in between." Came Paul's jovial voice over the trains intercom system. "Boys keep some space between trains."

The trains lumbered to life, groaning and creaking as they moved listlessly at first down the ancient steel tracks, but quickly gained speed. The noise of grating steel against steel filled the subway platform as Patrick Silverman fished out a cigarette and prepared himself for whatever might come next.

Chapter 57 (December 31, 2031 23:32)

"Paul the corner's too tight up ahead, you need to slow it down. The eighty-eighth street corner we won't make it. Slow down Paul." The voice came over his walkie-talkie.

"Keep it full throttle, don't slow down. It's either all of us or none of us. You slow it down and the trains will crash. Run it through boys." Paul picked up the lead train's P.A. Transmitter in his free hand and kept the walkie-talkie's button depressed in the other, "Everyone lean into the turn repeat lean right. Conductors follow my lead, Woo-Hoo I always wanted to get one of these fuckers up on one set of wheels. Here we go."

The elevated rails shook and rattled as the long set of cars and the tons of weight blew over the open water, reaching speeds the old R44 cars had never reached before, first seventy then eighty and finally more than ninety miles per hour. Struggling under the weight of over two million pounds of live flesh and hard steel but holding nonetheless. Paul could only hope that the electric current didn't break as it had so many times in the past. Hoping now that twenty thousand plus human beings wouldn't be stranded forty feet over open ocean with impending doom coming their way.

"Bill, is Rockaway far enough to escape the blast?" Eric asked the man standing next to him.

"We can only hope sir."

The trains struggled, rocking back and forth, the tracks themselves buckled and swayed but the trains once again came over dry land. "Slow it down boys, not too fast just follow my lead. I'll run out the track and ya'll slow on my cue. Call it out after me," came Paul's relieved voice as the train once again came over solid land.

"Copy Paul." The words came back three more times, each conductor taking the lead from the previous conductor until finally the final car came to an abrupt but efficient stop. The weight of the passengers pushing each other forward but men and women helping and steadying each other as they finally reached their destination.

Chapter 58 (December 31, 2031 23:58)

The great throng of refugees moved quickly out of the subway cars then walked, stumbled and ran towards the boardwalk and the beach. Nearly twenty five thousand people walking past what had once been expensive condos but had now become tenements and slums. Broken windows covered the exterior of many of the three and four story buildings. Their paint was peeled and flaking with balconies sagging near the point of collapse.

Loose and missing wooden siding marked their years of neglect. Buildings that had been built with disposability and low cost in mind. Sold for far higher cost than was necessitated by the quality of their craftsmanship by men and women who sought to twist out every last dollar they could from a public who had long ago given up on the virtues of quality and value. In a place that had at one time been prosperous hunting and fishing grounds for those who lived by much simpler means, in a less stressful world, and more natural surroundings.

Trash and loose debris poked up through the hard packed sands of the once pristine cultured and sculpted beaches, marks of an economy unable to sustain the diversions so many had enjoyed for so long. They stood on the beach and the weathered

planks of the long boardwalk looking out towards Queens and the tops of the tall spires of Manhattan, as the first snow falls of the new year came down, snows that tried in vain to purify the events of the recent few days. Snows that quickly melted and chilled them all to the bone.

The waves crashed upon the beach as if they too wanted to escape what was soon to come. Loose trash, flotsam and debris floated in the waves, struggling to keep atop the breaking waves; like rats fleeing from a burning ship. Wind, trash and surf that had seemingly been warned of what was to come.

They stood staring at the glow of the fires, just over the steel, stone and glass horizon, marked by the yellows and reds of the riotous flames. Many of them crying, knowing their homes and friends would soon be gone. Hugging each other and consoling each other.

Billy ran up and down the crowded beach looking in vain for a woman he had last seen as a child. "Mom, Mom, Amanda Bianchi!" He screamed until finally he saw a woman turn. One of her arms seemed limp, a constant remembrance of a night so long ago. A night that had marked and stained so much of both of their lives in so many ways.

Billy ran up and down the beach paying no heed to the loose debris, sand or surf and grabbed his mother in both arms. They hugged, both forgetting past misdeeds and lingering regrets, as they were bathed in a bright flash of light, that in the span of moments turned night into day. The power of a thousand suns bathing them in heat as if mid-summer. And then the blast wave pushing it's way through the crowd. A powerful wind that nearly pushed twenty thousand people off their feet. Then soon after, the ear-shattering sound of the explosion, followed by the large mushroom in the sky that in a single moment engulfed and replaced the tall peaks that had once seemed like they would last forever.

Chapter 59 (January 3, 2031)

"Eric are you sure you want to do this? You know what it'll mean? You'll be a hunted man. Anyone who follows you will be hunted too." Stephen said as the man in front of him prepared for his first ever camera appearance, inside a long black semi-truck packed full on each side, floor to ceiling, with computer parts, cables and blade servers.

"We're with you Sir." Frank Rodriguez said to his new Commander in Chief. He longed no more for the blood and violence but was ready to fight nonetheless. Fight for a better future, fight for their freedoms and fight for those who could not or would not fight for themselves.

"I've seen too much. Too much apathy, too much corruption and too much in the absence of honest men. No I'm not sure I want to do this, but I feel I have to. I owe it to so many that came before me at the very least. Men and women who fought their whole lives to ensure for me a better life. My Parents, my Grandparents, and even the relatives and ancestors of so many other men and women. You once told me that the world will always need leaders, well I suppose now is my time to step forward and step up. Besides many of us are already hunted men. So who better than those that society long ago cast away to finally come forward and show what so many have lost and what we

could all hope to one day once again find? Men and women who long ago gave up on ever getting their own second chance who now hope to give America itself a second chance." Eric now waited for his cue from Jack Brewster. Knowing that all over the country his image and his words would soon be invading people's thoughts as they went out all over the UnderNet.

"After all, we brought this on ourselves Stephen. All Americans are culpable in the injustices and abuses of power and loss of freedoms we now find ourselves surrounded by. My hope is that someday a majority of people can see this, and that war will not be inevitable or necessary to bring back our freedoms. That hopefully by showing the masses a better way we can all move past what so many think of now as being a natural state of being that is really not." Eric paused, he was para-phrasing a speech he would be reciting again in just a few short moments. This time for the benefit of those men who had promised their allegiance to him, and to the future, through word, action and deed, but in a few short moments for the benefit of those who might see him and his men in a much different light. A public he sought to break out of the cycles of abuse and victimization he knew they needed relief from.

"Greetings America; my brothers and sisters. My name is Eric Wakatanka Luta Mahpiya, Eric of God's Red Sky, and I AM the leader of the Oskapa Mahpiya."

Epilogue (Early Morning 2092)

As the sun began to pass over the lake and vanquish the long shadows of night, the old man abruptly excused himself whilst explaining his need for sleep and offering to complete his story the following night. Amber quickly shouted, "Wait Matt I have something to ask you still!"

The old man stopped his careful gait suddenly and thoughtfully, "Hmmm, it's been a very long time since I last huuuhd that name." Matt responded, turning his tired frame back to look at the young lady. "OK shoot."

"Did you love Lisa?"

"Yes, I loved her very much and, befo-ah you ask me what you're wondering I think I'll just answer what has you botha-ed." The tired old man took a long breath, as a look of thoughtfulness flickered in his eyes. "Eric taught all of us many things, but what he taught me mo-ah than anything was that death is just

as much a pahht of life as everything else. What many of us, in those early days, had forgotten was that death is inevitable and that it's fah more important how you spent your time here on Earth than how long you lived it for. So when it comes to Lisa it's very simple, she lived her life the way it best suited her. If I had evah tried to stop her from the things she did she wouldn't have been the same person I loved so much. I think most of us at one time forgot that simple lesson as we tried ou-ah best to be the same as those slick, shiny people on the boxes of light we brought into ou-ah homes. All of those poor people trying so hard to be so much like one another. The scariest pahht of those dark days to me, when I look back, is what so many of the time missed out on; Lisa may not have lived long but she did LIVE and so many others did not." Matt looked introspective for a moment as a look of warmth spread across his face and a sudden moment of contentment filled his weary heart. "Goodnight kids, I need some sleep we'll talk again latah."