ANGEL’S JUSTICE

A person smiling at camera

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A Novel by  
 James P Lynch

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There's a proverb attributed to the Buddha,  
  
‘Whatever precious jewel there is in the heavenly worlds,  
  
there is nothing comparable to one who is awakened

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CHAPTER 1

Angel’s New Home

Recap

Tilson Baggs, a corrupt Chicago Police Commander, arrested Jane Doe 413, also known as the Chicago Angel, in an attempt to have her assassinated at precinct headquarters. Officer Mac Merrick, the police officer whom Jane loves, asked his father and sister, members of the prestigious law firm Merrick, Dawson, and Brant, to defend Angel in court. They did so spectacularly, getting Baggs arrested for child abuse and having the charges against Jane dropped.

After the conclusion of the trial, the FBI brought Jane to their Chicago headquarters for an interview. That interview, moderated by FBI cybercrimes expert Dr. Carolina Hendon and watched by the top echelons of the US government, exposed the truth about Jane: her abandonment at birth, the hospital accident that made her mute, and the mistreatment at the state institutions where she grew up.

Jane recounted how the Albanian Mafia abducted her from her dishwashing shift at an all-night restaurant, dragging her to a warehouse where nine mobsters assaulted her while another filmed it. After mutilating Jane’s left breast as a warning, the mob dumped her near the restaurant.

Jane left the all-night restaurant, sought self-defense lessons, and got a job with a software development firm that was impressed with her 195 IQ and coding abilities. She then discovered that a prestigious Chicago software development firm, Chicago Cyber Engineering, is run by one of her rapists, Imer Bisha, and a genius computer security expert, Dr. Lewis Morton. This company is now looting some of the nation’s largest corporations and government agencies by penetrating their AI-protected computer systems.

Jane embarked on a one-woman campaign to disrupt Bisha and Morton’s business and expose them to the police and FBI. Based on Jane’s assistance to the FBI, Agent Carolina Hendon offered her a pardon and a job at the FBI to get to the bottom of the Albanian Mafia’s activities and bring them to justice. Dr. Hendon asked Mac Merrick’s family to house Jane in their mansion in Highland Park, guarded by Federal Marshals.

The Merricks used the law firm’s helicopter to fly to their mansion in Highland Park, overlooking Lake Michigan. Barney, the firm’s pilot, touched down on the mansion’s helicopter pad.

Meet the Family

Barney worked to open the forward hatch, lifting the top until it latched and lowering the bottom until it touched the ground. The pilot bounded down the steps, followed by the four FBI Agents carrying guns, Carolina Hendon, David Hanko, Ryan DiMarco, and Mac.

Anne Merrick, her son Ben, and his wife, Willie, approached the Sikorsky. Anne had changed into casual clothes, with a T-shirt with “Uber-Mom” blazed on the front. Ben and Willie still had their lawyer clothes on, although Ben had removed his tie and stuffed it in his jacket pocket.

John Merrick descended next and turned to wait for Jane. She appeared in the doorway of the helicopter. Jane graciously took Barney’s hand and stepped to the concrete pad. John stood close to his wife.

“Jane, you know my wife, Anne Ronan Merrick.”

Jane stepped up to her, maintaining close eye contact, just as Master Wu had taught her.

“Jane, welcome to our home, which is now yours. I promise you love, loyalty, and encouragement from this house for the rest of your life.”

Jane smiled warmly and placed her palms over her heart. She extended her hands, still clasped together, to Anne, who instinctively put her hands on Jane’s. Now Anne became emotional, her eyes watering.

“Jane, may I introduce you to my oldest son, Ben.”

Jane gave the same greeting to Ben and Willie.

“Mr. and Mrs. Merrick,” Carolina Hendon said, “We should get everybody inside as quickly as possible. We haven’t set up a drone exclusion zone for this property.”

Ronnie led the group to the pool, navigating towards one of the rear entrances. John thanked Barney for his work and asked him to stay this evening. The company pilot lived nearby in Bannockburn and called his wife to say he’d be late this evening.

As the group walked into the mansion’s Great Room, it was one of those situations where everyone talked, each having an agenda to persue. Special Agent Hanko was trying to assert his leadership, but Anne was having none of it.

“Excuse me, Mr. FBI man, what is your name?”

“David Hanko, second-in-command at the Chicago FBI, Ma’am.”

“Very well, Agent Hanko. Right now, I plan to show my new family member her third-floor bedroom and bathroom, where she will shower or bathe, dress, and join us in the kitchen for dinner preparations. You can tour the house, but we will get Jane settled. Have I made myself clear?”

“Perfectly, Mrs. Merrick. We’ll try to be as non-intrusive as possible.”

“Jane, your bedroom is on the third floor. It has a spectacular view of the Lake. Follow me; we’ll take the stairs. There is an elevator, though. Agent Hendon, why don’t you come along?”

Anne kept up a running commentary as they moved throughout the house. She explained that she and John slept on the first floor while Mac, Ben, and Ronnie grew up on the second floor. She had picked a third-floor bedroom for Jane because of Lake Michigan's view and the large skylight that gave a stunning view of the night sky.

“Jane, I called Doctor Shelly DiMarco this afternoon, and she helped me guess your sizes. Here are some slacks, a couple of T-shirts, panties, leggings, and slippers for you to wear until we get your clothes moved in. There are also lightweight cotton pajamas on the bed there.”

“Mrs. DiMarco is one of the good guys, Anne.”

“Agreed, Jane. Shelly has a Ph.D. in Psychology and teaches at the University of Chicago. If you’d like to talk to someone about any adjustment issues, I’m sure Shelly would be happy to confer with you. Let’s head to the bathroom, just down the hall.”

Anne gathered a change of clothes and led Jane and Carolina into the bathroom. She demonstrated the toilet, walk-in shower, and Jacuzzi-style bathtub controls. Jane elected to take a bath, so Anne started the water and added some fancy bath salts.

“Jane,” Anne said, “I know about the scar on your chest. Millie droned us a copy of the security footage of the illegal strip search attempt this morning. There’s a plastic surgeon in Chicago who is world-renowned for being the best in scar revision. We could set up an appointment to get his evaluation.”

Jane grabbed the tablet and started typing.

“Anne, I face pity every day of my life when I demonstrate that I’m mute by using this machine to talk. Would not a visit to a specialist make this scar public knowledge, more pity, so to say?”

“It's not pity at all, Jane. It’s justice. That’s what my whole life is about, getting justice for those denied. Mitigating the scar over your heart is just obtaining justice over those who sought to humiliate and degrade you.”

“I appreciate your concern for me, Anne. Maybe it doesn’t matter. Everybody in the FBI saw my scar today.”

“And there will be hell to pay, Jane,” Carolina said, “if anyone in that meeting leaks one iota of information. We’ve put the clamps down on everything. Anyway, even if you decide to do nothing, you’ll have to beat men away with a stick. You are super-model beautiful, Jane Doe 413.”

Anne Merrick turned off the water.

“There’s some makeup on the sink over there if you’re interested. Relax, collect your thoughts, and join us downstairs whenever you’re ready.”

Anne and Carolina closed the door to the bathroom as Jane peeled off her clothes and sunk into the warm, aromatic water. She turned on the jets and relaxed for a long time before washing her hair.

Getting to Know You

Jane finished applying makeup, something second nature to her since she is adept at disguises for any target locale. Looking one last time in the mirror, she self-congratulated herself, thinking, *You clean up well*. Making her way to the second floor, she encountered Mac, who led her to the lower level, where the FBI was busy. Carolina Hendon and David Hanko briefed her on the already underway sterilization of her apartment in Chinatown and her safe house.

The FBI teams transported Jane’s technical equipment in her Chinatown apartment to FBI Headquarters in Chicago. The FBI staff sent the material from the safe house, mostly a home supercomputer and backup drives to the CIA in Washington.

D’Marcus Mason, Special Agent in Charge of the Chicago FBI, negotiated with Natalie Rumsfort on her book about Jane Doe 413. Natalie agreed not to publish until the Albanian mob’s arrest; the FBI promised to bring her along exclusively on any future busts of the gang that tried to kill her.

Anne and Willie were busy preparing dinner in the expansive kitchen when Jane appeared, carrying a tablet computer.

“Welcome, Jane,” Anne said. “We’re planning an impromptu late dinner: strip steaks and mashed potatoes. Are you a vegetarian?”

“No, Anne, I’m a carnivore through and through. I keep in shape by limiting myself to one meal daily, with just coffee cake for breakfast. Exercise and training are the other half of staying healthy. May I help with dinner?”

“We haven’t thought of anything for dessert.”

“I can make a dessert. Do you have any blueberries?”

“Yes, we do,” replied Anne. “They were on sale this week, so I stocked up. What are you thinking of making?”

“I’ll bake a blueberry crumble cake. It’s sometimes called blueberry boy bait for its effect on young men.”

“Sounds good to us,” Willie said. Anne Merrick had a large separate pantry, and soon Jane had all the ingredients in front of her. They watched with fascination as Jane prepared the cake batter and streusel topping entirely from memory, working so efficiently that the 9-inch cake pan was in the oven in fifteen minutes.

“Figure forty-five minutes to bake, twenty minutes to cool.”

“Perfect, Jane. Ronnie’s husband, Pete Fieldstone, is just twenty minutes away,” Anne said.

Mac ushered Jane into the mansion’s Great Room. Carolina wanted to discuss some issues.

“Jane, our teams have thoroughly searched your Chinatown apartment and safe house. None of these domiciles contain any weapons unless you want to count a kitchen knife as a weapon. Do you know how to shoot a gun?”

“Yes, I spent time at an Indiana gun range, practicing with Glock-50s and AR-15 class assault weapons. I became reasonably proficient, though not as good as you are.

So, Agent Hendon, is my dildo and Hitachi vibrator now public knowledge at the FBI?”

The mood in the room changed as everybody felt uncomfortable. Carolina fixed her gaze on Jane.

“J. Edgar Hoover has been dead for almost 90 years, Jane. The FBI isn’t interested in such details. Those items do not appear on my list here, except as miscellaneous personal effects.”

Mac smiled and tried to lighten the mood.

“If having an occasional wank is grounds for going to Hell, then I suspect that every one of us had better stock up on sunblock.”

“Well said, Officer Merrick,” Carolina said with a chuckle. “Jane, I’m leaving via helicopter to Midway airport, where an FBI plane is waiting to take me and several others, plus your computers, to headquarters in Washington.

On Monday, we’ll set you up with an office at the FBI in Chicago and a home office with a better personal supercomputer than your Dell Galaxy Plus computer system. You’ll sometimes work here and sometimes at the FBI office. Mr. Merrick has offered his helicopter when we need you at the office.”

Bedlam continued in the first-floor Great Room as three Federal Marshalls arrived for sentry duty. Attorney General Landsberg can move mountains when so inclined. Special Agent Carolina Hendon took Jane aside, with the Merricks watching.

“Jane, listen carefully. I am your boss. You are to follow, of course, any directives of Special Agent-in-Charge Mason. If the FBI staff ask you to do anything that makes you uncomfortable, call me, and I will be your adjudicator.

“Also, Jane, do not engage in any more Ninja stuff. We need that magnificent brain of yours to bring these people down. Let Mac Merrick and Ryan DiMarco do the fieldwork. Here is your FBI Contractor credential and an FBI satellite phone. I’ve already added my cell and home phone to it, so don’t hesitate to call me.

“We have much to learn from each other. Keep an open mind.”

After a quick hug, John Merrick, and Ryan DiMarco escorted Carolina to the helicopter pad for the short ride to Midway Airport and an FBI jet to Washington, DC.

Dinner with the Merricks

Mac guided Jane into her chair next to his father, who, as the family patriarch, always takes the end seat. His mother, Anne, sat across from Jane. Mac nestled next to Jane as Veronica and Ben took their places with their spouses.

“John, will you say grace?” Anne said. The elder Merricks are Roman Catholic, attending Mass every Sunday. Ronnie always thought their attendance was more politics and networking than a profound expression of faith, so the children tended to be Christmas and Easter Catholics. John asked everyone to clasp their hands, and Jane felt a tingle of electricity as she gripped Mac’s hand.

“Bless us, O Lord,” John intoned, “and these, thy gifts, which we are about to receive from thy bounty, through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

“Before we begin, may I say what an extraordinary moment this is, welcoming Jane as a new family member. Anne and I will regard her as a daughter, and we hope our children will treat her as a beloved sister. Let’s begin this dinner for the first time as a nine-person family.”

As is typical for a family-style dinner, the Merricks passed around serving plates and bowls, sometimes awkwardly. Mac and his father almost competed to assist Jane with the plentiful food.

The conversation was lively, with Jane merely listening and not volunteering to enter the discussion. The group could hear hammering and sawing throughout the mansion. John explained that they were using his basement woodshop to reduce the number of entry doors to two. The FBI Agents and Federal Marshals were boarding up all the other doors.

Once the family finished the main course, Anne brought out Jane’s blueberry crumble cake. Everybody got a large serving, and the compliments came like an avalanche in the Alps.

Ben, wanting to start a conversation with Jane, posed a question.

“Jane, is this all too overwhelming?”

Jane looked at him, her smile not showing any teeth but warming nonetheless, positioned her iPad, and started typing.

“My employer, the Cottrels, often had me over for dinner. They live frugally, plowing most of their profits back into their business. Those dinners were just the three of us. Tonight is the first time I’ve sat down with so many.”

“I should tell you, Jane,” Anne said, “that the Cottrels called our law office this morning and offered to pay your bail.”

“I may be guilty of thinking that I am a voiceless outcast when, in fact, I have some loyal friends. My dinners with Tilly and Colby Cottrel were to discuss software projects since I operated exclusively from home. Still, they treated me with kindness. Mac, are they in danger now?”

“The FBI dispatched a two-person team this evening to talk to them. The FBI and Chicago police are planning a news conference on Monday to announce that you live here under the protection of the Federal Marshall Service. If you want to socialize with the Cottrels, my mother can arrange a get-together here.”

John Merrick leaned closer to Jane. “Jane, tell us what’s on your mind right now, at this instant?”

She stared at him for several seconds, collecting her thoughts. Then Jane Doe 413 started typing at a swift pace.

*“*I will be honest, and I apologize if what I say makes you uneasy.

I am uncomfortable with all this wealth. Your home is not the most expensive mansion in Illinois; many are far more elaborate. It’s just that our society is a zero-sum game. Somebody must have less to enable a house like this.

I’ve lived in Chinatown for the last four years. Most people live paycheck-to-paycheck, always a few dollars away from eviction and homelessness. The gig economy and automation have eliminated nearly all the well-paying factory jobs, driving all those people into fewer and fewer low-paying service jobs. And yet, the number of millionaires and billionaires keeps relentlessly increasing.

When you live on desolation row, you feel their hopelessness and misery. Now I find myself dropped into a world that the hoi polloi despises, asking myself, ‘Do I deserve this.’”

“In our society, Jane, the desire to become rich is the prime motivator of innovation and progress,” Pete Fieldstone said.

“This is true, Pete, but my work ethic is equal to and probably more relentless than anyone in this room. And yet, I never felt the desire to surround myself with riches. No one instilled in me the notion that the purpose of hard work was to enrich oneself exclusively.”

John Merrick listened to these exchanges with utter fascination.

“I agree with much of what Jane has said. The unchecked accumulation of wealth portends the eventual collapse of society. This scenario has played out in France and Russia over the last three centuries.

“She’s also right that, unlike her childhood, Anne and I were from affluent families who taught us that wealth was our destiny. I’m also sure that one of the reasons Anne and I drove so hard to create the most successful law firm in Chicago was the desire to satisfy our parents’ aspirations for us.

“I should tell you, Jane, that our law firm does the most pro bono cases in the United States. Merrick, Dawson, and Brant operate six Chicago Legal Aid law offices in Chinatown, the South Side, and other locations.

“The state provides a public defender attorney for indigent suspects in criminal cases. Ben’s wife is such a public defender.

“For simple civil matters, like evictions, bankruptcies, divorce, and so on, our Legal Aid offices provide competent, free legal services to the poor. I assure you that Anne and I would be a lot wealthier if we didn’t support these pro bono legal aid services.”

“If I may add to John’s remarks, Jane,” Anne said, “our liquid assets, money to be specific, are all in local Chicago banks. We have no accounts overseas whatsoever. The lion’s share of our liquidity is in real estate, primarily in office buildings here in Chicago. These buildings give hundreds of people gainful employment. We are cautious about donating to politicians, never exceeding the state and federal limits. We never contribute to political action committees. John and I donate a small fortune to charity. We hope you will someday suggest worthy projects to share our wealth.”

Veronica decided to take center stage. With a slightly impish expression, she queried.

“Jane, do you love my brother?”

Everyone at the table froze; it was instantaneous. Pete Fieldstone, Ronnie’s husband, muttered under his breath, “Oh my God.”

Jane flashed a mischievous smile and then started typing.

“Your brother Ben is married to a lovely wife. I would never interfere with their marital relationship.”

Jane the Angel one-upped Veronica, causing Pete to laugh heartily.

“Jane, you know that I meant Mac.”

Jane looked around the table, glancing at all seven family members awaiting her reply. With some trepidation, Mac looked like he was a defendant waiting for the jury’s decision.

“If I am to join this family, you must accept that I wear my heart on my sleeve. I will never hide how I feel about things. Also, Master Wu taught me never to engage in subterfuge. So, I will answer your question truthfully, Ronnie.

I do love your brother, Mac.

In truth, I haven’t spent that much time with Mac: an encounter in Grant Park, a nighttime adventure near a mob drug lab.

It’s no secret tonight that I’m a rape survivor, once in a State Institution, and a kidnapping-gangbang involving eleven members of the Albanian mob. I try to block these horrors from my mind, never to relive them. But I remember the perverse pleasure, the hate-filled delight those criminals enjoyed from my suffering, pain, and overwhelming fear that they would kill me. The point is this: I’ve experienced the worst in humanity.

The TV character Veronica Mars once said: ‘I’m all grown up now; I can spot a bastard at fifty feet.’ Ronnie, I’m the opposite of that. I can sense who is intrinsically kind, loving, and of good character by observing their facial expression, the look in their eyes, the sound of their voice, and, of course, their deeds.

I first encountered Mac two years ago in Grant Park. I watched him save the life of a man who collapsed due to cardiac arrest. Mac applied CPR for over twenty minutes until the Paramedics arrived. Knowing that I couldn’t speak to him, I stayed near the back of the crowd of spectators. Needless to say, I was smitten. Uncovering the Mafia Shqiptare's plan to kill him, I had to act.

I observed your brother at the worst moment of his life when a mob assassin pointed a gun at his forehead, intending to kill him. Your brother looked at that monster in his eyes and said that while his life might end right here, at least he lived it saving people’s lives while his killer poisoned children with their drugs. In the face of death, he stood for something good.

I managed to thwart Mac’s murder but ran away without identifying myself. On my return to Chinatown, I thought about this courageous man, the values he lived by, and the parents who gave him those principles and nurtured him to be the best of humanity. Remember, I, myself, had no parents.

I discovered Officer Mackenzie Merrick was from a family of over-achievers, yet he was the son who diverted from the expected path of law school and joining the law firm. I pondered if his becoming a policeman disappointed his parents and siblings. I wondered if his parents appreciated his strength of character, his courage when facing a violent end to his life, and the warmth in his eyes when I first met him face-to-face.

In my apartment in Chinatown, I discovered I had finally encountered the good man of my dreams. I realized that I loved him. I can’t explain it; it just happens.

Falling in love means you devote yourself to that person, so I intervened when the mob attempted to kill his family. If Albanian thugs threaten this family again, I will fight for you without fail.

Mac has told me that he loves me. I’ve never been in love before, but I adore how it feels.

Sadly, I also know my limitations as a woman. I have been, all my life, a voiceless outcast. I can’t whisper in Mac’s ear that I love him; I can only type it into this damn tablet with a robot voice. As Mac gets to know me, will I be the woman he wants and needs?

If it turns out that my shortcomings as a woman are more than Mac can deal with, I’ll not be resentful or angry. If I truly love your brother, I can have Mac in my life by being in this family, even if it’s just me secreting myself somewhere in the background.

Forgive me for taking so long to answer your question.”

A tear dribbling down the base of her nose, Ronnie, overcome with emotion, broke the stunned silence.

“That was beautiful, Jane.”

“Jane, my son is worthy of your love,” said Anne Merrick.

John Merrick scooted his chair toward Jane. He leaned forward and locked his gaze on Jane’s face.

“Jane, Anne is correct; Mac is worthy of your love. And you, my dear, are a very perceptive woman. It’s true. I once hoped all three children would follow in my footsteps and join the law firm. Mac chose a different path for himself, and I was initially disappointed. But Anne was persistent in educating me that Mac was pursuing what we all were seeking: justice, but differently. Now, I’m his most ardent supporter.

“A relationship with a policeman has its challenges, Jane. There is a constant worry about his safety, for he is in harm's way every day. We accept this because he has chosen this career.

“Speaking for the family, you have our love and support, now and forever.”

“Mac, I believe you should have the floor,” Ben Merrick said.

All eyes in the dining room turned to Mac. Jane twisted her body to face him, fixing her piercing green eyes on him. He exhaled slowly and glanced at everyone at the table before focusing his attention on Jane.

“There is no way I can match the eloquence of what we’ve heard so far. I’m not even going to try. It’s true what Jane said. I do love her, and I can explain why.

“She saved my life. She’s beautiful, intelligent, athletic, principled, good-hearted, and entertainingly unpredictable.

“While I’ve had my share of girlfriends, most being relationships of convenience, I’ve been searching for someone with whom to share my life. Now I’ve found her, and here she sits next to me in my boyhood home.

“In normal circumstances, I’d be making a full-court press to win Jane’s heart, convince her to marry me, plan a wedding, and all that. But now the family is in danger.

“The United States Attorney General specifically requested the Chicago Police to assign me to protect Jane, and that I will do. Convincing her that she should spend the rest of her life with me will have to wait. Jane, myself, and a hell of a lot of police and the FBI will spend the next few months finding and removing these mob vermin from our society. That is our priority. Romance will have to wait.

“That said, I promise you, Jane, that every night I will knock on your door and kiss you good night, without fail.”

Jane, overcome with emotion, picked up the tablet and started typing.

“If you forget, Mackenzie Merrick, I will come looking for you!”

Both leaned forward and kissed as everyone around the table started clapping.

CHAPTER XXX

Human Trafficking

The Circuit Board

The Monday after Jane’s catch and release, the FBI and the Chicago Police staged a raucous news conference, with national and international media in attendance. On the FBI's advice, Jane and the Merricks did not attend.

Before the conference, Bob Vicelli of Bob’s 24-Hour Diner gave an interview with one of the national networks, in which he disclosed Jane’s name and what happened to her. This revelation started a cascade of press investigations about Jane’s tenure at State Institutions. The bad press motivated Attorney General Baxter to investigate the facility that covered up Jane’s abuse.

The press conference was not easy for Chicago Police Superintendent Javion Green, who revealed that a member of the force, Captain Tilson Baggs, had disgraced the department. The FBI, represented by Special Agent D’Marcus Mason, were more circumspect in their disclosures, only willing to give Angel’s full name and that she was now cooperating with the FBI.

Merrick, Dawson, and Brant erected a virtual firewall around Jane, refusing the scores of requests for interviews from local and national media. Ashley Brant managed all calls involving Jane Doe 413; her experience in sexual abuse cases made her natural in these negotiations.

A couple of weeks passed since Jane moved into the Merrick mansion. Carolina Hendon supplied Jane with two new HP Galaxy-5 desktop supercomputers for home and office. These advanced computers gave Jane a one hundredfold increase in computing power over her previous Dell machine.

On Tuesday after lunch, Mac attended a short meeting in the Chicago FBI Headquarters building. After the session broke up, he happened by Pietrina Cerrone’s office.

“How’s my favorite whiz kid?” Mac said.

“Oh, Hello, Mac. I’m watching your Angel at work, as are a lot of other FBI personnel, I suspect.”

“Yeah, what’s Jane working on?”

“Well, she’s got the FBI cloud supercomputer in Washington doing an Internet pattern match of a circuit board connector, trying to find who uses this particular board. She’s soaking up half the building’s Internet bandwidth and at least a third of the mainframe’s CPU capacity.”

“Can you put that in plain English, Pietrina?”

“Mac, Jane found a circuit board design file on the Chicago Cyber Engineering computer. She also found a request for a quote to build the board with a local Chicago company, Boardcraft Engineering, west of Naperville. The board was not labeled, except for the edge connector pinout. She’s searching every document and image on the Internet, looking for a circuit board with that particular pin-out. Those pins are always labeled so a technician can probe them with an oscilloscope. She’s betting that she can find that board and the customer that uses it.”

“How long has she been at it?”

“Oh, about three hours now. FBI management is giving her free reign to operate. There’s a lot of people monitoring this, including me.”

Mac and Pietrina continued to stare at the screen. For Jane, it’s not often that one works with an audience peering over your shoulder.

“Oh, look, Mac. She got a hit. I’ll be damned; she got a hit. BART, San Francisco’s Bay Area Rapid Transit, is the customer. The BART board is labeled and identified, while the CCE board is unlabeled, except for the edge connector pinout. Now she’s messaging Carolina.”

Carolina Hendon perked up in her Washington, DC, office when Jane pinged her with a message. She started a conference with Jane.

“Hi, Jane. What did you find out?”

*“Morton’s circuit board design file and quote request match a board used by San Francisco's BART system. The BART maintenance document indicates that the board is part of a subway turnstile unit.*

*The BART circuit board is fully silk-screened, meaning the engineer who designed it labeled everything on the top and bottom layers. Morton’s version is blank except for the edge connector labeling. That is damn suspicious, don’t you think?”*

“Agreed, Jane. What else?”

*“OK, Morton’s request for a quote (RFQ) is for 1100 units built by Boardcraft Engineering in nearby Naperville. That company is five years old and financed by overseas investors. It will take the CIA to find out who they are. That’s also suspicious.”*

“How did you find this circuit board design file and RFQ on Morton’s system? It seems like the kind of thing he wouldn’t want anybody to see.”

*“I think it was a mistake, Carolina. I’ll speculate that this design data was on a thumb drive, left inserted in the USB port. Maybe the software engineer left the office for a few minutes, and Morton switched the upper floors back to the legit supercomputer system. Then, an automatic backup copied everything, including the thumb drive, to long-term storage, where I snagged it. The engineer returned, pulled the thumb drive out, and was unaware that he had left the data on the legitimate computer. Just a theory, Carolina.”*

“Color me intrigued, Jane. Keep working while I call someone at BART about that circuit board. Transfer a copy of the files, including the RFQ, to me. I’ll get back to you in an hour.”

Good to her word, Special Agent Hendon set up a conference with Jane and some FBI management.

“Jane, I spoke with Miguel Herrera, the technical director for all BART stations. He told me that the board in question is complicated, but it reads the rider’s smartphone or smartcard’s auto-pay system. When the traveler waves their phone or card, it automatically debits the fare from their account and transfers it via WiFi directly to a bank in San Francisco.

I asked him who manufactured those boards, and he identified CS Manufacture in Mexicali as the source of all their boards. He also told me that Chicago Cyber Engineering only had a contract to improve the large OLED display screens in the station. They had nothing to do with the turnstiles. Reaction, Jane?”

Jane relaxed a bit in her chair, giving Carolina a bemused smile.

*“Let me play Devil’s Advocate for just a bit and be Doctor Lewis Morton. I’ve penetrated all of BART’s computer systems. I have nicked all their circuit board files, embedded code, and management forms (work orders, e.g.) and identified who supplies their uniforms.*

*I’ve built my copy of the turnstile board and reprogrammed it to siphon off some of the fare transactions to my bank in God knows where. I’m smart about how much I skim, using game theory to choose a percentage that doesn’t raise eyebrows.*

*I have a small team show up at a station with BART uniforms and a legitimate-looking work order to service the turnstiles. I’ve got a revenue stream in a few months, and nobody’s the wiser.”*

“I concur with that,Jane*,*” Carolina said.

Bartholomew Radzinger, the Director of the FBI, popped up in a window.

“Congratulations to both of you on some excellent detective work. And thank you, Jane, for making that explanation understandable.

I’m guessing we cannot wade in there and arrest Morton and Bisha on this. Since his company worked for BART, he could say he had the board designs just for contingency. If Morton is as intelligent as Jane thinks, he’ll be sure that any purchase order to build those boards comes back to BART.

“Jane, FBI investigative work is like peeling an onion. You keep removing the outer layers till the rotten part appears.”

“Sir,” Carolina said, “that circuit board manufacturer in Naperville is probably a mob operation.”

“I agree, Agent Hendon. I will have judicial permission by tomorrow to begin intrusive surveillance of that company, meaning Jane can break in and find out what is happening.”

*“Respectfully, Director, we need to get a team to one of those BART stations and see if a randomly selected turnstile has the fake board installed. It would have no markings on the top and bottom of the circuit board.”*

“I agree, Jane. When I sign off, I’ll text the FBI in San Francisco, telling them that Carolina will call. See to it. Keep pushing, folks.”

After everyone signed off, Carolina called for the helicopter to transport Jane and Mac home. Jane could continue her work from the mansion.

The Bedroom

“Are you decent?” Mac said in a text to Jane’s phone.”

*“Yes, I just finished drying my hair before turning in.”*

“How about I bring up some Butter Pecan ice cream for both of us?”

*“Fabulous. I’m sitting on the bed.”*

It was close to midnight. Mac’s Mother and Father were already asleep, so he and Jane were the only ones awake. Outside, one Federal Marshal was doing sentry duty, making the rounds along the property’s perimeter. The rest were in the guest house, sleeping or operating the infrared detection system they had installed.

Mac carried two bowls of ice cream with spoons and took the elevator to the third floor. Jane’s bedroom, in the center of the house, faced Lake Michigan. Her office was in the adjoining bedroom.

She sat on the bed, wearing grey gym shorts and a baggy-sleeved T-shirt. Jane typed something on her iPad to command the lights out. The bedroom table lamp turned off, and the full moon illuminated the room. Jane dissolved a spoonful on her tongue, relishing the cool sweetness of the ice cream.

*“This is so good, Mac,”*

“Long day, right?”

Jane put down her bowl and used the tablet to reply.

*“Yes, this has all been quite an adjustment. When I worked for the Cottrels, I was mindful of respecting their wishes. They owned the business. Still, they trusted my ability to give them what they wanted without micro-managing me.*

*Carolina, on the other hand, watches my every move. She’s very organized and wants me to be a team player. I want to write all the code for a particular project, but she insists I pass off bits for her other programmers to finish. I’m not complaining, Mac. I’m just not used to a government agency's rigors with its rules and hierarchy.*

*Do you know her, Mac, Special Agent Hendon?”*

Mac set his bowl on Jane’s nightstand and faced her on the bed.

“Yes, I’ve met with her several times as part of my service to the FBI-Chicago Police Joint Task Force.”

*“Did you date her, Mac?”*

“No, it was made pretty clear to me by the FBI folks that she was verboten regarding hook-ups. I asked her about that once. I found out that we operate under the same career philosophy: don’t shit where you eat. She always has a boyfriend but never anyone from the FBI. Her current guy is from the State Department.”

*“Mac, may I speak to you from my heart?”*

“You should always speak to me that way, and ditto for me.”

She placed her empty bowl on the nightstand, stretching her body to reach it. In the soft moonlight, enhanced by the reflection from the lake, Mac allowed himself to admire her athletic figure, her toned legs, her perfectly shaped breasts, her hair tumbling from her shoulders, covering the side of her face. He exhaled, simultaneously shaking his head to break the trance she had on him. She smiled and looked down at her tablet’s backlit keys.

*“The women you run with, Mac, like Agent Hendon and Anneliese, are well-educated, affluent, and beautiful. Carolina is from a wealthy family; Anneliese’s parents are realtors.*

*You are also born of privilege and the most beautiful man I’ve ever met. To say it another way, you’re a babe magnet.*

*How can I compete with that? I may be beautiful, but I’m uneducated (officially). I make a programmer’s wage. Worse yet, Mac, is that I’m mute. What takes me minutes to communicate would take Anneliese only seconds to say. Again, I ask, ‘How can I compete in your world?”*

“You’re not competing with anybody, Jane. The competition is over. I’ve chosen you.

It’s true; I’ve had my share of consensual sex over the years. I’ve used my looks and, yes, my money to attract some women. All that time, though, I’ve been looking for somebody to devote myself to and love.

It’s you, Jane. You’re the one. I knew when you helped me to my feet on that dark construction site, and I looked at you for the first time. You were my Angel, and I had to find you. What do I have to say to convince you?”

*“Mac, I’ve never had sex with anyone. My two rapes weren’t sex; they were beatings. I don’t know how to please you.”*

“Jane. Intimacy between you and I will be what we decide to make of it. We won’t be measuring ourselves against old girlfriends or rapists. It’s just us. We will teach ourselves how to communicate non-verbally.”

Jane looked at him intently, dropping her tablet on the bed. Mac was sitting up, so she straddled herself onto his thighs. Her face was within inches of his. She reached for his left hand and boldly guided it under her nightshirt to her right breast. Jane did not release her grip as if to say, ‘Don’t let go.’

Mac responded by pressing his lips to hers. The kiss was passionate, exciting, and unrelenting, their tongues dancing. It was silent, and Mac thought that if she couldn’t moan, maybe he shouldn’t either. The kiss lasted at least a minute. She broke first. Mac removed his hand from her body, the feel of her bosom leaving a tingle in his fingers.

“Jane, if we go any longer, you’ll send me into the hallway with a tent pole in my shorts.”

Jane smiled mischievously, grabbing her tablet again.

*“At least you won’t run into anything.”*

Mac laughed wholeheartedly and stood up alongside her bed. He pulled her covers back.

“In you go, Jane Doe 413.”

Jane snuggled into a sleeping position with her head on the pillow as Mac positioned the duvet over her.

Retrieving the two bowls, he leaned over to kiss her forehead and headed out the door.

The Slave Auction

The following two weeks were busy for Jane and the FBI team. Director Radzinger, true to his word, got a federal wiretap warrant for Boardcraft Engineering in Naperville. With that green light, Jane and Carolina penetrated the company’s computer systems, which, in this case, were a networked group of desktop supercomputers. Jane set up a mirror of all these computers at FBI Headquarters and began covert surveillance of their operation.

One of the first things Jane discovered was that the factory utilized security robots manufactured by New England Kinetics (NEK). The NEK humanoid robots are not as sophisticated as the Tesla Optimus family but are still very usable in security applications. Fortunately, the robot used was the same model purchased en masse for military installations. Carolina assigned a team at FBI Headquarters in Washington to develop a maintenance application for these security robots that Jane could use to control their operation.

Special Agent Hendon flew into Chicago Tuesday evening, bringing two FBI managers with her, one from the legal department and one fluent in Mandarin. They set up a command center in Jane’s office at the FBI building on Wednesday morning, positioning several chairs around her workstation. Mac decided to watch the proceedings with Ryan DiMarco in Pietrina Cerrone’s office down the hall.

“Tell us what you’ve found, Jane,” Agent Hendon said.

*“OK, there are four NEK security robots. At any time, two are in their recharging stations. There’s one for each of the two floors. The head has two steerable imagers. One is programmed to look for more than three people in a group, people wasting time, for example. This kind of event alerts the security officer.*

*I have control of the second camera, and as the robot makes its rounds, we’ll have a look. They won’t know we’re snooping.”*

The NEK robot walked past some modern-looking machinery, and Jane provided a running commentary*.*

*“These are pick-and-place machines. Fully automatic, they place integrated circuits, resistors, and capacitors on the circuit boards. Oh, these are ovens to melt the solder paste into the chips.*

*This production line with the female workers inserts the more mechanical-type components onto the boards. Let me zoom in on some of these women. They’re all Asian. Look at this one; she’s young, maybe sixteen. They all look scared.*

*Carolina, look at this guy walking past. He’s got a gun in a holster. No wonder they’re all scared.”*

Carolina interrupted Jane’s commentary.

“Jane, let’s have a look upstairs.”

The second floor was primarily a dormitory operation. The group observed a full kitchen staffed by Asians preparing the noontime lunch. The dining hall had seats for about fifty people. Next, the robot traversed the sleeping areas with bunk beds in four large rooms. Some women were still sleeping; Carolina assumed that these were the second-shift employees who serviced the machinery. They also observed a lounge area with women playing computer games or reading Chinese magazines.

*“Carolina, I don’t believe these women can leave that building.”*

“I share that opinion, Jane.”

With everybody watching, Jane scanned through the building’s scheduling application.

*“Says here that twenty new employee candidates are arriving at 10 a.m. Maybe they’re staffing up for second-shift operations. It says processing will be in the large conference room. I’ll maneuver one of the security bots charging into that room, making it look like it’s pointing outside the window. Have the stake-out crew across the road alert us if any busses or a fleet of cars arrive.”*

At 9:45 a.m., the FBI stake-out crew in an apartment building across the road signaled that a bus had arrived at the gate. They operated a camera drone from their apartment roof, and it hovered high over the bus. They reported that twenty women and two men with assault rifles stepped out of the vehicle.

As Jane had surmised, the security robot showed the women marching into the conference room in single-file order. Four men and two women with slightly menacing facial expressions entered the room and walked past the candidates, giving each one a quick look. Four of the mob staffers were Asian.

“Agent Peng, will you listen and translate for us?” Carolina said.

One of the Asian males confronting the women started speaking. Agent Peng gave a running translation of the Mandarin words.

*“You women have all signed contracts with us for five years of employment. We will provide you with room and board. You will do whatever job we assign you without question. We will disburse your salary at the end of the five years, and you can return to China. If you want to stay in the United States, we will use part of your disbursement to arrange forged citizenship papers. Please surrender your passports to my associate as he passes by you.”*

“Opinion, Agent Juarez,” Carolina said to the FBI lawyer.

“Well, it’s not indentured servitude because eventually they get paid. I’m guessing that the mob smuggled these women into the country. Some of these women look very young; look at the girl, third from the right. She looks like she’s fifteen.”

A second Asian man stood before the women and started speaking.

*“Kindly remove your clothes. You may leave on your undergarments.”*

“Carolina, this is a slave auction,” Agent Peng said.

“We’re watching sex trafficking, up close and too personal,” Agent Hendon said.

Several Asian bus passengers started crying. One of the men with an assault rifle brandished it before the women, intimidating them into compliance. What followed was a grotesque display of degradation and humiliation. Their captors groped and inspected them like it was a horse auction. Carolina, Jane, and the rest of the FBI team watched this in shocked silence.

The men asked five women, the youngest and prettiest of the lot, to step forward. The women not chosen dressed and a guard led them out of the room.

One of the Asian males ordered the five remaining women to dress. When finished, two men pointed assault rifles at them, and the Asian criminal addressed them in an ominous voice. Agent Peng continued her running translation.

*“We have chosen you women for jobs as escorts. We will train you to please our clients and make money for our organization. At the end of five years, you’ll be free to go home with your disbursement.”*

All the women understood what was going to happen. Two of them started weeping at the news.

*“Stop your crying. It is foolish to resist. You are alone in a foreign country with no credentials. No one will know you're missing when you are in a shallow grave in the woods. No one will come looking for you. Your training starts tonight. Go with Miss Li. She will get you showered and dressed in new clothes.”*

As the last five left the room, only two men remained; one of them, probably Albanian, made a phone call.

“Velmir, Riad here. Inform the boss that we have five new candidates for training. Tell him we’ll deliver them to Sleeping Pigeon by 5 p.m. Yes, Velmir, tell him a couple of girls are special. Mirupafshim, my friend.”

Agent Hendon glanced at Jane, who turned to look at her. Jane’s facial expression revealed her fury at what they had witnessed.

"I have received training to look at evil dispassionately, but this revolts me on a biblical scale. Jane, I need your focus on this. Let’s see if there are any nearby motels named Sleeping Pigeon.”

In seconds, Jane had Google Earth on the screen. She positioned her mouse pointer to a motel on Route 30, five miles west of Sugar Grove and the Aurora Municipal Airport.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Carolina said after seeing the name ‘Sleeping Pigeon Motel’ on the screen. She went into management mode, handing out assignments to Jane and FBI personnel to find out everything about that motel.

In about an hour, several things made the motel suspect. Foreign investors built it five years ago. With 24 units, the business seemed like an odd investment, being so far out in the countryside. The most curious thing was that the motel had no Internet connection. The website turned out to be an ISP on the island of Barbados. A drone flyover showed no satellite dishes; the local Internet provider showed no connection to the motel.

Officer Merrick and Commander Ryan DiMarco joined Carolina in Jane’s office. Mac was eager to give his analysis.

“Look at the location. Some farmer sells Highway 30 frontage, so the back side of the motel faces farmland. Across the street is the Aurora Self-Storage complex, which is mostly unoccupied. Behind the self-storage units are railroad tracks and more farmland. It’s perfect; you can do anything at that motel, and there’s nobody nearby who might be suspicious.”

FBI Special Agent-in-Charge D’Marcus Mason popped up on the display.

“Agent Hendon, bring your laptop and staff to the large conference room immediately. I want to go over your findings.”

In the amphitheater conference room, D’Marcus Mason first described his dealings with the San Francisco FBI.

“An FBI technical team accompanied BART engineers to one of the stations, randomly selected. They inspected one of the turnstiles, which had one of the counterfeit circuit boards, just as Jane predicted. They installed Jane’s suggested monitoring board, and I’ve assigned a team to investigate the electronic skimming and where it goes.

They checked all the other turnstiles in the station, and all were counterfeits. BART only has twenty-five spare boards. Replacing all the bogus boards will take money and time. If Dr. Morton is indeed a crook, he’s temporarily got us by the short hairs.

So, Agent Hendon and Jane, what do you have?”

With her characteristic aplomb, Carolina gave a concise description of everything they found out about the Boardcraft Engineering facility and the motel. She presented a playback of the young women’s treatment.

“I had hoped,” D’Marcus Mason said, “that we could keep our investigative efforts secret so we could drill down deeper to find who is behind all this. If we act immediately, we may trigger the mob to take defensive actions that stretch out our investigation.”

Jane stood up, grabbed her tablet computer, and marched around the table. Approaching David Hanko, sitting next to Mason, she gestured with her thumb, indicating, “I need your seat.”

Hanko understood immediately and rose from his chair.

“Take my seat, Jane.”

Jane stared at Special Agent-in-Charge Mason for an uncomfortably long time, studying his face, looking for all those clues Master Wu had taught her to observe. She started typing.

*“Respectfully, Agent Mason, the crime of rape is probably going to occur at that motel tonight. Rape violates a woman’s most basic human right to choose with whom she procreates life. It is also an assault on a person’s dignity, their humanity.*

*What Agent Hendon has shown you is sex trafficking, pure and simple. These women, especially the young ones, may have entered the country illegally, but I assure you they did not choose to be raped tonight. They’re alone, without documentation, with nobody to stand up for them.*

*I should know, Agent Mason, because nobody stood up for me when the Institution’s employee raped me. The Institution’s management had its agendas, which took precedence over justice for me.*

*If we do nothing, are we not as guilty as those criminals who will rape and abuse those women tonight?”*

“You’re right, Jane. We do have to act immediately. Commander DiMarco, we’ll have to stage two simultaneous raids at 5 p.m. tonight. I’ll need significant support from the Chicago Police and people from Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

“I can get agents from Milwaukee and Des Moines to that regional airport. What was it? Oh, Aurora Municipal.

“Agent Marecki and I will run the Boardcraft raid. Agent Hanko, Commander DiMarco, and Officer Merrick will run the motel bust. I’ll get you a search warrant for that one.

“Remember, everybody. It’s FBI satellite phones and word-of-mouth only. We don’t want to tip them off that we’re coming.

“Ryan, let’s give Superintendent Green a call. OK, everybody. Man your battle stations.”

CHAPTER XXX

The Sleeping Pigeon

Raid Preparations

While the FBI conducts and supervises most FBI–Chicago Joint Task Force operations, Special Agent David Hanko and Commander Ryan DiMarco allowed Officer Merrick to plan and lead the raid on the Sleeping Pigeon Motel. Ryan wanted the FBI to see just how good Mac was, while Agent Hanko had always been interested in Merrick, a seemingly rich man in the Chicago Police Force.

David and Mac, in plain clothes, drove up to the Aurora Self Storage office, just across the road from the motel. Entering the main office, they encountered an affable thirtysomething African American.

“Good afternoon, gentlemen. I’m Devayne Miles. How can I be of service?”

“I am Officer Merrick of the Chicago Police, and this is Special Agent Hanko of the FBI.”

Mac and David showed their credentials.

“Mr. Miles,” Mac said, “we’re not investigating you or this facility; we’re more interested in that motel across the road.”

“You mean the Pigeon, Officer Merrick?”

“Yes,” David said, “and let me gently remind you, Mr. Miles, that it is a federal felony to lie to an FBI officer.”

“Have you had any dealings with the Sleeping Pigeon Motel, Mr. Miles?”

“They rented two units from us. They pay their bill on time. I don’t know what they use it for.”

David asked for the storage unit numbers and stepped away to ask for a search warrant.

“Have you noticed anything unusual going on at that motel?”

“I don’t pay much attention to it. I live in Aurora, so I always turn east out of our driveway. I have noticed that the parking lot always seems half full every workday, which seemed odd for a motel this far out in the countryside. The ‘No Vacancy’ sign seems lit all the time.”

David Hanko finished his call and returned to the negotiations. Devayne pointed out that their maintenance building on the west end, directly across from the motel, had an office facing the road and two sizeable garages. He called the maintenance supervisor, the only other employee on-site that day, asking him to move any vehicles out of the garage and drive to the sales office. Agent Hanko paid a month’s rental on two empty storage units as compensation. Mac hatched the plan: run unmarked vans with Police and FBI personnel into that maintenance building during the day in a prelude to the 5 p.m. bust.

Mac sent the maintenance manager home early; Devayne covered the rental office until nearly 5 p.m., then he would safely leave. The team increased during the day to 62 people. A small contingent from Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) also joined. If ICE caught any undocumented illegal immigrants in the round-up, they would deal with them compassionately. The Gestapo tactics of the Trump Presidency had given way to the more humane treatment of illegals, especially those involved in the international sex trafficking trade.

One addition to the group was a bit of a surprise.

“Well, hello, Officer Merrick,” Natalie Rumsfort said. “This is my cameraman Josh. Special Agent Mason and I have a deal. If I keep quiet about Jane the Angel, I get the scoop on any mob busts.”

“Good to see you, Natalie. You and Josh stay here until we signal it’s safe to approach the motel.”

Party Poopers

Late in the afternoon, David Hanko’s FBI satellite phone rang. Special Agent-in-Charge Mason informed him that Boardcraft was loading five women into a Volkswagen electric vehicle. His teams had surrounded the plant undetected.

“OK, Sleeping Pigeon teams, move into position,” Mac ordered on his satellite phone. Two teams formed to the west and east of the motel, hidden on the opposite side of the road. Mac, David, Ryan, Special Agent Peng, and Officer Andres Williams, dressed in FBI armor and helmets, got into two unmarked vehicles.

They waited patiently as the electric van arrived and parked next to the west end of the motel. Two men with assault rifles escorted the women from the vehicle and herded them into the motel's five westmost rooms. Each then entered the second and third motel rooms.

“Everybody, David and I are going to visit the office first. When you see us go in, cross the road, and get into position east and west of the motel.”

Arriving in their vehicles, David, Mac, DiMarco, Peng, and Williams burst through the motel office door. There was an attendant behind the desk and a young Asian woman sitting on a lounge chair.

“You! Stand up, move away from the desk, hands up,” said David Hanko. The attendant looked shocked but complied.

“What’s your name? Answer quickly!”

“Merrit Vagner, sir.”

“All right, Mr. Vagner. I’m Special Agent Hanko of the FBI. You are under arrest for the sex trafficking of minors. We have been following five women brought here under duress for God knows what. You have a choice. Cooperate and tell us what we want to know, and maybe we’ll put in a good word with the prosecutors. Stonewall us, and you’re looking at a long Federal prison term. Choose now, Mr. Vagner.”

“I’ll help. I’ll help. What do you want to know?”

“Tell us about the twelve units on the west side.”

“Paradyne Global Promotions permanently books the westmost five rooms. That’s a mob company that runs a nationwide escort business. They audition and train girls to be escorts in those units, using violence and drugs to coerce them. Those women they just delivered are in for a bad night.”

“What about the other seven units?” Mac said.

“They’re all booked for night-long trysts with some very young escorts, having sex sessions with rich and influential people.”

“What about the twelve units on the east side?”

“Six units have two girls per room, waiting for assignment to a city somewhere. In the meantime, they do the motel’s housekeeping before noon. The other six units next to the office are vacant tonight,” Vagner said.

“What else do you know?” Mac said.

“We run surveillance in one of the back rooms.”

“Surveillance, you say. Show us,” David Hanko said.

“Holy shit,” was Agent Peng’s reaction as they entered the surveillance room. On the wall were two 72” high-resolution displays, each showing the activity in each of the motel’s units. A central desk included a keyboard and screen connected to a supercomputer and an Internet router.

“Explain the router on the floor?” Mac said.

“It’s a local Internet, Officer, not connected to the country’s Internet. We supply the rooms with porn, movies, and so on. We store the surveillance data on a petabyte thumb drive. Somebody picks it up once a month.”

“So, this place is, in addition to being an escort training center, also a blackmail operation, isn’t it?” David Hanko said.

“Essentially,” Vagner said. They returned to the lobby.

“Vagner, give me keycards to all twelve rooms on the west side and likewise for the east side.”

Agent Lian Peng stayed in the surveillance room. David Hanko asked her if the coast was clear outside.

“Yeah, they’re too busy humping to look out the window.”

Hanko handed Ryan DiMarco the twelve marked keycards for the east side. He slipped into his vehicle unnoticed and drove to the east parking lot, distributing the key cards to his officers. Mac, David, and Andres entered their car and moved to the west parking lot.

Mac described the plan. He would take the first unit since it was one man and one victim. David would enter the second room, which was much more dangerous because the mobster had a long gun. With the key cards, everybody got into position, stealthily ducking underneath the windows. All the officers waited for Agent Hanko to command. Mac whispered to Andres.

“Go with Hanko. He’s up against the most firepower.”

Hanko gave the signal.

“Go, Go, Go.”

Mac slipped the key card into the slot below the doorknob. Opening the door, he stepped into the room with his M6 carbine. What he saw shocked his sensibilities. The perp had a young Asian girl dressed only in a bra and panties on her knees, forcing oral sex on her. Mac shouted with his command voice.

“You are under arrest. Release the woman and raise your hands.”

The perp, showing his back to Mac, released the young woman. But he whirled around behind and lifted her by the armpits. In a flash, he placed the panic-stricken woman in a chokehold.

Mac, trained to observe details, spotted a Glock-50 with a silencer on the nightstand.

“If you so much as flinch for that gun, I’ll shoot!”

“Really? Officer Merrick?”

“You’re Yilka, aren’t you? Yilka Kartallozi. The one who killed Officer Williams.”

“Yeah, I killed that fucking cop, but we missed you, didn’t we? Time to rectify that mistake.”

“Now, that’s a stupid plan, Kartallozi. There are sixty people outside.”

Yilka, at six feet, four inches tall, weighs 245 pounds. Training every week in martial arts, he is powerful and deadly. He violently catapulted the Asian girl across the room straight at Mac Merrick’s body. She crashed into him, uttering a frightened shriek as she hit. Mac could see Yilka reach for the gun on the table.

Mac’s natural response is to protect the innocent; that’s his job. He grabbed the girl, twirling her away from the line of fire. Mac extended his leg to trip her, forcing her to the floor just as Kartallozi fired. The shell just missed Mac’s left arm. He twisted to look at Kartallozi. Yilka, rather than shooting again, just had to get in one more insult.

“It’s a pleasure to kill you, Officer Merrick, you fucking cop bastard!”

Instinctively knowing that fractions of a second mattered in a life-or-death situation, Mac got his fingers on his handgun, swiftly yanking it from his holster. He pointed the gun haphazardly at Yilka and pulled the trigger. The shot rang out. Yilka, his eyes bulging from the bullet’s impact into his abdomen, stumbled back a step.

Suddenly, three M6 carbine shots rang out, Bang, Bang, Bang, in quick succession, each deafening report vibrating the room's walls. One of the bullets hit Yilka in his temple above the ear, ending his life in a microsecond. His surprised expression became his death mask, frozen forever. The other two shells impacted directly into Yilka’s heart, blowing it into bloody bits. Kartallozi fell vertically to the floor, his body collapsing into a grotesque tangle of limbs and a frozen expression of surprise.

“Mac. Are you all right?” said Andres Williams, some smoke still curling out of the barrel of his assault rifle.

“I’m OK. That guy was Yilka Kartallozi, the one who killed your brother DiOtis. Can you help me off this victim? She needs help.”

In a state of shock, the woman was saying something in Mandarin.

“Andres, grab that sheet from the bed and cover her.”

Andres gently shrouded the girl with the sheet, saying only, “OK, OK.” She seemed to get the point and helped him maneuver the sheet to restore her modesty.

David Hanko entered the room. “Is everybody all right?”

“We’re OK,” Andres said. “The dead perp is Yilka Kartallozi, the guy who killed my brother.”

“Dave, is everybody all right?” Mac said.

“Two perps dead in the next two rooms. Everybody else surrendered peacefully.”

The scene along both wings of the motel was bedlam.

Ambush Journalism

“Well, if it isn’t my favorite Chicago cop,” Natalie Rumsfort said, as Mac stumbled out into the parking lot. “I’ve got a soft spot for you alpha-male boys, Mac. Does Jane know you’re all right?”

“Thanks for reminding me, Natalie. I’ll call her right now.”

Mac called Jane’s cell phone number, requesting a video session. Jane’s smiling face appeared on display. Mac watched Jane operate the text-to-speech generator.

*“Mac, I watched your helmet cam video. I was so scared. Are you all right?”*

“It was a close call for sure. We’ve got a lot of work to do here. I may be home late tonight.”

“I’ll stay up until you make it home. So proud of you today.”

Natalie’s cameraman, Josh, returned from the edge of the motel parking lot, where he had just placed a portable StarLink dish system into operation, giving Natalie a direct video connection back to the Chicago Sentinel newsroom. Her editors would watch the feed and provide her with real-time info on people she might be interviewing.

“All set, Natalie,” Josh said, “we’ve got WiFi back to the shop. Let’s get started.”

They walked up to Commander DiMarco, who Natalie knew.

“Commander DiMarco, Natalie Rumsfort of the Sentinel. What happened here in Room 24?”

“Oh, Hi Natalie. One of our officers stopped a sexual assault on an underage woman in this room. The perpetrator fired a weapon at our officer. He fired back, as well as a fellow officer, killing the criminal.”

“Is the officer OK?”

“Fortunately, the officer was not injured.”

“Have you identified the perp, Commander DiMarco?”

“Yes, Natalie. Our officer recognized him, and we recovered an ID from his wallet. The deceased’s name is Yilka Kartallozi, a known mob leader. From our officer’s body cam, we have his admission that he is the person who killed Officer DiOtis Williams. Natalie, don’t ask for the names of any of our officers today for obvious security reasons.”

“Commander DiMarco, how old was the victim in this room?”

“We have a policewoman fluent in Mandarin interviewing her. The victim testified that she was sixteen. Natalie, please don’t show the faces of these victims on air.”

“That would be against our newspaper’s policy, Commander. We will blur the faces of all the victims.”

Natalie moved on to FBI Special Agent Hanko, who was somewhat reticent. Natalie had to prod him for every scrap of information.

He did explain that when entering Rooms 23 and 22, they encountered suspects assaulting underage women. The suspects all had long guns and lunged for them. A short gun battle ensued, with two both perps killed.

The three other hotel rooms had one perp per room, and the agents arrested them without a fight. Hanko explained that the Asian immigrants were under the age of seventeen.

Josh’s camera work showed a busy scene, with more FBI agents and Chicago Police arriving, plus a couple of FBI vans to transport those arrested to detention.

Two Chicago policemen escorted a person out of Room 14. The chain leg restraints made him look disheveled and unsteady on his feet. As one of the officers reentered the room, Natalie had a chance to question him. In her earpiece, Natalie’s editors informed her that facial recognition software had identified him as Marko Savanović, the current Speaker of the Illinois House of Representatives. As Natalie approached him, her editors fed her a stream of embarrassing information.

Savanović, dressed in khaki Dockers and an unbuttoned sports shirt, looked drained and bewildered. His long, greasy black hair was a tangle of spaghetti.

“Speaker Savanović, I’m Natalie Rumsfort of the Chicago Sentinel. Two years ago, you voted against legalizing sex work in Illinois, giving those workers police protection, and providing a safe way to conduct business that didn’t infringe on others' rights or sensibilities. Now you are at this whorehouse for child molesters, busted for having sex with a woman under seventeen. How do you explain this rather egregious hypocrisy?”

“You people in the press, you love seeing people’s lives destroyed, wiped out in a single moment of indiscretion. Does it give you pleasure, Miss Rumsfort?”

“I take no pleasure at anyone’s misfortune, Mister Speaker, but in your case, this sure looks like a self-inflicted wound.”

“Look, Miss Rumsfort. Friends told me that this place had some wild evening parties. I came and found myself in a single room with a hooker. I didn’t know she was underage.”

“Are you sure you want to stick with that, Mr. Speaker? Cops told me that the mob equipped each room with cameras. The mob records all activity in the rooms, telephone calls, and money transfers. Is the mob blackmailing you, Mr. Savanović?”

“We’re done talking, Ms. Rumsfort.”

A Chicago policeman came out of the motel room, and they escorted Savanović to the awaiting van. Natalie couldn’t resist twisting the Fourth Estate knife blade one more time, following him to the vehicle.

“Mr. Savanović, you have two teenage daughters, both under the age of seventeen. Would you be OK with them working in a place like this?”

Marko Savanović stopped at the door of the police van and stared at Natalie with grim intensity.

“We all hope our children will do better than we did. Isn’t that right, Ms. Rumsfort?”

With that, he extended his hand to the officer inside and clambered clumsily into the vehicle, taking him to a life of shame and disgrace.

As the FBI agents and police brought out the other six motel customers in Rooms 18 through 13, Natalie’s editors quickly identified them via facial recognition: a Chicago City Councilman, two bank Vice Presidents, the owner of a construction firm, and two very wealthy Chicago hedge fund managers. They all got the Natalie Rumsfort grilling; all but one were smart enough to say, “No comment.”

One hedge fund manager, Roland Spranger of Apogee Assets Group, did agree to talk.

“Mr. Spranger, I’m Natalie Rumsfort of the Sentinel. What do you think your investors will say when they see you arrested at a bordello for child abusers?”

“Well, you’d be surprised how many use prostitutes for single hookups like this or at sex parties in their mansions. They only care if I make money for them, Ms. Rumsfort.”

“Cops tell me that the girl you were with had just turned sixteen. You’re looking at a felony rape charge since the woman involved is under seventeen. You could get twenty years, worst case.”

Spranger laughed at Natalie. He flashed a Cheshire cat grin.

“What planet are you living on, Ms. Rumsfort? I’m worth two and a half billion dollars. I’ll sic a team of high-priced lawyers to plea bargain this down to disorderly conduct. Yeah, I’ll make the news a few times, but in a year, it’ll be old news when I walk free.”

“You’re not married, are you, Mr. Spranger.”

“Nope, never married.”

“I can see why,” Natalie concluded as two policemen escorted him to one of the vans.

Aftermath

Mac returned to the Merrick mansion late, near midnight. The FBI booked him a RoboTaxi to get home, so he used the long drive to fill out *Weapons Discharged* reports required by the Chico Police Department. Entering the mansion, he was surprised to see his mother, father, and Jane waiting for him.

“Son,” John Merrick said, “Jane told us that when the mobster reached for his gun, you got the young Chinese girl out of the line of fire. I’ve never been prouder of one of my children than I am today. I want you to know that.”

“Dad. Andres Williams and I shot and killed an Albanian Kryetar, an Underboss. His name was Yilka Kartallozi. He’s the one who killed my partner, DiOtis Williams. He’s also one of the gangbangers that assaulted Jane.”

Jane started typing into her FBI satellite phone. Everybody patiently waited for her to finish.

*“I take no satisfaction at the death of anybody and would have preferred this man to spend the rest of his days in jail. That said, he made his intentions to kill Mac pretty clear, so I’m glad Mac and Andres had the final say in the matter.”*

“So, Mac. Would you say that the mob will be angry about this?” John said.

“Apoplectic is the right word, Dad. This mob is famous for its crazy acts of vengeance. Dad, we’re closing in on them, but it’s not over. Not by a long shot.”

CHAPTER XXX

Mob Panic

Bad News Rising

“Lewis, you’d better get up here right now,” said Imer Bisha in the CCE secure conference room with Lendina Bisha and Valmir Peco, who runs most night operations. They had news reports from most local media outlets running on the wall-mounted display panel, especially Natalie Rumsfort’s on-the-scene reports of the raid against the Sleeping Pigeon Motel.

Lewis burst into the room, a bit out of breath.

“OK, what’s the big emergency?”

“The Feds have raided the Boardcraft operation and the Sleeping Pigeon facility. That fucking Natalie Rumsfort is reporting that Yilka is dead,” Imer said.

“Shit! How did this happen?” Lewis said.

“It’s that God-damned Angel, Lewis. Before, she was just a thorn in our side. Now, she’s joined forces with the FBI. As you predicted, she’s got a fucking juggernaut behind her.”

“We’d better set up an emergency conference with the bosses immediately. I’ll get the ball rolling,” Lendina said. One after another, the bosses of the New York, Seattle, Los Angeles, Miami, St. Louis, and Boston syndicates popped up on the screen.

Arsen Murka, the North American Albanian mob leader, looked disheveled and irritated.

“Imer, this had better be good. What’s going on?”

“Boss, it’s all over the local news here in Chicago. The feds raided our Boardcraft Engineering factory and our Sleeping Pigeon Motel operation. They’re saying that the feds killed Yilka Kartallozi at the motel.”

“Yilka dead? Jesus, Imer, who killed him?”

“We don’t know, but pictures that nosy Sentinel reporter broadcast show both FBI agents and Chicago Police involved.”

“Do you suspect the undercover cop, Merrick, was involved?” Murka said.

“Probably, sir, although the reporter isn’t identifying any lower-level cops and agents.”

Vinski Kastrati, head of the Los Angeles group, remembered Yilka fondly.

“Yilka was a loyal Underboss and a good friend. As a young man, he guided me on my first retaliation mission. He was old-school, for sure, but you could always rely on him.”

“Agreed, Vinski,” Arsen Murka said. “We all owe a debt to Yilka. I could never see him as a Boss; he was too hot-headed but good for certain things.”

“Lewis,” Luvas Vercuni from Seattle said, “what’s the overall impact of what just happened?”

“I can only speak to the Boardcraft Engineering situation, Luvas. Remember that we invested $9 million in setting that operation up. The idea was that they would build our cyber-skimming circuit boards secretly, at a low price, using Asian illegal immigrant labor. The company appeared legitimate on paper, but we secretly constructed our boards without keeping any records. We’ll have to start over, so increasing our skimming efforts will be on hold for at least six months or more.”

“Imer, tell us about the Sleeping Pigeon Motel?” Vercuni said.

“They’ll see only one month of our blackmail activity. We remove all surveillance videos monthly. They’ll know about Paradyne Global Promotions, so Lewis will have to dissolve that company pronto. It’s an offshore company located in Cyprus. We’ll have to go with what escorts we currently have on staff since acquiring new candidates will have to wait.

“The bottom line, Vercuni, is that they crippled our expansion plans, and we’ll have to endure some negative headlines in the news.”

“The good news, I guess, is that our business data was not part of the material seized, am I correct?” Luvas said.

“That’s true, Luvas,” Lewis Morton said. “Eleven years ago, Arsen Murka authorized Imer and me to computerize our business. That included the traditional aspects such as drugs, prostitution, protection, extortion ops, and new endeavors such as cyber skimming and Fortune 500 legitimate companies' penetration. We store this data on our secret supercomputer, located in a separate building about a mile from our Chicago Cyber Engineering building.

“Lendina visits every syndicate location four times a year and audits its quarterly business results. She transmits new data to our supercomputer via the StarLink constellation Internet connection. She uses a very advanced encryption protocol that I designed; it’s very secure.

“We meet with Arsen Murka and the other Bosses in New York four times yearly to review our quarterly business results. Lendina makes her presentation using the same StarLink secure channel. These meetings facilitate our future planning, how we’ll invest our income, new projects, and so forth.

“We also backup the business data on our secret supercomputer to a Dell laptop computer with petabyte storage four times a year. There are many reasons to have an offsite backup of our business data; there could be an earthquake or some other calamity that wipes out our secret supercomputer. This backup is so crucial that we wistfully call it the Chicago Ark of the Covenant.

“This laptop computer is ensconced in a high-tech safe, bolted to the slab of a self-storage company we own in Elmhurst. As part of our quarterly business review, we bring the Ark of the Covenant, under armed guard, to our Chicago Cyber Engineering building. Imer and Lendina copy our secret supercomputer data to the portable unit. After that, it’s returned, under armed guard, to its Elmhurst storage site. Just like our clandestine supercomputer, we keep the Ark out of reach of federal prying eyes.

“I’ve planned to make our business raid-proof; so far, it’s working, save for today’s embarrassment.”

“Let’s talk about this Angel woman,” Lendina said. “What should we do with her? By my account, she has engineered the loss of a large fentanyl shipment, the discovery of our local drug lab, and the elimination of our Boardcraft and Pigeon operations. This woman has also interfered with some of our efforts at retaliation. I’ve been in this business as long as my husband. I’ve never seen a single individual do as much damage to us as this lady. Maybe it’s time to consider the VORTEX solution.”

“I’m sorry, I’m not familiar with this VORTEX,” Ari Dervishi from Boston said.

“I’ll answer that, Lendina,” Imer Bisha said.

“VORTEX is a play on the old James Bond villain, SPECTRE. VORTEX loosely stands for ViOlence, Revenge, Terror, and EXtortion in this modern variant. Get it?

“They are a collection of retired Russian Spetsnaz, or Russian Special Forces veterans, a near-equivalent to the Navy Seal Team Six. A fired Russian general named Oleg Novikov runs the operation. Apparently, he was too brutal even for the Russian Army. He’s based somewhere in Indonesia. I’ve heard he employs a secretive four-person crew to do the dirty work. They utilize the latest Russian technology and are well-funded. They will do the most challenging jobs but at an extreme cost.”

“Can you guess how much?” Luvas said.

“The FBI and the Chicago Police have set up this Angel person as a house guest at the John Merrick mansion in Highland Park, protected by Federal Marshals. Assuming we want to take out Angel, Officer Merrick, and his parents, that would be four people plus the Marshals. I’m guessing sixty to seventy-five million dollars.”

“Didn’t we spend three and a half million to hire that Serbian to kill the Police Commander, and she thwarted that one? Vinski said.

“Yeah, but these guys have a spotless reputation. They claim to have never failed. You could ask them to kill Santa Claus, and they’d do it.

“Well, my friends,” Arsen Murka said. “I may be the Boss of the North American syndicate, but on this act of retaliation, I’ll need everybody to vote up or down. Give me a thumbs-up if you’re okay with investing in the VORTEX solution.”

One by one, each Boss gave a thumbs-up gesture.

“OK, since everybody agrees, I will make an overture to this group. I understand they charge $2 million to even look at the job.

Once we set this into motion, I can’t update the group about any of this. Secrecy is paramount here. Let’s get back to business but keep me informed of any other FBI interference. Good day, my friends.”

CHAPTER XXX

Repercussions

Raid Cleanup

Jane received a request before lunch to come to Special Agent-in-Charge D’Marcus Mason’s office. Passing his secretary, she noticed Carolina Hendon sitting with him. Master Wu taught her how to read faces so Jane could tell they had disappointing news.

“Oh, Jane. Have a seat,” Mason said. “Carolina and I have reviewed all the data files and evidence taken from Boardcraft Engineering and the Sleeping Pigeon Motel. I had hoped we’d find a copy of your rape video there. That would have made it easy for me to immediately arrest Imer Bisha and others we’ve identified on the charge of rape and assault. Being a raid conducted under a legal search warrant, we could use such evidence in court.

Alas, no such file exists in either raid location. Also, investigators found no slam-dunk evidence that connected Bisha and Morton to either operation. We’ve undoubtedly hurt the mob’s operation by shutting down a blackmail operation and some of their penetration of Fortune 500 companies. Still, there’s not enough here to arrest any mob leadership.”

*“I would have thought, Agent Mason, that Chicago Cyber Engineering requesting a quote on a BART turnstile board with the silk-screen labeling removed would have been sufficient evidence of criminal intent.”*

“We’re going to ask Dr. Lewis Morton about it, Jane,” Carolina said. “D’Marcus called him and demanded that he come in for an interview at 2:00 p.m. Barney is on his way with the Merrick chopper. It will be here in ten minutes. Please go home and watch the meeting with your FBI satellite phone. Jane, we don’t want you anywhere near that guy.”

Jane gave D’Marcus Mason a penetrating stare before starting to type.

*“Respectfully, Agent Mason, I’m not afraid of any of these people.”*

“I’m well aware of that, Jane. That’s why we want you ten miles away when we bring this man in for questioning. Oh, Marcia is signaling that your helicopter has landed. Off you go, Jane. Be ready to observe at 2 p.m.”

Grilling

Two armed FBI agents shepherded Dr. Lewis Morton and Tony Sipelli through the metal detectors and ultrasound scanners. The FBI stored all their electronics, phones, and smartwatches at the FBI entrance. Tony reminded the agents that any search of their property without a search warrant would have legal repercussions.

Two FBI guards led Morton and Sipelli to an interior interview room with a two-way mirror and a single door. Escorted to their seats, the two guards sat in chairs away from the table.

“Dr. Morton, Counselor Sipelli, I am Special Agent in Charge D’Marcus Mason. If you look at the cameras on the front wall, you will see that we are recording this interview. May I remind you that it is a federal felony to lie to an FBI agent?

Seated next to me is Special Agent Carolina Hendon. Next to her is Special Agent David Hanko. On my left, representing the Justice Department, is US Attorney Joseph Tyler Wolvingham.

Lewis Morton looked like a GQ magazine model, wearing a tailored light grey business suit, white dress shirt, and matching grey tie. Thirty-eight years old, his full head of hair, light five o’clock shadow mustache, and goatee gave him an attractive countenance. Morton fixed his gaze at Carolina.

“Hmmm. Carolina Hendon? Are you the author of the 2047 Cal Tech Ph.D. Thesis on Linux Round-robin scheduling in a multi-core computing environment?”

“Yes, Dr. Morton. I am the author of that paper. The Open Software Foundation accepted my work and incorporated it into all versions of Linux the following year.”

Morton inched forward in his chair towards Carolina with a condescending smile.

“I must admit, Agent Hendon, that when I reviewed that paper, I had no idea its author would be so ravishing.”

“Let’s keep our comments professional, Doctor Morton,” Carolina said. “The Mad Men television series ended forty years ago; in case you have forgotten.”

“Let’s get this interview started, shall we?” Mason said.

Special Agent Mason shoved a gruesome autopsy photograph of Yilka Kartallozi in front of Morton and Sipelli.

“Do you know this person, Doctor Morton?”

“No, Agent Mason, I have no idea who this is.”

“His name is Yilka Kartallozi, Dr. Morton, and he was an Albanian Underboss. I ask again, do you know him?”

Morton stiffened in his seat, his body language indicating a rising level of tension.

“For the second time, I do not know this individual.”

“Dr. Morton,” David Hanko said, “has this man ever been in your Chicago Cyber Engineering building?”

“Not that I’m aware of.”

“We have the testimony of three witnesses that this man went into your lobby four years ago, bypassed security, and went into the elevator. What’s your explanation for that?”

Tony Sipelli became indignant, clenching his fists as he spoke.

“This is ridiculous, Agent Hanko. Four years ago? The lobby of Chicago Cyber Engineering is open to the public. Anybody can walk in there. Maybe there was a lapse in security, or this individual was looking for a bathroom!”

Carolina took over the questioning. She had pages of notes in front of her.

“Doctor Morton, have you or your company had any dealings with Boardcraft Engineering near Naperville?”

“Yes, we have purchased their services many times. We like them because they not only etch and drill our circuit boards but also assemble them.”

Carolina shuffled some papers, her face always sporting a faint smile, as she prepared to poke the bear.

“We raided that company five days ago, Doctor Morton. We have determined that the Albanian organized crime family financed, staffed, and operated this firm. The employees were primarily destitute Asian illegal immigrants, forced to work under nearly slave labor conditions.

“In our study of their business records, one transaction caught our attention. You requested a quotation for this circuit board that I’m showing you. The design files have all silk screening removed on the top and bottom layers, save for the edge connector pinouts. You asked for a quote to build and populate one thousand units.”

“Forgive me, Agent Hendon; I don’t see where this is going?”

“I’ll explain, Dr. Morton. We tracked down the end-user of this board. It turned out to be San Francisco’s Bay Area Rapid Transit system. Specifically, Bart uses this board in their subway turnstile units; it transfers cash from the user’s smartphones or debit cards to a BART-affiliated bank.

“The FBI and BART engineers checked two stations’ turnstile units. We believe both stations had these counterfeit boards installed to skim some of the transactions to a foreign bank.

“So, I ask you, Louis Morton, did your company design, manufacture, and install these counterfeits into BART turnstiles for a sophisticated electronic skimming operation?”

Morton relaxed a bit, leaned back in his chair, and studied Carolina’s face for a few seconds. She could sense his intellect working at warp speed, trying to frame the best answer.

“The short answer, Agent Hendon, is no. We did not build those boards. Did you find orders, parts purchases, and other evidence of the manufacture of these boards?”

“No, we did not. The only evidence on the Boardcraft system was your request for a quote and the needed schematics and board design files. We think leaving this on their system was a mistake.”

“You should have gone into science fiction writing, Ms. Hendon. You’ve woven a delightful conspiracy theory here. The only problem is that there’s a simple explanation.

All BART circuit design files were available for our work with their station display systems. I wanted to evaluate the cost and capabilities of the Boardcraft Engineering company, so I chose a reasonably complicated BART circuit board for my evaluation and removed most of the labeling to protect my customer. I asked for a quote, determined their price and capabilities were acceptable, and started doing business with them. So, Special Agent Hendon, my response to your conjecture, colloquially put, is ‘nice try, sweety pie.”

Carolina, trained not to react to such blatant sexism and hostility, maintained her resting face smile.

“Here’s where we are, Doctor Morton. There are fifty BART stations and about six hundred turnstiles. Our inspections of a couple of stations indicate that someone installed counterfeits in every turnstile. BART usually has only fifty turnstile circuit boards stocked for maintenance replacement. It will take many months to purchase new units and replace them.

In the interim, we had an electronics consultant design a WiFi board to replace the ones at the BART stations. Using off-the-shelf components, this WiFi board will intercept your modified WiFi stream and do two things: route legitimate fare transactions to BART’s bank and skim data to the proverbial bit bucket.

My cybercrime team in Washington has fifty of these boards programmed and tested. We will ship them to San Francisco this weekend and installed Monday night. Whoever profits from this skimming operation will lose their revenue by next Tuesday. We know it was you, Morton. The entirety of the FBI is working to prove it.”

“We ran an interesting experiment before our raid, Dr. Morton,” Joe Wolvingham said. “We took the design files of a complicated Raspberry Pi Plus board from a Manhattan manufacturer, modified the design files to reflect a bogus FBI company, and submitted the design online for bids by Boardcraft Engineering and CS Manufacture in Mexicali, the company that builds BART’s boards. Guess what we found? The Boardcraft board was one-third the Mexicali company's price, and that’s a Mexican company.

There’s only one explanation: slave labor at the Naperville plant. Slave labor here in America. My conclusion: you set up a company to manufacture your boards inexpensively and secretly, a perfect criminal collaboration!”

“Jesus H. Christ, D’Marcus!” Tony Sipelli said, his face flushed with indignation. “How long are you going to let this farce go on? You’ve let Cal Tech Tinker Belle over there weave a colorful conspiracy theory without any evidence whatsoever to support it. You know damn well that none of which you’ve said will hold up in court. You, Barrister Wolvingham, should know this.”

“If I may butt in, Agent Mason,” Morton said, “my offer is still open. You can bring Tinker Belle and all your agents to our facility, and I will let her inspect every room, every computer, and every data storage system. We are 100% legitimate, and I can prove it. Bring them over tomorrow.”

Special Agent in Charge Mason looked intently at Morton, cracking the slightest Cheshire cat smile before speaking.

“Nah. We're not interested in your Potemkin Village stage show, Doctor Morton. But I will tell you some areas of research we’re looking into regarding your company.

“We’re looking into the somewhat suspicious death of your building inspector, Boyd Creekmore. What did he do for you that required his elimination?

“We’ll be using your tax records to identify every one of your customers. They’ll get visits from the FBI, ascertain what you did for them, and identify possible skimming opportunities similar to the BART caper. We are relentless, Doctor Morton. You’ve been warned.”

“Agent Castor, please escort these gentlemen out of the building. Good day, Doctor Morton, and Counselor Sipelli.”

After the guards escorted Morton and Sipelli out of the interview room, Special Agent-in-Charge Mason relaxed a bit, leaning back in his chair, gently scratching his goatee with his fingers.

“Well, I’d say we certainly rattled those gentlemen. Those colorful monikers for Agent Hendon, Tinker Belle and Sweety Pie, certainly attest to that.”

“Thank your lucky stars that you sent Jane home, D’Marcus,” Joe Wolvingham said. “If Morton had called her Tinker Belle, she’d probably have hit him.”

“You know, sir,” Carolina said, “We could probably go into that building tomorrow with jackhammers and get to the bottom of all this?”

“Yeah, we could, but you let Jane keep squeezing them. If they were a water tank, Jane has them near the burst limit.”

CHAPTER XXX

Getting to Know You

Late Night Conversations

“Jane, come in.”

Mac’s eyes sparkled, seeing Jane at the doorway to his childhood bedroom. Plopping down next to him, Jane leaned over and quickly kissed him on the lips, a kiss not designed to initiate intimacy but more of a gentle confirmation of her affection for him. Mac’s face beamed as she reached for her tablet computer.

“Long day at work?”

*“Yeah, I worked a half-day at the FBI Headquarters and a half-day upstairs. They interviewed Morton and didn’t want me in the same room. He’s a bit of a conceited prick, Mac. “He called Carolina Hendon ‘Caltech Tinker Belle’ and ‘Sweety-pie.’ She didn’t bat an eyelash.”*

“Yeah, I’ve heard that about her; she’s unperturbable.”

*“They were smart to send me home; I might have hit him if he said that to me.”*

“Oh, am I interrupting something I’m not supposed to see?” Anne Merrick said, standing at the entrance to Mac’s bedroom.

“Would either of you like a midnight snack?”

“Any pistachio ice cream in the fridge, Mom?”

“Yes, we bought some yesterday. Would you like some ice cream too, Jane?”

Jane gave an enthusiastic ‘yes’ by nodding her head, and Anne left for the kitchen. Anne Merrick returned with a tray containing three goblets of ice cream topped with sugar wafer cookies.

They all sat cross-legged on Mac’s bed, with Jane closest to Mac. Anne inquired about the Federal Marshals, wanting to know how many were on duty tonight.

“Three Marshals are working the night shift, Mom. One walks around the house; another operates the infrared motion detector surveillance system. There’s one asleep in the guest house. These marshals are local; a replacement crew will arrive at 9 a.m.”

“Jane,” Anne inquired, do you have any friends?”

*“Certainly, Colby and Tilly Cottrel would qualify as friends; they proved that when they offered to pay my bail.”*

“Yes,” Anne replied, “I was thinking of having them over for dinner soon. I was thinking more along the lines of a girlfriend who you are close to, someone you socialize with.”

*“The short answer, Anne, is no. Like your son, I decided to avoid fraternizing with anyone at the restaurant. I needed the job, and any romantic drama might jeopardize it. As for the Cottrels, I worked exclusively from home; all employees saw me as an avatar.*

*I do have many acquaintances online as part of my studies of the hacking community. There, I protected my anonymity with clever bylines like ‘cyberwench’ and ‘bitchbucket.’”*

“Hey, I like that nickname, Bitchbucket,” Mac said with a gleeful giggle. Jane poked him in response, flashing a playful smile.

“Seriously, Jane,” Anne said, “don’t you have anybody, like a girlfriend, with whom you can share your heart? I mean, everyone needs a friend to lean on.”

*“Let’s finish our ice cream, and then I’ll respond.”*

Jane, Mac, and Anne consumed the pistachio ice cream and sugar wafer cookies, and Anne placed the goblets and spoons on the nightstand. As Jane picked up her iPad and started typing, Anne was utterly fascinated by her stream of consciousness.

*“The school I attended, the State Institution for Intellectually Disabled Children, was like a prison. The children there were so helpless, so disadvantaged, that the staff couldn’t allow any possibility of escape. Even at a young age, I was smart enough to realize that running away would be fruitless; I had no money or family.*

*After a male employee raped me at age thirteen, I saw males as a threat and avoided contact. Except for mealtimes and bedtime, I remained in the library, which was enormous and virtually unused. Most of what I learned about men was from reading classic English literature.*

*So many heroes of English novels are larger than life, intelligent, and respectful; I longed for the depth of love that these men engendered. From Thomas Hardy’s Far From the Madding Crowd, one passage has Gabriel Oak saying to Bathsheba Everdeen, ‘I shall do one thing in this life — one thing certain — that is, love you, and long for you, and keep wanting you till I die.’*

*I’ve had many men approach me, Anne, and some women too. I politely turned them all down. Many just wanted a quick pump and dump; others were more earnest, but I just wanted a man with the decency, passion, and intellect of Gabriel Oak.*

*Surely, you can see that your son, Mac, is a modern archetypal version of Gabriel Oak: handsome, witty, loving, and respectful. I’ve dreamed of someone like him for years.*

*Forgive me for being blunt with you, Anne. If your son wanted me, I would willingly be his consort.*

*Remarkably, he doesn’t take advantage of my willingness; instead, he waits until he’s confident that my safety and your safety are assured. Isn’t that the mark of a heroic character in English literature? I thus love him more for each day this goes on.”*

Anne reached out, gently laying her hand over Jane’s fingers. Mac is her last unmarried child, and every day moves her towards wanting Jane Doe 413 to change her surname to Merrick.

Trip to Washington

Having attended an afternoon briefing in Agent Mason’s office, Commander Ryan DiMarco strolled past the visitor’s offices in the Chicago FBI building. One of the offices had Special Agent Carolina Hendon sitting at a desk, busily working with her laptop computer. Carolina was wearing a Brooks Brothers two-button Navy suit with a man’s pinstripe shirt, and a simple gold chain replaced the usual tie. She looked up as he entered her office.

“Ah, Commander DiMarco. You’ll have to forgive me; I’ve forgotten your first name.”

“It’s Ryan, Carolina. You travel so much and meet so many people. I don’t know how you can remember so many names. What brings you to Chicago today?”

Flashing her characteristic warm smile, Agent Hendon motioned with her hands for Ryan to sit in the empty office chair.

“Just got back from a five-day trip to Washington with Jane. You might remember the Texas pipeline spill in February, the one caused by malevolent hackers?"

“Yes, I do remember that. It seems like it was for spite only. The hackers demanded no ransom.”

“That’s correct, Ryan. Most of the cybercrimes we investigate are simple robberies. Hacker gangs break into a corporation’s computer systems and encrypt all the files. They demand $5 million in a digital currency du jour to unlock the files. Most corporations find it cheaper to pay the ransom.

“We’ve been worried about hackers, possibly at the behest of a hostile government, breaking into the factory computers of nuclear plants, chemical plants, and what have you, and causing a costly or deadly accident.

“Congress formed a committee to investigate this new threat, and they asked my boss at the FBI Cybercrimes Division to set up a demonstration. I immediately thought Jane would be perfect for this, so we flew her to Washington.”

“Where did she stay, Carolina?”

“Our office building has a couple of small bedrooms, so we ensconced her there, under round-the-clock protection.”

“Well, how did she do?”

“Fabulous, Ryan. She quickly became the Project Manager, directing engineers from the FBI and CIA. She purchased a small factory computer and a Programmable Logic Controller from a local supplier. One group created a miniature factory application, just a motor running a propellor with an on/off button and a couple of knobs to adjust maximum speed and whatnot. Another group installed a SCADA package on the industrial computer.”

“OK, Agent Hendon. You lost me. What’s a SCADA.”

“Oh, that stands for Supervisory Control and Data Acquisition. It’s a fancy software program for industrial computers that controls the factory from a large display panel. You use the mouse to click the text entry box for motor speed and type in a new value. The motor’s RPM changes instantly.”

“Now I get it, Carolina. If Jane can break into that industrial computer via the Internet and get control of the SCADA software, she can….”

“She can freeze the factory’s sensors, over-pressure a propane gas tank, and open the emergency relief valve, dumping the propane gas into the nearby town. It’s the perfect fuel-air bomb.”

“So, who attended the demonstration?”

“The Congressional committee, a couple of people from the White House, several members of the Military, and reps from the CIA and Homeland Security. An eclectic mix, Commander DiMarco.”

“And how did it go?”

“They were gobsmacked, Ryan. I displayed our little factory, essentially a motor running a propellor up and down in speed. Using the SCADA software, I demonstrated how to adjust the maximum speed and how fast the speed changes.

Then Jane started her laptop computer, hooked it to a StarLink terminal, and located the Internet address of the demonstration’s factory computer. We cast her work to a large display screen, and the attendees were jolted when she gained control of the SCADA system and made herself an auxiliary user. Jane locked us out, commanded a higher speed, shut the motor off, and so on. I explained how Jane’s hacking could cause an oil spill, a nuclear plant radiation release, or an electric grid shutdown. One of the attendees remarked that they were glad she was on our side.”

“If I may ask, Carolina, what was their reaction to Jane?”

“She made a good impression, Ryan. The ones most interested in her were the Pentagon people. After the presentation, they spoke to her for a couple of hours, mainly about military vulnerabilities. There will be future requests for her expertise from the military and the CIA. She made a lot of friends yesterday, Commander.”

CHAPTER XXX

The Russians Are Coming

Shadowy Forms

Jane woke up, took a deep breath, and focused on the spectacular moonless star field through her skylight window. Having slept soundly since 7 p.m. after the law firm’s helicopter delivered her to the Merrick mansion, she realized, glancing at her iWatch, that it was 1:00 a.m. Suitably refreshed after days of little sleep preparing for the Congressional Committee demonstration, Jane cast the covers aside, rising to look out her window.

Peering at the Merrick mansion’s lawn, east of the swimming pool, her adrenalin surged as she noticed five shadowy forms in the yard, busily working on a rectangular box on the ground. Jane saw a sixth form prostrate on the green turf near the northeast corner of the yard, just away from the company helicopter.

Quickly opening the nightstand drawer, Jane found her night vision glasses. Putting them on, she stared again at the intruders below. The five people were in full battle dress, with helmets and body armor painted black, and assault weapons strapped to their backs.

A *no signal* indication scuttled Jane’s idea to call emergency services. Both cellular and WiFi were out. Next, she tried her FBI satellite phone. It, too, showed *no* *signal*.

Clad in her pajamas and wearing her night vision glasses, Jane sprinted barefoot out into the hallway towards the south stairs over the living area of the house. After going down one flight of stairs, she dashed along the second-floor hallway to Mac’s room.

Mac was sound asleep, in his undershirt and sweatpants, as Jane pulled away the duvet covering him. Shaking his left shoulder, Mac awakened with a jolt and reached for the lamp. Jane grabbed his wrist, shaking her head, signifying ‘no.’ She handed him her night vision glasses and pointed to his window.

Astonished at what he saw, Mac looked at Jane and whispered.

“What is that box they’re standing around?”

She typed quickly on her FBI satellite phone and showed him the text.

*“It’s a jammer, Mac. All communications are out, even the FBI phone.”*

“Jane. Get Mom and Dad to the Great Room. I’ll get my tactical gear on. Go! As fast as you can, Jane.”

As Jane dashed away, Mac worked quickly, pulling his FBI-issue M6 Carbine Rifle and ammo belt from underneath his bed. Clicking the belt into place and cinching it tight, Mac now had his Chicago Police Glock-50 pistol holstered with two spare magazines plus three additional M6 automatic rifle magazines. Reaching into his nightstand drawer, Mac put on his night vision glasses and looked out the window again.

Now, two intruders were in the company helicopter. *That’s their escape plan,* Mac thought, *they’re gonna fly out of here.*

The other three assassins deployed around the entrance to the guest house. One of the Federal Marshalls came through the guest house doors to investigate. The killers dropped him with a single shot.

Mac watched two intruders enter the guest house and saw the rifle flashes through the front window. The intruders killed the last Marshall.

Downstairs, Jane ran down the first-floor hall to John and Anne's bedroom, her peripheral vision confirming that the north door to the pool area remained closed. She roused John Merrick by jostling his shoulder. He sprang upright, his eyes trying to focus on Jane. Jane feverishly typed a message on her FBI satellite phone and showed the text to him.

*“Assassins. 5 of them.*

*The Marshals are dead.*

*We have only seconds.*

*Mac wants us in the Great Room.”*

When he read Jane's message, John Merrick’s eyes momentarily bulged in surprise. The danger they faced made him instantly alert. He shook Anne’s shoulder and forced her to read Jane’s warning.

“Oh, my God, John!”

“Anne, get out of bed,” John said. With Jane leading the way, they raced into the Great Room just as Mac descended the stairs.

Merrick’s Last Stand

“Dad, comms are out, and they’ve killed the Federal Marshals. We can’t call for help. There’s no choice; we’ll have to fight for our lives.”

Mac unholstered his Chicago Police revolver, chambered the first round, and handed his father the pistol and two magazines.

“Mom and Dad, a professional hit team is coming at us. They’re wearing helmets and body armor, so aim for their eyes. Those goggles may be the only place where they’re vulnerable. You and Mom get behind the half-wall at the east side of the fireplace, and I’ll get behind the Grand Piano. Establish a crossfire.”

“What about these windows, Mac? Couldn’t they shoot at us from outside?”

“Bullet-proof glass, Mom. I’m sure they know that. Jane, you get behind Mom and Dad.”

Jane shook her head no at Mac’s suggestion. She quickly typed on her FBI phone, and the female computer voice rang out.

*“Guerilla war, Mac. It’s what I know best. I’ll take out as many as I can.”*

Jane sprinted across the Great Room, past the dining room, and into the kitchen.

“Jane, come back!”

“Let her go, son. She wants to fight the way Master Wu taught her. That’s her best chance.”

Glancing down the long hallway from the living area to the north door by the pool, the closed door told Jane the assassins hadn’t entered the house yet. She had seconds to act.

Jane rummaged through the laundry hamper past the expansive kitchen’s center island. She found a queen-sized pillowcase, and at the bottom of the basket were two of John Merrick’s belts. He habitually leaves his belts attached when throwing his slacks into the hamper, so Anne removes them. Jane felt for a specific ratchet belt, one with the cog strip running the entire length of the belt.

Taking the pillowcase and belt to the countertop nearest the door to the back hallway, Jane remembered Master Wu’s admonition, “Make common items your weapons.”

Using Anne’s Ginsu paring knife, Jane made several slits above the pillowcase’s hem. Then, she quickly threaded the belt through the slits, making a hood she could pull tight at the open end. Jane placed it on the counter near the rear door. Next, she quickly laid potential weapons on the back wall counter and the island: a Lodge cast iron frying pan, several Ginsu kitchen knives of various sizes, a flashlight, and Anne’s roll of high-strength, steel-reinforced duct tape.

Jane froze when she heard the door near the pool area open, and the assassins slipped in. She listened quietly, ascertaining that a group headed up the back stairs, ostensibly to murder Mac and herself. She could hear one assailant come down the main hallway and enter John and Anne Merrick’s bedroom. The killer did not find them in bed, so he opened both closet doors, ventured into the main hallway, and took the short hallway to the game room. Jane monitored his footsteps as he checked the game room and the law library. With one hand on the back countertop, Jane lifted herself off the floor behind the open kitchen door, steadying herself with her other hand on the doorknob. She wanted no part of her body visible through the door’s edges, surmising he was wearing night vision infrared goggles.

Taking a deep breath, Jane steadied herself as the contract killer exited the library and crossed the short back hallway. She remained motionless as he moved through her doorway, oblivious to her presence behind the door. He was not using a flashlight, relying instead on his night vision goggles to maneuver. Jane silently dropped herself onto the kitchen floor as he plodded away. Grasping Anne’s 12-inch cast-iron skillet, she approached the killer from behind.

Jane instinctively remembered Master Wu’s advice, “The speed you swing your weapon is a force multiplier.” The cast-iron skillet weighs just under nine pounds, so Jane swung it sideways at the assailant’s helmet near the temple. Her blow landed with a loud thump, followed by a groan from her victim. Jane quickly followed up with a smash to the top of the killer’s head. He stumbled, reaching for the counter’s edge for support. Now she had him. She grabbed her pillowcase hood and slipped it over his helmet, pulling the belt taut with the ratchet clamp at the back of his neck.

Jane’s next moves were swift and brutal. Jane swung the cast-iron skillet upwards one last time, emulating a boxer’s uppercut, targeting his chin. The blow knocked him out, and he flopped face down to the floor like a sack of cement. With the killer now blinded, unconscious, and on the floor, she quickly wrenched his assault rifle from his hands.

Using Anne’s sharp and pointed Ginsu knife, Jane straddled his thighs and located the joint between his thigh and calf armor. Finding the faux leather accordion-fold joint behind the knee, Jane pushed the knife deeply through the leather into his flesh. She sawed on the right and left sides, cutting the ligaments and hamstring muscles behind his knee. She did the same to his other knee. With this injury, there was no way he could stand up. Fetching Anne’s duct tape, she wrapped it around his legs several times.

Quickly turning around and straddling his waist, Jane wrapped the duct tape around one of his wrists, followed by the other, binding his hands behind his back in seconds. She quickly removed the makeshift hood and his helmet. The assassin had a shaved head, but his eyes still had that glazed-over look, like a knocked-out boxer. Jane found the helmet’s microphone and cut it free with the paring knife, rendering him unable to communicate. She wrapped the duct tape around his mouth several times, assuring herself he could still breathe through his nose. Then, placing her improvised hood back on the killer’s head, she cinched it tight.

Jane put his handgun and spare magazines into Anne’s canvas shopping bag. She dumped his grenades and throwing knives into another canvas shopping bag and hid it in Anne’s waste bin. Standing up, she turned on Anne’s kitchen flashlight and headed for the Merricks with the assailant’s assault rifle.

“Jane, come here,” Mac said when she crossed the dining room. She paused momentarily, pointing the rifle at one of the love seats in the Great Room. Jane fired one round into the chair cushion. The weapon only made a muffled whump sound, thanks to the high-tech silencer installed. Satisfied that the gun was operational, Jane raced to John Merrick, giving him the assault weapon and the bag with the spare gun and magazines. Jane quickly kissed John on his cheek.

Dashing to the Grand Piano, Jane hugged Mac, giving him a quick kiss on his forehead.

“Is he dead?”

Jane shook her head, signifying ‘no.’ She swiped her fingers on the back of Mac’s knees.

“You cut his ligaments?”

Nodding her head, Jane turned and sprinted back to the kitchen. Then, grabbing another of Anne’s Ginsu kitchen knives, Jane moved through the law library into the game room. She hid behind the pool table and listened.

Someone was coming down the stairs at a double-time rate. These killers may wear advanced armor, but their movements are not silent. Jane was somewhat conversive in Russian, having studied Russian hacking techniques. She could hear the intruder say: “Vasiliy, ty gde?” Jane translated in her head: “Vasily, where are you?” Now Jane knew the name of the man she subdued in the kitchen. He took the short hallway into the game room, saying again: “Vasiliy, eto Grigoriy.” Similarly, Jane translated this as: “Vasily, this is Gregoriy.”

He started walking around the massive pool table, but Jane moved like an insect, down on all fours, circling the table out of sight. Grigoriy moved towards the door to the Law Library. Jane being barefoot, he did not sense her approach. Brandishing the sharp knife, Jane simultaneously put her hand on his left kneecap and plunged the blade into the back of his knee. Stabbing into it deeply, she twisted the dagger and pulled it out. Grigoriy hollered “Aiyeee” and toppled down to one knee. Jane sliced through the leather strap holding his automatic rifle and wrenched it from his grip as he fell. She dashed out of the game room and ran to the main hallway.

“Don’t shoot. It’s Jane,” Mac said as she sprinted into the Great Room. She went right for John Merrick and handed him Grigoriy’s assault rifle. Jane ran into the kitchen and positioned herself behind the rear door as before.

“Mac, she’s going to jump him as he enters the kitchen,” John said.

For God’s sake, Dad, don’t shoot her.”

Jane had enough ambient illumination to watch Grigoriy limp through the back kitchen entrance. Carrying his handgun, Grigoriy moved slowly around the north side of Anne’s kitchen island to the empty area between the kitchen and the Dining room. Jane, barefoot and silent, vaulted to the top of Anne’s kitchen island. Taking a couple of quick steps, Jane dove towards the Russian, grasping his helmet with her left hand and her right arm under his armpit. Using one of Wu’s maneuvers, she somersaulted and flipped him over, crashing onto his back. Jane ended up facing his feet, so she snagged his ankle-mounted pistol and side armed it into the Great Room.

Mac rushed up and smashed the buttstock of his M6 Carbine rifle on Grigoriy’s gun hand. The Russian military revolver came loose, and Mac kicked it away. Jane and Mac had now deprived him of his guns.

Grigoriy, the leader of the VORTEX team, is a hulk of a man and strong as a Russian bear. His adrenalin set in, and he rose to his feet.

Mac put his left arm around Grigoriy’s neck, hoping to pull him away from Jane. Instead, Grigoriy, a master in hand-to-hand combat, backward headbutted Mac, forcing him to release his grip, and his M6 FBI weapon fell to the floor. The Russian turned and punched Mac in the face; Mac stumbled back, momentarily seeing stars.

Brandishing the cast iron frying pan, Jane approached the Russian and swung for his head. He dodged Jane’s weapon deftly, raised his right leg, and stomped her backward. Jane had never felt the power of someone like Grigoriy. She ended up on one knee, with the skillet on the tile floor.

Jane rose to go at him again, but she saw him grab a small throwing knife from his equipment belt. She turned and dove for the floor as Grigoriy side armed the blade at her. The knife had a long, flat steel handle and a spear-like tip. As she leaped, her rump was in the air, and the knife blade sliced into her left buttock, bottoming out on her hip bone. Jane hit the floor face-first. While the pain was excruciating, she couldn’t cry out; instead, her eyes watered. Still, she remembered Master Wu’s advice, “Redirect the pain into anger; get back into the fight.”

She reached around and yanked the knife from her rump. Ignoring the pain, she stood up with the cast-iron skillet in her hand. Her face was resolute in anger as she advanced towards Grigoriy. John Merrick had his arms around Grigoriy’s legs, and Mac held onto his left arm. She violently swung the cast iron pan toward his helmet's chin at a forty-five-degree angle. The blow knocked the Russian unconscious. Just like Vasily, he tumbled face-first onto the floor.

Retrieving the kitchen knife and the duct tape, Jane straddled the assassin’s legs and cut into his knee ligaments. Grigoriy did not cry out; he was out cold. In seconds, Jane had duct-taped his legs and arms. With Grigory neutralized, Jane turned him over and removed his helmet. The Russian’s eyes had glazed over, but he was still breathing. Jane taped over his eyes and mouth. Again, she cut out the helmet’s microphone. Jane placed Grigoriy’s weapons and ammo in another of Anne’s shopping bags.

Jane retrieved her FBI phone from her pajama bottoms and quickly typed a message. Her computer voice resonated through the Great Room.

*“Mac, these men are Russians. We can trap the other two upstairs. Let’s move to the stairwells. It’s their only way out!”*

“Mom and Dad, Jane’s right. They’ve cut the ComEd power and our emergency backup system, so the elevator is inoperative. Dad and I will man the north stairwell; Jane guards the south stairwell. Mom, use my Glock 50 pistol and watch these two killers. If they try anything, shoot them in the head. Let’s go. Quickly!”

Jane took one of the Russian assault rifles and a canvas ammo bag to the dining room's stairwell. Mac and John scampered down the long hallway with the other bag to the north door's stairs. The Russian working in the law firm’s helicopter didn’t notice them. Suddenly, the helicopter’s engine roared to life, and the main and tail rotors started spinning up.

Gun Battle

John Merrick gingerly closed the north door to the pool area slightly, hoping that the Russian outside wouldn’t notice them in the hallway.

“Mac, why have they started the helicopter?”

“I think they’ve hot-wired it to take off. That guy is their pilot and will fly them out of here.”

“Son, I have combat experience. I’ll go outside and take out that pilot. You stay here.”

“Absolutely not, Dad! I’m thirty years younger and a Chicago policeman, so you stay here and guard the north stairs. That’s an order. Don’t make me arrest you.”

“Mac, they can shoot at you from the third-floor windows. You’ll be in a crossfire.”

“If I make it to your massive cast-iron Texas smoker and fancy outdoor grill, I’ve got a good chance. Dad, how do I disable the helicopter?”

“This new model has three bump-panels to the left of the door. The leftmost one is the fuel cutoff valve. Bump the panel open and turn the handle clockwise as far as it will go. You’ll starve the engine of fuel in 20 seconds.”

“Got it, Dad.”

“Son, I’m so proud of you. For those times I’ve disappointed you, I’m sorry.”

Mac put his hand on his father’s shoulder, giving him a loving pat.

“You’ve been a great Dad, stubborn occasionally, just like me.”

Mac peeked around the door. The Russian was still inside the helicopter. Mac was confident he could reach the outdoor grill before the pilot could react.

Sprinting like an Olympic hurdler, Mac jumped over one of the pool’s lounge chairs, heading for his father’s smoker and grill. The getaway pilot saw him and exited the helicopter with a long gun. Kneeling behind the grill, Mac had to shout the required police warning.  
*“This is the Chicago Police. Drop your weapon. Put your hands over your head. This will be your only warning!”*Mac wasn’t even sure that the pilot understood English. The pilot aimed at Mac and squeezed off three shots, but Mac ducked out of sight, and the shells ricocheted off the Grill and smoker. The pilot didn’t know which end of the smoker and grill Mac would fire from, so Mac had a slight edge. He got on his belly and sighted his M6 carbine on the pilot’s head. Confident that any errant shells would land in Lake Michigan, Mac fired five shots at the intruder. Without a silencer, his rifle’s report was earsplitting and sure to attract the attention of the killers upstairs. But Mac’s M6 had a night vision scope and laser targeting, so all five rounds hit the Russian’s helmet. The helmet deflected some of the bullets, but the pilot bounced back and forth like a marionette. Fortunately, one of the shells must have been a bull’s eye. The pilot stumbled backward and dropped to the ground, on his side, motionless. Mac assumed he was dead.

Dashing to the helicopter, Mac located the leftmost bump panel and popped it open. Then, keeping his eye on the third-floor windows, Mac turned the fuel shut off valve clockwise until he felt it reach the limit. After popping the panel back in place, Mac sprinted back to the smoker and grill. Seeing someone opening a third-floor window, he ducked behind the cast iron smoker.

Getting on his belly again, Mac trained his M6 rifle sight on the jammer unit in the yard. He fired five times. The third shot triggered a flash of light, possibly an electric arc. The last volley caused a hissing sound from the jammer box, followed by smoke and visible flames. The jammer exploded in a flash of white light and a cloud of shrapnel.

*The Russian jammer has a self-destruct charge,* Mac thought.

Now in open battle with the shooter in the third-floor window, Mac could see the laser beam from the Russian assault weapon dance around his position behind the mansion’s outdoor smoker and grill.

Having grown up in this house, Mac knew the shooter had to be close to the window to fire downwards. Firing a volley of five shots, he tattooed the open window, knowing that it would drive the Russian sniper back. Mac raced again across the pool area, firing several additional rounds. It worked; he made it to the mansion’s north doorway.

“Son, are you injured?”

“No, Dad, I’m OK. I’m fairly sure I killed the pilot.”

Just then, Jane started firing her captured Russian assault weapon. Even with the high-tech silencer, the whump-whump sound filled the hallway. Racing to help her, Mac saw her enter the stairwell and fire several more times. Jane bolted out of the landing and back into the hallway. When she saw Mac, she signaled with her open hand ‘stop’ and turned to face the wall as the grenade exploded. The flash was white with a loud bang, and a cloud of shrapnel burst into the hallway. Several debris pieces ricocheted onto Jane’s shoulder and lower back. They didn’t cut too deeply, but they were hot and hurt.

Knowing that the Russian would try to rush her after the grenade exploded, Jane ran back into the landing with Mac following. They caught the Russian on the upper landing, and both opened fire on him. While the combined volley didn’t kill him, he beat a hasty retreat upstairs.

“Jane, are you hurt?” Mac said.

Jane, eyes watering, nodded her head slightly.

“Can you still fight?”

Jane gave Mac a thumbs-up sign.

911

Pulling his FBI satellite phone from his belt, Mac noticed a cellular signal. The jammer device was dead. He quickly dialed 911.

“This is the 911 operator. State your emergency.”

“This is Officer Mackenzie Merrick of the Chicago Police. I’m at my family home at 91 Lake Vista Avenue, Highland Park. A five-person Russian hit team penetrated our security, killed all three Federal Marshals, and entered the mansion. We have fought back, subdued two, and killed one outside. We have the last two killers trapped upstairs. We control the only two staircases on the first floor. Contact Chicago SWAT and the FBI immediately. Don’t let the Highland Park police enter the property. The Russians will shoot at them from the upper windows. We need help!”

“Copy that, Officer Merrick. I’ve alerted the FBI and Chicago SWAT. Is anyone injured?”

“Jane has a knife wound and some shrapnel. My father and I have black eyes and some shrapnel cuts. Mom is unhurt.”

“We’ve called for ambulances, Officer Merrick.”

The sound of gunfire filled the hallway again. Mac dashed down the hallway to help his father. Entering the lower stairwell, Mac spotted the Russian John Merrick was targeting. He started shooting, and the Russian retreated upstairs.

“Good work, Dad. I’ll get back to Jane’s position.”

Running back to Jane, the 911 operator was waiting for him.

“Merrick here. We just beat back another attempt to come down the stairs.”

“Officer Merrick, Commander Subramanian is calling you. Please put me on hold.”

Mac swiped his FBI phone’s screen to accept the call.

“Mac, this is Nivani. I’m in my car, five minutes out from SWAT Headquarters. Two SWAT vehicles are already on their way, rushing up Interstate 294. Expect their arrival in 20 minutes. Two helicopters at FBI headquarters and the SWAT garage will take off in ten minutes. Help is on the way. Can you hold out?”

“We have to, Commander. We face a highly skilled Russian assassination team tricked out with advanced body armor, assault weapons, and hand-to-hand fighting skills. They would have killed us all if not for Jane spotting them. Jane took down two of them. I shot the getaway pilot when he refused my order to surrender. The two trapped upstairs have only one play left: capture one of us as a hostage.”

“Can you flee the house, Mac?”

“No, Commander. They’d pick us off from the upstairs windows.”

“Fight like hell, Officer Merrick. We’ll be there soon!”

The 911 Operator came back on the air; she had news.

“Officer Merrick, Belynda here again. Two Highland Park officers are outside your property, staying out of sight as you suggested. One is on the east side. He spotted a drug submarine on the beach, just below your home.”

“So that’s how they got here. Uh-oh, my dad is shooting again.”

Mac raced to his father, but John Merrick jumped into the hallway as he approached and shouted, “Grenade!” Both John and Mac faced away from the stairwell entrance when the blast went off. Another shrapnel blizzard followed the white flash and loud bang, some ricocheting off the walls. Both Merricks were hit by the flying debris, causing more lacerations and burns to their backs.

Again, Mac re-entered the stairwell and spotted the Russian coming down from the upper landing. He fired twice using his FBI carbine. The assassin scampered back upstairs. Mac looked down the hallway; there was no sign of Jane. Instead, he heard her firing her assault rifle. Then, just as quickly, she ran back into the hallway and away from the grenade blast. Mac turned away also but ran into the stairwell, guns blazing once the explosion ended. Catching the Russian just coming down the last stairs, Mac tagged him enough to drive him back upstairs.

Mac found Jane down on one knee, her pajama top showing several bloodstains, while the bottom had a very red stain. Helping her to her feet, he asked her: “Are you with me?” Jane answered by quickly kissing him. She was breathing hard; tears were dripping down her cheek.

“I’ll never love anybody the way I love you.”

Mac raced to check on his father. The next twenty minutes seemed like an eternity, with Mac making sure his father and Jane had new magazines.

The Cavalry Arrives

Eventually, they heard the roar of heavy machinery outside and the sound of gunfire from upstairs. Mac knew this was a SWAT armored vehicle, and the assassins upstairs were pointlessly firing at it.

Next, Anne Merrick heard rattling at the mansion’s front door as the SWAT team cut the Russians' chain that locked in the Merricks.

“Officer Merrick. It’s Chicago SWAT. Where are you?”

“Over here,” Anne said.

Ten men, in full battle dress, stormed into Anne’s kitchen. She was still training Mac’s handgun at the two trussed-up killers.

“Are you Anne Merrick?” one of the SWAT officers said.

“Yes. These two men are the ones Jane took down. Mac, Jane, and John are down that hallway. They need help.”

Eight SWAT officers rushed down the hallway to take positions at the stairwells. Another eight entered the Great Room, led by SWAT Commander Nivani Subramanian. Anne pointed down the hallway; he ran to Mac at the north stairwell near the pool area.

“Mac, sitrep, quickly!”

“We trapped the last two upstairs. They have an assault rifle, a handgun, a small pistol in the boot, and a collection of knives. I believe they have only one grenade left. Their high-tech body armor is nearly impossible to penetrate. A headshot to the goggles is probably the only way to kill them.”

“What’s their play now, Mac?”

“Try to capture somebody as a hostage, then negotiate a plane ride out of here. The two trussed up in the kitchen can’t walk; Jane cut their knee ligaments. Their pilot is dead. They’ve got to be desperate, Commander.”

Two SWAT officers quickly removed Vasily and Grigoriy’s body armor in the mansion's Great Room and shackled them with stainless steel handcuffs and leg restraints. Outside, the armored vehicle continuously traveled back and forth, bringing in more police.

“Commander!” someone yelled from the Great Room. “The FBI is here.”

“Mr. Merrick, bring that Russian weapon and ammo bag with us to the other side of the house,” Nivani said.

John arose and followed Subramanian down the long hallway. They stopped at the south stairwell.

“Jane, bring your weapon and come with us,” Nivani said.

On one knee with her weapon pointed towards the staircase, Jane turned to look at Commander Subramanian. There was sweat pouring down her face; she looked anguished.

“Oh, Jesus,” Mac said. “Dad, hold my weapon.”

Mac knelt to one knee and put his arms under Jane’s legs and her upper back, lifting her. She was breathing hard, wincing from the pain.

“Jane, I know it hurts. Put your arm around my neck.”

Mac carried her into the mansion’s Great Room.

“Mac set her down over here,” Agent Carolina Hendon said.

Mac laid her down on one of the sofas. Carolina knelt next to Jane.

“Jane, can you hear me? Nod your head if you can.”

Jane nodded and reached for her FBI phone. She started entering text, her hands visibly shaking.

*“Agent Hendon, something’s wrong. I feel sick.”*

“Are you injured, Jane?”

*“That one over there, Grigoriy, hit me with a throwing knife. I tried to avoid it, but it buried into my rump.”*

“Where is Grigoriy’s throwing knife, Jane?”

Jane pointed to where it was on the floor, and Carolina located it with her flashlight. Putting on rubber gloves, Carolina was about to place the weapon into an evidence bag when, in the dark, someone accidentally bumped into her. The jostling caused Agent Hendon to drop the Russian blade. It fell and pierced her left wrist.

“Oh, shit,” Carolina said as she looked at the bleeding wound.

Still the consummate professional, Hendon gingerly placed the throwing knife into an evidence bag.

“Jane, where are the other throwing knives?”

Jane struggled to reply, but Agent Hendon waited patiently.

*“I hid the grenades and knives in the kitchen waste bin.”*

“Pietrina, get some rubber gloves and empty this waste bin. Put the throwing knives into evidence bags. Do not touch the blade surfaces. They may have a poisonous nerve agent on them.

Jane, that Russian knife just jabbed me. How long was it before you started feeling unwell?”

*“Oh, no, Carolina. Not you, too. I started feeling unwell thirty minutes after the blade hit me. Your heart alternates from skipping a beat to running too fast.”*

Getting Organized

FBI Special Agent in Charge D’Marcus Mason directed his agents to place several SuperNovas around the Merrick family’s Great Room. The powerful LEDs soon bathed the living room with light. Mason sought out SWAT Commander Subramanian.

“Nivani, the FBI will take over the investigation after your SWAT team has secured the building. We’ll be available to help or stay out of your way until then. It’s your op, Commander.”

“I’ll take the help, D’Marcus. Can you organize a team to secure that drug submarine on the beach below?”

“Done. David Hanko just arrived; he’ll arrange it.”

“Great,” Nivani said. “Agent Mason, I want to evacuate the Merrick family immediately. Officer Mac Merrick will stay with us to help organize our sweep.”

Special Agent Carolina Hendon rushed up to them. Her usual smile was absent; she looked worried.

“Agent Mason, we must immediately get Jane the Angel to a hospital. She’s crashing.”

“What happened?”

“That guy there, Grigoriy, hit her with a throwing knife. She turned and dove for the floor, but it impacted her left buttock. I’m concerned that the blade might have a nerve agent on it.

But there’s worse news, D’Marcus. As I was about to drop the weapon into an evidence bag, somebody jostled me in the dark, and the spear point fell onto my left wrist. Whatever happened to Jane will beleaguer me in about thirty minutes. I’m sorry for being so clumsy, D’Marcus.”

“Don’t think twice, Agent Hendon. Shit always happens in a field op.”

Commander Subramanian barked orders to use the SWAT armored vehicle to convey EMT people with two gurneys and all their equipment. While waiting for them, Agent Mason photographed Vasily and Grigory and sent the photographs to FBI Headquarters in Washington, hoping to get an ID on the men. He also woke up Chicago Police Superintendent Javion Green, requesting him to secure Ben Merrick and Veronica Fieldstone and move them temporarily to safer quarters. Mac suggested moving them to his apartment at the Grant Park Tower, where Millie Grainger has been house-sitting for him.

The First Responders maneuvered two gurneys into the Great Room. With Carolina’s help, they lifted Jane to a gurney. They covered her with a sheet, attached ECG electrodes, and a blood pressure cuff. Their initial look at Jane’s heart waveforms showed Jane heading rapidly toward a full V-Tach. One tech ran an IV into her arm and hooked up a bag of D5W to hydrate her.

“What are you guys doing?” Agent Mason said.

“It’s emergency medicine, Agent Mason. V-Tach will kill her rapidly. So, I’m injecting a low dose of Diprivan to knock her out, and then we’ll attach our AED or Automated External Defibrillator. Hopefully, the electric shock will reset her circuitry and give her some good beats, at least enough to keep blood flowing to her brain.”

“Diprivan? Isn’t that the stuff that killed Michael Jackson decades ago?”

“Yes, sir, but it’s a low dose, and we’ll watch her like a hawk.”

Mac clasped Jane’s hand, moving close to her face. She was obviously in duress, wincing from the sick feeling taking over her body.

“Jane, you saved us all. We would be dead, but for you. Now, let us take care of you. Mom will see that you get the best medical care. Do this for me, Jane. Meditate on something that makes you happy and lowers your stress. Think of you and me on a beach, walking ankle-deep in the surf, the sea air filling our lungs. Lower your anxiety, Jane. Master Wu taught you how to do that.”

Jane reached for Mac’s neck to pull him closer using her other hand. He gently kissed her as the first responder tapped him on his shoulder.

The emergency medical team attached the AED electrodes to Jane, revealing her almost in full V-Tach.

“Miss Jane, the sedation medication will take a few minutes to work. But you’re in V-Tach, so we must turn on our defibrillator machine. There’ll be a shock. Brace yourself.”

The Tech shouted ‘Clear’ and turned on the AED unit. There was an immediate shock, and Jane’s body stiffened. She immediately closed her eyes, wincing in pain. As the electric pulse subsided, Jane relaxed on her gurney and opened her eyes.

“Normal sinus rhythm. We’ve got normal blood flow. Jane, are you with us? Give us a thumbs up.”

Jane struggled to make the hand sign, tears flowing from her eyes. She was breathing hard.

Commander Subramanian approached Jane and reached for her hand with his glove.

“Jane the Angel, you are one of the loveliest women I will ever meet. You’re going to make it; that’s how strong your heart is. I’ve got some killers to arrest. Don’t give up, Jane, and neither will I.”

As the SWAT Commander strolled away, Jane’s eyes started to droop; the Diprivan began to take effect. Medical professionals rightfully call it the ‘milk of amnesia.’ The EMT tech handling Jane, Gerald Connell, spoke up.

“Agent Mason, you should call Doctor Sandeep Modi over at Rush ER. That guy’s an Army vet and knows everything about everything!”

“Exactly, Gerald,” Agent Mason replied as he dialed Sandeep Modi on his FBI satellite phone.

“Agent Mason, we meet again. You're up late.”

“Hello, Sandeep. I’m at the Merrick mansion in Highland Park. A Russian assassination team attempted to kill the Merrick Family and the Angel tonight.”

“Oh my God, D’Marcus. I know the Merricks. Are they OK?”

“We’ve got one Russian dead, two captured, and two trapped upstairs. I have two casualties: Jane the Angel and one of my Agents. The Russians hit Jane Doe 413 with a throwing blade, which might have an infectious agent. The same knife pricked one of my Agents, but she hasn’t manifested any symptoms so far. We have two EMT teams I’d like you to consult with.”

“Doctor Modi, this is Gerald Connell. If you look at Jane’s ECG, you’ll see as I scroll it that she falls into V-Tach, and our AED unit shocks her back to normal sinus rhythm. We’re getting about five minutes of sinus rhythm before the infectious agent kicks back in.”

“I see that. If the Russians infected Jane with Novichok, she’d be puking and having violent seizures. This is something new. Who is the other patient?”

“It’s me, Doctor. I’m Special Agent Carolina Hendon. I tried to put the weapon into an evidence bag, but somebody jostled me in the dark, and I dropped it onto my left arm. Jane said it takes about a half-hour for the symptoms to appear.”

“Is there any other ordinance you suspect might have this infectious agent?” Doctor Modi said.

“Bullets and grenades, Doc.”

“Nah. I wouldn’t worry about the grenades. A grenade painted with an infectious agent would create a toxic cloud when it detonates. It’d kill the person who threw it.”

“Agreed,” Agent Mason said. “Sandeep, what should I do?”

“OK, D’Marcus, there are several things you should do. First, get samples of the blades and bullets to FBI Headquarters and expedite a DNA analysis. I bet the CIA has DNA codes for the newer Russian weaponized viruses.

Second, sedate Agent Hendon and rig her up to another AED machine. Get them to my ER as fast as you can!

Third, I heard about a guy doing post-doctoral research on Russian and Middle Eastern weaponized viruses. I remember his name; it’s Doctor Bruno Ronis, and he’s at the Mayo Building at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis. He might have an antidote.”

“I’m on it, Sandeep. We’ll have Jane the Angel and Hendon on the move in a few minutes.”

“We’ll be ready, Agent Mason.”

“Mac, come here,” Commander Subramanian said. “Lift your nightshirt.”

The SWAT Commander had one of the EMT technicians inspect Mac’s back. He reported that Mac’s injuries were not life-threatening but would eventually need medical attention. Mac insisted that his shrapnel lacerations were no worse than a sunburn, and he wanted to stay and help secure the mansion.

“Mister and Mrs. Merrick, we will transport you, Agent Hendon, and Jane to the Hidden Creek Aquapark, about a mile and a half from here. A helicopter is waiting in their parking lot to transport you to the Rush University ER. We’ll send your son to Rush once we secure your home.”

“Special Agent Whelan, I want you to drop off the Merricks at Rush, then chopper directly to FBI Headquarters with those suspect knives. I’ll call in the daytime forensics team to conduct chemical and DNA analysis. Find out what is on those blades and if there’s an antidote!”

“Understood, sir,” Agent Brian Whelan said as he left through the front door.

The Sweep

The SWAT commander, Nivani Subramanian, formed two teams to sweep the basement and first floor. Each team had a flying drone enter a room and survey it with visual and infrared cameras. The drones looked under the beds where possible, but the mansion’s closets proved a problem. The SWAT team must open the closet doors manually. Nivani had to assume that there might be extra hit team members Mac and Jane didn’t see. Mac guided the team from the Great Room, utilizing his FBI Satellite phone and earbuds.

D’Marcus Mason received a call from Pietrina Cerrone, his resident electronics whiz.

“Agent Mason, we’re in the drug submarine; it’s unoccupied. However, the hit team attached an electronic box with Russian markings, blinking LEDs, and displays to the submarine’s navigation control unit. I disconnected the Russian box from the Nav unit and unhooked the diesel engine's battery. This sub isn’t going anywhere.”

“Pietrina, what do you think is the purpose of the Russian electronics?”

“One of the cables went to an antenna attached to the sub’s snorkel. I believe this unit would auto-pilot the submarine away from the site as the hit team escaped on the chopper, sir.”

“Good work, Pietrina. Anything else?”

“Yes, sir. There’s a small table in the sub, maybe where they eat lunch while sailing. On the table was a large map of the Lake Michigan area. What piqued my interest was an ‘X’ marked in northern Wisconsin. Unfortunately, most of the notations were in Cyrillic script, which I can’t translate. But the ‘X’ mark had a longitude and latitude that I could understand. Maybe a farm with an airstrip, Sir?”

“I agree with your conjecture, Pietrina. Call Agent Walter Danvers in Quantico, Virginia's FBI Earth Resources Unit. Photograph the map and have him analyze that location and get a Space Force bird to have a look right quick.”

“One other thing, sir. The Russians filled the cargo hold of this sub with extra equipment for this job, including a second copy of that cell phone jammer they used. Officer Merrick told me that the jammer had a self-destruct device in it. I found a small WiFi antenna on the backup’s exterior, so I clipped the antenna short and connected it to the case. That should make it safe for now.”

“Pietrina, if that thing has an explosive in it, let the Chicago Bomb Squad handle it when they arrive. Keep me posted, Pietrina.”

“On it, sir.”

The two search teams checked the first floor and the basement for thirty minutes. They were all trained for this operation: lifting mattresses, checking under beds, rummaging through closets, and using ladders to check storage shelves. Finally, convinced there were no Russian assassins in the basement or the first floor, the SWAT team re-grouped in Merrick’s Great Room. Before Commander Subramanian could organize a squad to clear the second floor, FBI Director Bart Radzinger called him from his home office in Washington.

“Commander Subramanian, Agent Mason, I wish to speak to everybody.”

Mason forwarded the call to every FBI agent onsite and all members of the Chicago SWAT team.

“Go ahead, sir. We’re all hooked in.”

“This is FBI Director Bart Radzinger. A foreign mercenary force has invaded the United States, killed three of our Federal Marshals, and attempted to kill Jane Doe 413 and the Merrick family. For national security reasons, I am assuming control of this operation. Chicago SWAT Commander Subramanian, whose skill and leadership are nationally admired, garners my utmost respect.

FBI Headquarters analyzed Agent Mason’s photographs sent to Washington and the CIA in Langley. You are up against a group of retired Russian Spetsnaz veterans who call themselves VORTEX. It’s a play on the words: violence, revenge, terror, and extortion. I guess they like the old James Bond movies. These men are the Russian equivalent of our Seal Team Six.

These mercenaries brag that they will kill Santa Claus for you and have never failed. The Russian Federation has been trying for a decade to capture these guys. It’s believed they operate from a secret island in Indonesia by bribing the local Governor. These criminals are so heartless and vicious that they killed a Russian billionaire’s two children in a kindergarten playground during recess five years ago.

Commander Subramanian, you are to offer these cold-blooded killers no deals. Instead, give them a stark choice: surrender or die.”

“Respectfully, Director Radzinger,” Subramanian replied, “those Federal Marshals were our friends and neighbors. One of them invited me to a barbeque at his home, so I wasn’t planning to negotiate with these killers. Sir, any news about Jane and Agent Hendon?”

“Agent Brian Whelan reports they are about 30 minutes away from identifying the nerve agent on the throwing knives. The hospital says this poison affects Jane’s cardiovascular system, causing her to throw arrhythmias. They have her on a defib machine to keep her blood moving. Her condition is critical; Agent Hendon's condition is also critical.

“As to that latitude/longitude notation Pietrina Cerrone found, it’s an abandoned farm with an Eisenhower airstrip. There’s a plane on the strip, not moving. The Air Force is redirecting a SkyEagle drone from Grand Forks Air Force Base operating over Lake Superior to the abandoned farm. I’ve asked them to attack with Hellfire missiles if the airplane attempts to take off.

“I’m on my way to Joint Base Andrews to take a government jet to Chicago. Commander Subramanian, get those killers!”

“Nivani, Officer Polushin is here,” one of the SWAT officers reported.

“Oh, Dan. Come over here. Did you hear Director Radzinger’s instructions?”

“Yes, sir,” replied Office Dan Polushin, a natural-born son of two Russian emigres. “You want me to give them an ultimatum?”

“Yeah,” Nivani Subramanian replied. “Move the armored vehicle away from the entrance and use the loudspeakers.”

David Hanko approached the SWAT Commander and Special Agent Mason with more information.

“Nivani, local Police departments, and Illinois State Police are showing up in droves. They’ve surrounded the Merrick residence with fifty officers, with an FBI Agent on each side with operational control. They’ll see nobody fires on the second floor when we're clearing it. The police are evacuating the neighboring residences to the John the Baptist school cafeteria. Pastor DeMoise has opened it up and is preparing to make breakfast.”

The loudspeakers in the SWAT armored vehicle sounded off in Russian. Agent Mason set his FBI phone to translate what Officer Polushin said.

*“Russian Vortex Team. Your mission has failed.*

*We have captured Vasily and Grigoriy. Your pilot is dead.*

*We have surrounded the Merrick home with a hundred armed officers.*

*There is no escape.*

*You have killed three of our fellow Police Officers.*

*We will not negotiate or offer any deals.*

*Your choice is simple.*

*Surrender unconditionally, and we will spare your lives,*

*or we will attack and kill you.*

*Answer now.*

*There will be no other warnings.”*

After a short pause, a voice shouted from a third-floor window.

*“Prikhodite i zaberite nas, amerikanskiye svin'i.”*

“Dan, what did he say?” Commander Subramanian said.

“Loosely translated, sir, “Come and get us, American pigs.”

Dismissing that with a shrug, Nivani quickly organized his assault. First, he placed a team of SWAT officers and a couple of FBI sharpshooters on the landings below the second floor on the south end of the house. Their mission was to prevent any escape from that end of the house. A similar tactical placement on the north staircase would stop any attempt to counterattack the search party.

Then, with all avenues of escape closed off, Nivani and a group of five officers with full armor and M6 assault rifles carefully opened the north door to the second floor. One officer with head-up display glasses released a small drone into the hallway. Satisfied that the hallway was clear, he signaled Commander Subramanian to enter the second floor.

The American Army’s technique for clearing buildings in foreign war zones is brutal. They toss a grenade into a room and enter after the explosion and shrapnel blast have subsided.

SWAT teams open the doors in American buildings and let a drone maneuver into the room, using infrared imagers to look for perps. If spotted, a flash-bang grenade stuns the enemy, and armed men enter with M6 carbines. It’s more dangerous but necessary in urban America.

The SWAT team cautiously swept the second floor, with Mac providing a running commentary of the various bedrooms, bathrooms, and storage closets. The small drones flew in first, followed by SWAT police officers thoroughly checking the room and its closets. The team placed a small SuperNova light source in the cleared space. The police surrounding the property could monitor their progress, clearing the mansion’s second floor.

Leaving a team in place to control the second floor, Nivani and five SWAT personnel assembled on the landing between the second and third floor on the north end of the house. Suddenly, the third-floor door opened, and a voice rang out in broken English.

*“American Police.*

*Vee have a suitcase nuclear device.*

*Is from Pakistani tactical weapon.*

*Yield fifteen kilotons, like Hiroshima bomb.*

*Vee require you to make helicopter good, and deliver Vasily,Grigoriy, Officer Merrick, and woman known as Chicago Angel to us.*

*Do not, and vee detonate bomb.*

*Ten thousand Americans will die weeth us.”*

“I don’t believe you,” Nivani shouted. “Show us this weapon.”

*“I show you.*

*If shoot at us, bomb will detonate.”*

A Russian appeared at the third-floor doorway, dangling a suitcase from his left hand. Mac was watching Commander Subramanian’s tactical imager. He magnified the suitcase image with his FBI phone.

“Nivani, that’s my suitcase from the third-floor linen closet. See the big letters ‘MM’ I had laser-etched on it? They’re lying to you, Commander!”

Subramanian did not reply to Mac but instead fired two rounds into the suitcase the Russian was dangling. The shock of the impact caused the assassin to shout and drop the case. The case bounced down the stairs and popped open when it reached Nivani. It was empty.

Just then, Officer Rolf Knudtson, one of several SWAT officers operating the tactical drones, called Commander Subramanian.

“Commander, this is Knudtson. Those Russians have all the third-floor windows open. I just got our anti-personnel drone into the hallway. Thanks to the vaulted ceilings, I’ve got it zig-zagging above them. They’ve tried to shoot it down but can’t hit it. Do you want me to detonate it?”

“Affirmative, Rolf. Let ‘em have it.”

Several seconds elapsed, but Commander Subramanian didn’t hear any explosion.

“Too late, Commander. They dashed down the hallway to the second doorway from the southeast end of the house and closed the door. Officer Merrick, what room is that?”

“It’s a guest bedroom,” Mac replied.

Commander Subramanian and his contingent stormed into the third-floor hallway on the north end of the mansion. He assigned two team members to train their rifles at the guest bedroom door if the Russians decided to engage them.

The SWAT teams worked through the third floor bathrooms, bedrooms, and storage closets. Again, Mac guided them from the Great Room, explaining where they may be hiding. As they searched and cleared each room, the small SuperNova lights informed the phalanx of Police on the mansion’s perimeter of their progress. Nivani Subramanian was tactically on a knife’s edge, for he knew the two Russians would do something desperate. Commander Subramanian’s worries were, unfortunately, prescient. What occurred next lasted only a few seconds.

Suddenly, both Russians burst through the bedroom doorway into the hall. One started firing at the SWAT team members while the other pulled the pin from their last grenade. Someone shouted, “Grenade!” The SWAT team member closest to the Russians targeted the grenade thrower’s hand and fired. The M6 bullet just nicked the Russian’s glove, and he dropped the Grenade to the floor. The grenade’s handle popped open and ignited the delay fuse. Commander Subramanian shouted, “Fire in the Hole!” The SWAT team all jumped into doorways to avoid the blast.

The Russian who dropped the grenade fell to all fours in a desperate attempt to grab it and toss it down the hall. He frantically felt around till his fingers touched the weapon. It was directly below him. Before he could grasp it and throw it away, it exploded. Operating the drone near the third-floor ceiling, Officer Knudtson saw the explosion lift the Russian six feet into the air. While the body armor kept the Russian’s body intact, the blast ripped through his torso and destroyed most of his inner organs. He was clinically dead in seconds.

The blast catapulted the other Russian assassin backward, landing dazed on the hallway floor. Two SWAT officers sprinted down the hallway, leaping over the dead Russian. They overwhelmed the stunned killer, detaching his armored gloves and applying steel handcuffs. Then, removing his boots, they cuffed his ankles. The officers quickly retrieved all his weapons.

Commander Nivani Subramanian, being the consummate professional, continued the room-by-room sweep of the third floor with Mac’s help. In several minutes, they checked every room on the third floor. Mac was correct; only four Russians were in the mansion. Nivani made his report.

“Special Agent Mason, Director Radzinger, the Merrick home is secure. We have captured three mercenaries alive. Unfortunately, there are two dead, one in the mansion and one outside. It’s time for the FBI to attend to our fallen officers and verify the condition of the getaway pilot that Officer Merrick shot. I recommend the Chicago Police bomb squad unit enter the premises and sweep the mansion for planted explosives.”

“Commander Subramanian, this is FBI Director Radzinger. I compliment you on your courageous and professional work. Please keep your team onsite to assist Special Agent Mason in his crime scene investigation. I am flying to Chicago to participate in our investigation.”

CHAPTER XXX

Strelkavirus

Doctor Ronis

Doctor Bruno Ronis shook his head and winced a couple of times before looking at his watch; it was 4:00 a.m. Lifting himself to a seated position on his bed, he momentarily stared at his beeping iPhone, surprised that the caller was Monica Brooks, FBI.

“Hello, this is Doctor Ronis.”

“Doctor Ronis, this is Special Agent in Charge Monica Brooks of the Minneapolis FBI. You are doing post-doctoral research on weaponized viruses. We have several patients in Chicago infected tonight with the Strelkavirus, a recent Russian bioweapon. Do you have a vaccine for this weapon?”

“Yes, Agent Brooks. I have developed an mRNA vaccine that eliminates this virus. The WHO and the CDC funded my research. May I ask how you made this diagnosis of Strelkavirus?”

“The Chicago FBI has a top-of-the-line Applied Biosystems Genetic Analyzer; the CIA supplied them with the genomes of recent Russian weaponized viruses.”

“Fair enough. May I ask, who are the patients?”

“Jane Doe 413 and one FBI agent.”

“Why does that sound familiar?”

“Possibly you remember her by her alias, the Chicago Angel.”

“Ah, yes. The girl genius who exposed mob activity, albeit illegally, and is now cooperating with the FBI. What happened?”

“A rogue Russian hit team attempted to kill her and the family she resided with. Jane and the Chicago SWAT captured three and killed two others, but one of the Russians hit her in the buttock with a throwing knife coated with the Strelkavirus agent.”

“Where is she being treated, Agent Brooks?”

“She’s been taken to Chicago’s Rush University ER.”

“Ah. That’s a top-flight medical school.”

“Doctor Ronis, on behalf of the United States Government, I request that you travel to Chicago immediately to administer your vaccine to Jane Doe 413 and the others. You’ll see a black FBI vehicle if you look outside your window. Special Agent Rodrigo Garza will transport you to your Mayo Building lab at the University of Minnesota to pack your Strelkavirus vaccine, then deliver you to Minneapolis–Saint Paul International Airport, where we have contracted a private jet to get you to Chicago’s Midway Airport.”

“Tell Agent Garza I’ll be down with my scrubs and a go-bag in five minutes. The FBI must contact the CDC Emergency Desk for permission to use this experimental vaccine. We did use it six months ago in Europe, and it was successful. One more thing, Agent Brooks, text me the name and number of the ER Doctor who’s treating this patient.”

“On it, Doc. Thanks for your cooperation.

Clean Up

The Merrick compound was a scene of frenetic activity after the Chicago SWAT secured the mansion. Teams of state and local police scoured the surrounding neighborhoods, looking for possible Russian mercenaries that might have escaped the clutches of the SWAT team. Mac was in the yard near the helicopter pad with SWAT Commander Subramanian. An Emergency Medical Technician verified that the getaway pilot was dead. With his helmet removed, it was a grisly sight.

“Can’t say I’m pleased with killing this fellow, Commander.”

“It’s always like that, Mac. When you take a life, a little bit of yourself dies with them.”

“But he must have had a family, people who loved him?”

“True, Mac, but the mob paid him to kill you. Don’t forget that.”

Mac’s boss, Commander DiMarco, walked up to them.

“Ryan, any word on Jane?”

“Rush ER has Jane and Carolina listed as critical, Mac. The FBI has identified the nerve agent as Strelkavirus, a Russian bioweapon that attacks the heart’s electrical system. They’re using a defib unit to force beats to keep the blood flowing.

But there’s good news, Mac. The FBI found a doctor in Minneapolis doing post-graduate research on these weaponized viruses, and he has an antidote. Doctor Bruno Ronis is en route to Chicago Midway with the vaccine. They’re hoping that he can arrive about 7:30 a.m.”

“My Mom and Dad?

“Word is that your mother is making a nuisance of herself. She brought in the city’s top cardiac surgeon to assist in Jane’s treatment and had Chicago’s top plastic surgeon remove the grenade fragments from your dad’s back, all in the middle of the night. She’s a force of nature, Mac.”

“Mac,” Commander Subramanian said, “this is Commander Vince D’Orrio, head of the Bomb Squad, and with him, wagging his tail, is Boomer, our never-fail explosive-sniffing Labrador Retriever.”

“Well, hello to both of you,” Mac replied, patting Boomer on the snout.

“You’ve done the Department proud, Officer Merrick,” D’Orrio said. “We need to sweep the mansion for planted explosives, so we’re not switching the power back on. Mac, are there any safes in the house?”

“My dad has a safe in the first-floor law office. He keeps about $100,000 in emergency cash and a pile of legal documents. If you want to remove the contents of the safe, being that it’s a Law Office, a Judge will have to appoint a Special Master to supervise the handling of the safe.”

“Officer Merrick, I don’t care if your father has the Ark of the Covenant in there. You and the dog inspect the safe for explosives and then close and lock it.”

Mac escorted D’Orrio to the law office. Mac unlocked the combination safe and rummaged through its contents. Boomer, the Labrador Retriever, did not sit down; his signal for smelling explosives.

“Ned, follow me to the kitchen. My Mom batch cooks two pounds of bacon in the oven, then places them in a plastic zip-lock bag in the fridge. Since it’ll be a while before she moves back in, give the bacon strips to Boomer.

In the Great Room, D’Marcus Mason received a call from FBI Director Bart Radzinger en route to Chicago. He asked that the SWAT team and the Chicago Police listen in.

“Everybody, Minneapolis Special Agent in Charge Monica Brooks is in charge of operations against that getaway plane. Agent Brooks is currently flying to the remote airstrip aboard a Minnesota National Guard Stingray helicopter with ten FBI agents, five National Guard troops, and a medic. The National Guard guys have a Javelin missile with them. Monica, what’s the current tactical situation?”

“Sir, I’m on the phone with two Wisconsin State Police officers who approached the abandoned farm with lights off. They moved through the woods to the parked aircraft. So far, the Russians haven’t spotted them. On the line is Officer Jim Ironcloud, a full-blooded member of the Menominee Tribe. He’s an Army Ranger veteran and a skilled sharpshooter. Jim, tell us what you found?”

“Agent Brooks, Officer Nathan Aceto and I reconnoitered the site unobserved. The private jet is a big one, a Gulfstream, I believe. We see three people aboard. Looks like one is a woman with blond hair. They haven’t come down the exit stairs so far. There’s a generator on the pavement next to the aircraft; I suspect it’s powering their air conditioner and comms gear. The Russians parked the plane near the north end of the runway. There’s a tanker truck parked at the very end. Nate spotted a dead body lying on the tarmac near the tanker. I guess this is some poor bastard who accepted a contract to deliver jet fuel and the Russians killed him after he topped off their tanks.

Ma’am, I’m in position to shoot out the six tires; it’d be a 200-yard shot. I have a State Police issue M6 carbine with a telescopic sight that I have aligned myself. Officer Aceto has a standard revolver, which would be useless considering the woods' distance from the tarmac. Do you want me to disable the plane?”

“Jim. What’s your tactical evaluation?”

“There could be more than two aboard, sleeping out of sight. When I start shooting, the gang members will have three directions to escape into the woods. Since these are dense woods, they’ll get a big head start before we deploy drones and bloodhounds. You might want to wait until you arrive with the helicopter. Just saying.”

“Agreed, Jim. Sit tight until our National Guard chopper arrives. However, if the perps start the aircraft’s engines and button up the exit stairs, shoot out the tires and wing it.”

“Understood, Ma’am. Ironcloud out.”

Mac approached Special Agent Mason, who had just hung up his satellite phone.

“How are you doing, Officer Merrick?”

“I’m good, sir. Can you explain why there’s a runway out in the middle of nowhere?”

“The Cold War, Mac. Eisenhower had a slew of these built all over the United States, something about the dispersal of forces in a shooting war. The government canceled the program, but the Air Force has secretly maintained these runways every decade. This one is two miles long. Mac, get Commander Subramanian; Agent Whelan is calling.”

“All right, is everybody listening?” Brian Whelan said.

“Everyone is hooked in, Agent Whelan. What’s your report?”

“We determined the Russians coated this Strelkavirus on the bullets and throwing knives, but not the grenades. However, they’ve micro-encapsulated it within some novel polymer bubble that breaks down when wet, such as human flesh or sweat, releasing the pathogen. Therefore, every bullet impact point is deadly.

We did establish that the polymer fluoresces when exposed to black light, so that might help identify the locations of the pathogen.

Doctor Ronis is on his way to Chicago. He told me that the Russians designed the Strelkavirus to affect human DNA only; it is ineffective against animals, fish, and plant life. Being a weak virus, it cannot survive in the open air or water for more than a few minutes, so it’s not communicable. Ronis told me hydrogen peroxide is the best disinfectant to kill the Strelkavirus.

I suggest you contact Homeland Security about the HazMat situation at the Merrick home. They’ll want to send a CDC team to manage this.

Agent Mason, send Officer Merrick to the Rush ER immediately and any officer who any Russian bullets might have nicked. I’m heading to the hospital to represent the agency on Caroline and Jane’s treatment.”

“Agreed, Brian,” Mason said. “Keep us apprised of Jane Doe’s condition.”

“Will do, sir.”

Reporters

“Sir, I have Agent DeSmet on the phone,” David Hanko said as he handed his phone to Agent Mason.

“Ben, this is Agent Mason.”

“Sir, I am organizing the keep-out area. Quite a few media vans and reporters are showing up, clamoring for information. One of these reporters, Natalie Rumsfort of the Chicago Sentinel, says you have a deal with her. Is this true?”

“Yeah, Ben. It’s true. Let me speak to her.”

“Hello Ms. Rumsfort, it’s Special Agent in Charge Mason.”

“D’Marcus, what’s going on? You and I have an arrangement.”

“True, Natalie. But we’ve got a HazMat situation here at the Merrick mansion, and I can’t let anybody near the place right now.”

“D’Marcus, Can I speak to Officer Mac Merrick?”

“We’re transporting Merrick to Rush via ambulance in a few minutes. We have all our choppers tied up shuttling in people from Washington. This thing has blown up into an international incident, Natalie. How about you ride to the hospital with Merrick? I’ll ask him to brief you. I’ll have Agent DeSmet bring you to the entrance to the Merrick mansion.

Favorite Alpha Male

”Well, if it isn’t my favorite alpha male, Mac Merrick,” Natale Rumsfort said as she extended her hand to help Mac board the ambulance. Mac was a sight to behold, with a fearsome black eye and two reddish-blue bruises decorating his face and forehead.

“You’re not catching me at my best, Natalie.”

“No, Mac. I’m catching you at your very best. Agent Mason told me how you fought to save your parents for over an hour against heavily armed and trained Russian mercenaries.”

Mac looked for a second at her blue eyes and red hair tied haphazardly in a ponytail. She had quickly dressed when called by the nighttime newsroom staff.

“Allow me to drop my reporter’s persona for ten seconds, Mac,” Natalie whispered.

She kissed him on his right cheek.

“That’s from me, Mac.” Then, kissing him on his left cheek, she breathed: “That one’s on behalf of our Angel, who saved both of our lives.”

Four Federal Marshals clambering aboard interrupted that special moment between Natalie and Mac.

“Officer Merrick, sit on the edge of the gurney,” one of the paramedics said. “We want to take your vitals and run an IV before we start rolling.”

“Mac, your vitals are good,” one of the EMT techs said. “I have a Lidocaine spray that may make your back more comfortable. Lie on your side facing Ms. Rumsfort, and we can start moving. The Chicago Police has two cruisers escorting us to Rush ER.”

Looking directly at Mac, Natalie asked if she could record their conversation. Mac replied that he didn’t want his voice to appear on air, but the editors could use the tape to ensure accuracy. Mac reminded Natalie that he didn’t know everything that went on.

CHAPTER XXX

The Airstrip

Monica Brooks

Special Agent in Charge Monica Brooks double-checked her FBI-issue Colt M6 carbine assault weapon. She had already chambered a round but left the rifle in the ‘safe’ position. She’ll select the ‘single shot’ mode if it comes to shooting. FBI agents rarely use the ‘burst mode’ setting since it tends to raise the barrel upwards.

A graduate of West Point, Monica Brooks, as an Army Ranger, distinguished herself in the Equatorial Guinea mission to defeat an ISIS attempt to overthrow the government and establish another Caliphate in Africa. While the FBI typically recruits recent college graduates, Congress mandated a program in 2045 to accept qualified candidates from the military, and Monica was a shoo-in. She quickly became a high-flyer in the Agency, resulting in her posting as Special Agent in Charge of the Minneapolis Office.

For the FBI leadership in Washington, Brooks was their go-to person for emergencies. Her ability to multi-task on the run and think outside the box made her the obvious choice to secure the Russian getaway plane. She was in her Tesla auto-piloting for the Minneapolis Headquarters within five minutes of Director Radzinger’s 3 a.m. call. Monica ordered the five Special Agents on nighttime duty to stock two FBI vans with weapons, ammo, and body armor for an eleven-person team. She called six daytime agents and ordered them to drive to Headquarters immediately. The FBI is a 24/7 job; all the agents accept this.

After a briefing by the FBI Director, Brooks knew that a helicopter assault made the most sense. While the Eisenhower-era runway was almost two miles long, it had no runway lights. In wartime, the Air Force would have to use oil lamps or flares for nighttime operations, so landing in a jet at night was out of the question. Additionally, the people in the getaway plane were expecting a helicopter.

Agent Brooks got close cooperation from the Minnesota Air National Guard Base in St. Paul. General Dreeson, Commandant of the Air Base, jumped into action, ordering a Stingray helicopter fueled up and ready to go. Five soldiers on duty for base security suited up in combat gear. Two soldiers were qualified to fire Javelin missiles, so General Dreeson requisitioned one launcher and two missile loads. He called in one of the base’s medics, Sergeant Kate Burkley, and had her gear up for a combat mission. In addition, he assigned two pilots from off-base housing to operate the Stingray helicopter. General Dreeson met the two FBI vans in his jeep at the base entrance and personally escorted them to the hanger where the Stingray was warming up for the flight. Before the eighteen-person team departed, the FBI made special arrangements with the FAA Air Traffic Control to allow the mission to run in stealth mode. As a result, the Stingray’s whereabouts did not appear in any publicly available air traffic displays.

Dust Off

The interference from the Air National Guard Stingray helicopter’s dual rotors permitted only voice transmission back to FBI Headquarters. The Stingray, a replacement for the venerable Chinook, is jet-powered, but not how most people would expect. Two jet engines on either side of the copter’s rear pylon generate no thrust but instead turn a single driveshaft that powers the twin rotors. As a result, the Stingray can still fly if one of the turboshaft engines fails; the other engine and driveshaft will keep the aircraft aloft.

“Agent Brooks, we’re five minutes out. Have the team lower the loading ramp,” Warrant Officer Dan Hinton announced from the pilot’s seat.

“Team Alpha, drop the loading ramp, set weapons to single-shot mode, and get into position to deploy. Four minutes to drop,” Monica ordered.

“Brooks,” Hinton said, “Three minutes. Twenty minutes till twilight. At least you’ll deploy in darkness.”

“Officers Ironcloud and Aceto, can you hear us approaching?” Monica said.

“I can hear you, Agent Brooks, but I don’t see any lights,” Officer Aceto responded.

“Two minutes out. We’ll deploy an eight-person team behind the tanker truck. They'll take positions to prevent any escape into the woods.”

Hinton dropped the Stingray to nearly ground level in the cleared-out north approach corridor to the runway.

“Thirty seconds to the pinnacle maneuver. It’ll be a three-foot jump.”

Agent Brooks gave Dan a friendly double pat on his shoulder as she hurried to the end of the Stingray. There, she switched her safety lever to ‘single shot’ mode. Hinton lowered the Stingray directly behind the gasoline tanker truck. In a pinnacle maneuver, the copter never touches the ground.

“Go, Go, Go,” Dan Hinton said.

The first team of eight FBI Agents and soldiers jumped to the ground and scattered like ants into a semi-circle around the north side of the getaway plane. Hinton gunned the engines and lifted off, rising over the tanker truck and the Gulfstream jet. Then, veering to the edge of the runway, Hinton swung the Stingray helicopter around to face the Gulfstream jet head-on. He slowly lowered the craft to the ground, about seventy-five meters from the VORTEX private jet.

“RPG, RPG,” Officer Aceto said. “Two guys on the stairs are lining you up with some kind of missile. You guys are sitting ducks! If I shoot, I might hit your people north of the plane. Dust off! Dust off!”

“I haven’t a shot either,” Officer Ironcloud said. “You guys are in my way. Jesus! Dust off! Dust off!”

Warrant Officer Hinton revved up the Stingray’s engines, and the chopper rose. He banked to the left, hoping to expose the side of the Stingray to the missile attack. Instead, Hinton’s peripheral vision showed someone appearing at the top of the stairs, followed by a burst of muzzle flashes.

The Hostage

“Cease fire! Cease fire!” Officer Ironcloud said. “That blond-haired woman just shot and killed the two guys with the missile. She fired at least a dozen rounds into them. One’s sprawled on the tarmac; the other is half off the bottom step. They’re not moving. OK, now she tossed her long gun to the ground. She raised her hands. I think she’s surrendering.”

“Dan. Put us down near the Gulfstream and then move to that pasture on the west end of the abandoned farm. That’ll put you out of range of any rifle fire.”

Agent Brooks felt the low-frequency rumble of the helicopter’s power in her feet as it lifted and swung around for a head-on approach to the VORTEX jet. Once again, Warrant Officer Hinton lowered the Stingray to the three-foot level.

“Go, Go, Go!” the pilot said as Monica and the other assault team jumped to the runway. There was an ear-splitting roar as the Stingray revved its engines and lifted away from the tarmac. Monica and her team sprinted towards the Gulfstream G700 jet.

“Team Alpha. Tighten up the perimeter,” Monica shouted as she approached the Gulfstream jet’s stairs. The blond-haired woman was sobbing, dressed in light grey sweatpants, a navy-blue T-shirt, and no shoes. Her arms, raised over her head, were trembling like a leaf.

Three of Monica’s team surrounded the Gulfstream’s exit stairs, pointing their guns at the blond-haired woman.

“Do you speak English?” Monica said.

“Tak, English my second language. What country this?”

“You’re in the United States of America.”

“My name Doctor Hanna Salenko. These people kidnapped me from Kyiv, Ukraine, three years ago.”

“Hanna, come down the stairs.”

She made her way, unsteadily, down the exit stairs, stepping over the dead body at the bottom. Monica ordered her to turn around, then quickly handcuffed her behind her back. Then, explaining that she must pat her down for weapons, Agent Brooks searched Hanna’s body thoroughly. Reaching for her right calf, Agent Brooks stopped short. There was a noticeable bloodstain.

*Uh ooh*, Brooks thought.

“Hanna, how did you get this injury on your right calf?”

“Bullet bounced off missile, then stairs, then to me. Bullet poison. I have hour to live. I help you get justice, even if I not live to see.”

“We have an antidote, Hanna. We will have to fly you to Chicago.”

Brooks called for Sergeant Kate Burkley, one of the base’s call-in medics, a Nurse Practitioner at a St. Paul doctor’s office in everyday life.

“Hannah, Sergeant Burkley is an Army medic. Kate, cut away her pants leg to look at this injury.”

Burkley had a backpack of medical gear and worked quickly to reveal the severity of Hanna’s wound.

“Agent Brooks, this is just a graze. The bullet did not lodge in her leg.”

Agent Brooks sent three team members onto the plane as the Army Medic worked on Hannah. They reported that the aircraft was empty. A search of the cargo hold showed no stowaways there either.

“What your name?” Doctor Salenko said.

“Monica Brooks, Ma’am.”

“Those two men brought me along because I a doctor.”

“How did you get loose? Get their gun?”

“I in bathroom when helicopter arrive. Men forget about me. Too much excitement. I see them go down the steps with missile, so I pick up one of their automatic rifles. They try to kill you.”

“Hanna, let me take an image of you.”

Agent Brooks had two team members point their flashlights as she snapped Hanna’s face with her FBI satellite phone. She now had a strong signal, so she dialed FBI Director Ratzinger.

“Agent Brooks, sitrep quickly,” Ratzinger said.

“Sir, we have secured the VORTEX aircraft. There were two men and one woman aboard. The two men attempted to fire a missile at our helicopter, but the woman shot them dead before they could fire. She claims to be an unwilling participant. I’m sending you her image. Could you get an immediate facial recognition analysis on her?”

Brooks waited patiently, studying Hanna’s face. Blond hair tied simply into a ponytail framed an attractive face framed by tapered bangs. She looked to be in her middle thirties.

“Agent Brooks, Bart here. The CIA got an immediate hit on Interpol’s database. She is Doctor Hanna Salenko, Chief Resident of the National Emergency and Trauma Hospital in Kyiv, Ukraine. Supposedly abducted from a Kyiv nightclub three years ago. They have been actively looking for her. Tell her that her cooperation will help put this gang behind bars.”

“I’ll handle it, sir. I’ll pass you off to Agent Dystrum, who is concerned that the missile launcher out on the tarmac might be live. He needs help safing it.”

Turning to Hanna, Agent Brooks removed her handcuffs.

“Doctor Salenko, we are assuming that you are a victim here. First, however, let me make it clear that it is a crime to lie to an FBI agent in the United States.”

“I honest woman, Agent Monica. I have photographic memory and can tell you much about these Russian brutes. I know the GPS coordinates of the island where they held me prisoner.”

“Hanna, does the plane have explosives to self-destruct?”

“No, but they have Chinese timer bombs. I know where they are.”

“Let’s go aboard, Hanna. Show me everything!”

Agent Brooks turned to Kate Burkley.

“Kate, get your AED machine and some tranquilizer. We’ll knock out Doctor Salenko and get her on the AED for the trip to Chicago.”

CHAPTER XXX

The War’s Aftermath

Help Arrives

Doctor Sandeep Modi guided Bruno Ronis to Jane’s ER room, with an orderly pushing a cart with Ronis’s equipment behind them. Ronis marveled at the array of medical instrumentation, with patient monitors, infusion pumps, IV bags, and digital wall displays blinking and beeping. Two nurses and a doctor hovered over the patient.

“Doctor Ronis, this is Doctor Jonathan Arenberg, one of Chicago’s best cardiac surgeons. Anne Merrick, the one uninjured member of the Merrick family, requested his assistance with this case.

”Just call me Jon,” replied Doctor Arenberg, whose blue scrubs, sterile gloves, surgical cap, N95 mask, and face shield concealed his age; he turned sixty-five last month.

“And this is our patient, Jane Doe 413,” Doctor Modi said as he pointed to the ER bed with the intubated Jane on her back. Ronis stared at Jane’s Patient Monitor, displaying normal sinus rhythm.

“How long has she been like this?” Ronis said.

“She was in V-Tach four minutes ago; our Automated External Defibrillator shocks her as soon as she slips back into V-Tach,” one of the ER nurses said.

“The EMT staff at the Merrick mansion looked at her with a credit card ECG device and immediately observed arrhythmias heading for full V-Tach. They quickly sedated her and attached the portable AED unit. She gets about five minutes of sinus rhythm each time it shocks her before the Strelkavirus roars back,” Arenberg said.

Ronis stared briefly at the infusion pump running an IV dextrose, saline, and potassium solution into Jane’s wrist. Then, after discussing the ingredients of the IV bag with the nurse, Ronis fetched a vial of his mRNA antidote and extracted 4 ml into a syringe. He pumped the medicine into the bag’s injection port, gently squeezing the bag to distribute the vaccine. Finally, he asked the nurse to update the label on the bag to indicate the added medication.

“How long will this take?” Doctor Arenberg said.

“We should see her arrhythmias subside in twelve hours, then completely disappear after six more hours. But I want to keep her on this dosage for at least four days to be sure.”

“What’s your view of her prognosis, Doctor Ronis?”

“That depends. Did Jane Doe 413 have a long period of V-Tach before intervention?”

“We don’t think so,” Doctor Modi said, “the EMT crew at the Merrick mansion reported her lucid and able to enter responses to their questions on her smartphone. They sedated her when she entered V-Tach and attached the portable AED unit. We hope we’ve kept enough blood flowing through her blood-brain barrier to avoid brain damage.”

“Yes, but the patient has a brain injury already. Is that not true?”

“Well, yes. Jane’s meth-addicted parents abandoned her on the waterfront as a two-day-old baby. A hospital mistake resulted in some brain damage, essentially her inability to command her vocal cords.

If you will follow me, the next ER room has Agent Hendon, who accidentally dropped one of the Russian knife blades onto her wrist.”

“Let’s get her started on the Strelkavirus vaccine too.”

“Doctor Ronis, I’ll take you to surgery where we are treating Officer Mackenzie Merrick. He just arrived an hour ago,” Doctor Modi said.

The entourage used the elevators to go onto the second floor. Anne Merrick scurried up as they approached the surgery. Usually elegant in appearance, she was a bit of a mess, clad in her pajamas, with her hair tangled and dusty. Anne looked like she had been in a war.

“Sandeep, is this Doctor Ronis?”

“Mrs. Anne Merrick, may I introduce Doctor Bruno Ronis? He’s the developer of the mRNA vaccine for the Strelkavirus.”

“Good morning, Mrs. Merrick,” Ronis said. “I have a couple of questions for you. Were you grazed in any way by the gunfire at your home?”

“No, Doctor Ronis, I was not injured during the gun battle.”

“Mrs. Merrick, did you touch the Russian Mercenaries’ equipment?”

“Yes, I reached into the shopping bag of ammunition that Jane collected to fetch a spare magazine for my husband.”

“Doctor Modi, I want Mrs. Merrick confined to a bed with an IV drip of the mRNA vaccine. She’ll need ECG and arrhythmia monitoring for at least four days.”

“Now, wait a minute, Doctor Ronis. I have to monitor the medical treatment of my family to ensure they get the very best of care! May I remind you, Sandeep, that my husband and I are major benefactors to this hospital?”

“Speaking for the hospital, we are well aware of and appreciate your generosity. But your largess will stop if you and John Merrick are dead. Anne, this is one of those moments where you should listen to the advice of experts such as Doctor Ronis. He traveled to Chicago in the middle of the night to help you.”

Anne Merrick exhaled, clenched her fists, and looked at the floor. She thought *my family wasn’t the only one affected by this attack. Three men lost their lives at our house. Men who were trying to protect us.*

“I’ve been barking orders like it's my Law Firm, haven’t I, Sandeep?”

“Yes, you have, Anne. You’ve been in a war, seconds from possible death. You’re suffering from shell shock, what we call Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome or PTSD these days. I want to put you in a cardiac care bed with an IV to hydrate you and some medicine to help calm you. I will personally see that your husband and son receive the best care possible. I need you to trust me on this, Anne.”

“Doctor Modi,” Bruno said. “What is the current occupation of your cardiac care ward?”

“Twenty-four beds, only four occupied at the moment.”

“OK, anyone exposed to the Russian equipment but not showing arrhythmias should go to cardiac care. Those showing heart arrhythmias should be in the ICU unit. I suggest putting Mrs. Merrick and her husband together in one cardiac care room.”

“Agreed, Bruno. We’ll find a room facing Lake Michigan and list false names on the registry.”

As a nurse escorted Anne Merrick to the cardiac care department, Doctor Modi received a phone call informing him that the stricken Ukrainian hostage had just arrived at Midway Airport and would be in the hospital in fifteen minutes. They rushed to start Officer Mac Merrick and his father, John, on the Strelkavirus antidote.

The Light of Day

The morning sun revealed a picturesque day ahead, the opposite of the violence and mayhem that had occurred just a few hours earlier. A Coast Guard vessel approached in the distance, tasked with towing the drug submarine to the US Coast Guard Station in Calumet Harbor. The Department of Homeland Security would inspect and disinfect the craft and decide on its disposal.

The Merrick mansion and its grounds were crawling with FBI agents. Mason had most of his daytime staff onsite doing crime scene investigations and aiding the County Coroner with preparations to transport the deceased Russians and Federal Marshals to the morgue for autopsies. A planeload of FBI and CIA staff from Washington arrived, adding to the crowd milling in the yard and the mansion itself.

“Right this way, Director Radzinger,” D’Marcus Mason said as he led the FBI Director to the gate on the southeastern perimeter of the Merrick mansion. Bart Radzinger is tall and in good shape for a man of fifty-two, with a full head of brown hair, but there’s some grey showing at the temples. He is one of the rare FBI Directors who worked as a Special Agent right after law school, but politics intervened, and he accepted a federal judgeship in his forties. The President nominated him for a ten-year term as FBI Director, and the Senate quickly confirmed his nomination. He’s popular with most of the FBI because he delegates responsibility well, but Washington politics remains a minefield he must traverse occasionally.

“This is where we think they shot the first Federal Marshal; we found a spent cartridge over there,” Mason said, pointing to a spot by the steps leading down to the lake. They disabled the four infrared motion sensors next.”

“How did they do that?”

“They used four drones to descend vertically on each sensor and lay a blanket to spoof it. We think it’s a Chinese metamaterial that blocks infrared radiation.”

Agent Hanko held up one of the drones with a tee-shaped rod underneath with solenoid clips to hold the metamaterial blanket.

“We think they programmed the four drones to descend vertically and lay the blankets simultaneously. The drone is unusually quiet and looks to be a Chinese design,” Agent Whelan said.

“Next, they cut the gate lock with this bolt cutter and entered the mansion grounds. We think one of them raced around to the front door and padlocked it closed with a rubber-coated chain. The others lugged the comms jammer into the yard. “

“Who made the jammer?”

“It has Russian markings, sir.”

“When they fired their first shot, why didn’t the rifle’s sound alert the other Federal Marshals?”

“Their automatic rifle is unusually quiet, Sir. The weapon has an advanced silencer that we’d not seen before. Our initial look suggests an electronic noise-canceling emitter in the silencer. I’ll have Agent Hanko demonstrate it for you.”

With rubber gloves, a mask, and a face shield, Hanko aimed the weapon toward Lake Michigan. Shouting, “Fire in the hole,” Hanko squeezed off a single shot. The Russian gun made a muffled ‘whump’ sound.

“Jeez, D’Marcus. That was it? My God, Marine sharpshooters can make a headshot at 600 meters consistently. At that distance, you’d never hear this thing. Your only chance to get a fix on the shooter would be to spot the muzzle flash. The Military will want to inspect this silencer. So, what happened next?”

“They started the jammer. That’s when Jane Doe 413 woke up and spotted them in the yard. She roused Officer Mac Merrick and ran to John and Anne Merrick. Mac watched them hot-wire the helicopter and kill the other two Marshals in the guest house.

Next, they cut the Internet cable and shut off the Consolidated Edison power, the backup generator system, and the solar/wind battery pack. Now, the mansion is dark, with only one exit and no way to call for help. They entered the mansion; three went upstairs to kill Officer Merrick and Jane Doe 413, and one headed for John and Anne Merrick’s first-floor bedroom.”

“So how did the Merricks survive the hit team that has never failed?”

“Asymmetric warfare, Director. Officer Mac Merrick used his FBI-issue Colt M6 rifle and gave his father his Chicago Police Glock 50 handgun. They set up a crossfire in the mansion’s Great Room while Jane the Angel functioned as a behind-enemy-lines one-woman guerilla army.”

D’Marcus explained in detail how Jane and the Merricks fought back.”

“That’s an amazing story,” Radzinger said as they returned to the Merrick mansion. “Where are the three Russians who survived now?”

“I had them helicoptered to St. Joseph’s Medical Center in Joliet. The Illinois State Police are guarding them. All three are injured, the last one by a grenade blast. We should move them to a federal supermax prison as soon as possible to preclude anyone trying to free them.”

“I’ll get that arranged, D’Marcus. What’s the Chicago Bureau’s opinion of Officer Merrick?”

“Very favorable, Sir, a star performer. Merrick is the best we've seen of all the candidates the Chicago PD has ever submitted to the FBI-Chicago Joint Task Force on Organized Crime.”

“Do you want to consider him for the Older Agents program, D’Marcus? I could grease the skids to get him into the Academy.”

“He would make an exceptional Agent, but consider this. Teamwork and cooperation with the local police are crucial to our mission in a large metropolis like Chicago. Having an asset like Merrick as our interface to the Chicago Police would be essential to getting the job done.”

“Point taken, Mason. After the dust has settled, I’d like you to meet with Officer Merrick and discuss these two options with him. Find out what he wants, OK?”

“I’ll do that, sir. Anything else on your mind?”

“There is, Agent Mason. Walk with me. The President got off to an early start this morning, 6 a.m. He blew his stack during the President’s Daily Briefing. He’s treating this incident as an invasion by a foreign power, or at least rogue elements of the Russian military. I think the President is justified in being furious about this attack, D’Marcus. In addition to the five Russian assassins the Merricks faced last night, others of this gang supported this raid with surveillance and research. The accomplices are probably escaping to airports as we speak. Of course, the Russian Government will claim no knowledge of this attack. After the fall of the Putin regime, Russia is still a corrupt country, and there’s no doubt that some military commanders are providing this gang with advanced tech and airstrips, allowing these people to fly their jets all over the globe.”

They walked around the Merrick mansion to the expansive driveway area, stopping at a Federal Marshal SUV. The back gate was down, and Director Radzinger and Agent Mason sat on the gate, facing each other.

“Now I come to the unpleasant part, D’Marcus. The Attorney General wants us to raid that programming company, Chicago Cyber Engineering, today.”

“Do you have a warrant, Director?”

“Should be in your offices by ten this morning.”

“Sir, most of my agents have been up all night, and the ones we need to search this computer shop, namely Jane Doe 413, Agent Hendon, are in the hospital.”

“I’m aware of that, D’Marcus. That’s why I’ve decided to run this raid out of Washington. I’ve got forty-five Agents in combat gear from Headquarters on two planes, currently heading for our government hanger at Midway Airport. They should arrive by 10 a.m. I’ll need you to auto-pilot about six vehicles to Midway to transport my team to the mob programming shop.”

“Sir, you know what Jane the Angel has told us about raiding that place. She thinks Doctor Morton prepared for an intrusive search, and we’ll find jack squat.”

“I know, I know. We’re coming with a specialist who will have a ground-penetrating radar. If they have any equipment buried at the site, we’ll spot it. In any case, we’ll check every employee working on the three upper floors and see if they are legit.”

“This is my town, Bart. I’ll lead the raid.”

“That's fine, D’Marcus. I’ll watch it from your office. Anyhow, let’s get this show on the road.”

CHAPTER XXX

Search Warrant

FBI Raid

“Alright, young lady, I’m from the FBI, ” Special Agent in Charge Mason explained to the Chicago Cyber Engineering receptionist in his practiced FBI command voice.

“Please ask Doctor Morton or Mister Bisha to come to the lobby. We have a federal search warrant to inspect the premises.”

The receptionist, Lucinda Walsh, was wide-eyed, with her lower lip trembling as the horde of people in blue jackets poured into the reception area. Ten FBI agents were in full combat dress with body armor and M6 carbines. Director Radzinger was taking no chances today. He didn’t expect a gunfight, but considering the suspicion was that CCE was possibly an Albanian Shqiptare front company, a show of force seemed prudent.

“Suh Suh Sir,” Walsh stammered, “Doctor Morton and Mister Bisha aren’t here. They… They’re on an executive retreat on the island of Barbados. All senior staff and project managers are at the Sandy Lane Hotel in St. James. Today, the only executive here is Mister Prentice, VP of Software Quality Control.”

“Fine, Miss Walsh. Kindly get Mister Prentice here straight away.”

Lucinda quickly called VP Prentice, informed him that the FBI had arrived, and asked him to come to the lobby at once.

“Sir, Mister Prentice’s office is on the third floor. He’s heading for the elevator.”

The elevator doors opened in less than a minute, and Prentice quickly approached the Reception Desk. In his late twenties, Prentice wore grey Dockers and an embroidered CCE polo shirt.

“I’m Morgan Prentice. What can I do for you gentlemen?”

“Good afternoon. I’m Special Agent D’Marcus Mason of the FBI. We have a Federal Warrant to search the premises.”

Mason handed Prentice a copy of the Warrant. Prentice looked at it for a moment, somewhat befuddled.

“I have no idea what to do with this.”

“How about cooperating?” Agent Mason said. “Get on your public address system and order every employee to stop their work and assemble in the company amphitheater on the first floor.”

Prentice complied by broadcasting on the building’s PA system, requesting every employee save their work and assemble in the auditorium immediately.

“OK, now I want you to disengage your security system so we can enter any room in the facility,” Mason said.

“I don’t know how to do that, and I doubt she does either. May I call Doctor Morton for help?”

“Fine. Put it up on the large screen so I can monitor your conversation.”

“Lucinda, request a Zoom meeting with Doctor Morton’s laptop.”

“Right away, sir.”

After the usual flashes and blinks, a picturesque Caribbean scene appeared on the reception booth's large display. Morton’s laptop rested on a glass table pointing toward the ocean. In the foreground was a tall concrete column with a white inverted canvas parasol pointing to the sky. Beyond it were several smaller glass tables with pink parasols with smiling guests enjoying a beverage or bar snacks. Mason could hear the sounds of children frolicking in the pounding surf. The Caribbean water was turquoise close to the shore, and a few sailboats decorated the horizon.

The person opening Morton’s laptop to take the call circled the table to get into the camera’s view. It was Lendina Bisha in a light yellow, flower-printed bikini. She had a matching oversized scarf tied at the waist, giving her a modicum of modesty for the resort’s ocean-view plaza.

“Good afternoon, Morgan. Is there something wrong?”

“Mrs. Bisha, the FBI is here with a search warrant. They’d like to speak with Doctor Morton.”

“Let me speak to them.”

Prentice and Mason shifted positions until the FBI Special Agent-in-Charge was in view.

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Bisha. We have a federal search warrant to inspect the Chicago Cyber Engineering facility.”

“Agent Mason, I don’t know how often my husband, Doctor Morton, and I have told you that a search warrant is unnecessary and that you are welcome to inspect our facility. That said, know this. We built this building on bedrock and a thick concrete slab. This slab has conduits running fiber optics and other cables connecting our supercomputer to the server farm. Any jackhammering of these systems will put us out of business for weeks, maybe months.

Let me also advise you that we provide specialized cloud services to many government agencies that rely on the unique, ultra-secure, and reliable data storage that only Doctor Morton’s expertise can provide. Last year we did $650 million in gross receipts, clearing $140 million in profits, from which we paid taxes to Chicago, Illinois, and the Federal Government. I tell you these things, Agent Mason, to remind you that a destructive inspection of our building will have wide-ranging and unnecessary consequences.”

Mason’s face, usually dour and somber, broke into a chuckle.

“Mrs. Bisha, we’re the FBI. Investigation is our surname, and we have our methods. Please get Doctor Morton; I’d like to speak to him.”

Lendina stood up, looked towards the resort’s bar, and shouted for Lewis Morton, waving for him to come over. In a few seconds, Morton approached Lendina, who moved out of the range of the laptop’s microphone. They conferred briefly, and Lewis Morton sat facing his laptop computer. Lendina hovered just behind him.

“Good afternoon, Agent Mason. What can I do for you?”

"Doctor Morton, please disengage your security system so my staff can enter any room in the facility?”

“Very well, this will take a minute.”

Morton tapped away at his keypad, requesting remote access to the Chicago Cyber Engineering supercomputer. Morgan Prentice typed something at his end to authorize remote access, and in seconds, Mason noticed that the display and LED indicators on a swipe-card unit at a doorway near him went dark.

“Agent Mason, our security system is off; you should be able to go through any door in the building. Let me explain a few things to you. We do not allow employees to bring personal smartphones, iWatches, or memory glasses into the building. These items are in a storage locker behind the X-ray machine near the door. Employees use Microsoft Super Surface laptops, which we supply, to do Cloud Computing with our supercomputer. Each office has a CAT-500 cable to connect the Microsoft machines to our system. These laptops have an alternate login for management use. I’ll now dictate the username and password that will get you into any computer in the building, including our Samsung Pulsar All-Flash Storage System supercomputer, in executive mode. Please write this down and distribute it to your staff. Anything else I can help you with, Agent?”

“Yes, where is Mister Bisha?”

“He’s out on the golf course with the Project Managers,” replied Lendina. “This resort has one of the world’s most expensive golf courses, replete with ocean vistas on every hole.”

“Mrs. Bisha, is Magda Galanis with you?”

“Seriously, Agent Mason? The La Touche De l'artiste gallery had a successful year, so we included her in our executive retreat. She’s at the resort’s spa today.”

“Agent Mason, why did you decide to visit our facility today?”

“Why did you get your company’s senior staff out of the country today, Doctor Morton? Was it to establish an alibi?”

“An alibi for what?”

“Watch the news, Doctor Morton. If you will excuse me, I’m going to have a look around. Ms. Walsh, please terminate this conference call.”

Natalie Makes the National News

In the Sentinel’s multi-media room, Natalie adjusted the belt of her dark navy blue long-sleeved dress. This dress, popularized by England’s Queen Kate Middleton, is suitably modest with hems below the knees. Rumsfort closed her eyes for a second, trying valiantly to suppress her nervousness, for this was her first national exposure, an appearance on NBC’s The News at Noon show.

“Thirty seconds left in their commercial block,” reminded Antoine, the Sentinel’s multi-media manager. Rumsfort stood in front of a green screen background so that chroma-key trickery would show Natalie in front of a picturesque view of Chicago’s waterfront. She stared at one large display panel showing Lana Olsen, the NBC anchor, speaking to a staffer. As the staffer scurried away, Lana’s image showed a Producer counting “three, two, one” with his fingers. Lana looked up, smiled, and started speaking.

“We are back, and now to that extraordinary situation in Chicago early this morning where a Russian assassination team tried to kill one of Chicago’s most prominent families and the woman, Jane Doe 413, AKA the Chicago Angel. We have an exclusive interview with Chicago Sentinel reporter Natalie Rumsfort. Natalie, what happened?”

“Good afternoon, Lana. Last night at one a.m., a five-man team of Russian assassins entered the grounds of John and Anne Merrick’s Highland Park mansion overlooking Lake Michigan. Living with the Merricks then was their son, Mackenzie, a Chicago policeman, and Jane Doe 413, whom you identified as the Chicago Angel. After killing the three Federal Marshalls guarding the property and setting up a Russian comms jammer, they entered the Merrick mansion, intent on killing everyone inside.”

“How did the Merrick family survive?”

Rumsfort started describing the details of last night’s battle at the Merrick mansion. Lana Olsen interrupted several times with requests for more information. When Natalie finished, Olsen had one more question.

“Natalie, do you know this woman, Jane Doe 413?”

Rumsfort paused for a few seconds, looking down, collecting her thoughts. She looked up, staring directly at the television camera.

“Yes, Lana, I do know the Chicago Angel. She saved my life. The Chicago Police kept this fact secret to protect me. A mob assassin tried to kill me on Saturday, September 1st, at the Clubhouse Restaurant. Jane the Angel thwarted the hitman and got me out of the restaurant. Since Jane is now fighting for her life in a Chicago hospital, I cannot comment further about her.”

“I understand, Natalie. Please keep us appraised on the Chicago Angel’s condition. This is Lana Olsen for NBC News at Noon.”

Nobody Home

An hour later, FBI Director Radzinger, in one of the guest offices at the Chicago FBI Headquarters, called Special Agent Mason to inquire about the search of Chicago Cyber Engineering.

“D’Marcus, what have you found?”

“Sir, the top three floors are essentially empty. All the offices are bare, with no Super Surface laptops, manuals, or other indications of use. A Cat-500 optical Internet cable is on each empty desk, lying there like a limp dick.

The top floor has a nifty meeting room built like a Faraday cage. The door has Beryllium-copper seals. We found two satellite Internet dishes on the roof, one for StarLink and one for the Amazon Kuiper constellation.

There are only 143 employees on site today, but we have the HR records. There’s a Samsung Pulsar supercomputer and a large server farm. In addition to contract software development, it appears that CCE sells cloud computing services to a large customer base, including many federal government agencies.

We’ve made copies of all employee’s cell phones and smartwatches and copied the memories of the supercomputer and each server computer.”

“Now Jane the Angel believed there is a second supercomputer where they do their mob business. Any luck finding it, D’Marcus?”

“No, Director. This building rests on a slab, so there’s no basement. We checked everywhere with ground-penetrating radar. It revealed nothing.”

“So, Jane’s prediction that Dr. Morton and Imer Bisha prepared for a search and we’d find nothing has turned out to be true.”

“That’s how it looks, Director,” D’Marcus Mason said.

“OK, bring the search team back to Headquarters. We’ll take your copied data back to Langley for diagnosis.”

“Copy that,” said a not-at-all-surprised Special Agent Mason.

Recovery

Early Saturday afternoon, Officer Mac Merrick stood outside Jane’s ICU room. The subtle, sterile scent imbued the ICU wing and the synchronized melody of beeps and clicks filled the air, creating an ambient soundscape. Mac saw Nurse Jason Heitmueller walking towards him, his footsteps echoing through the sterile halls of the ICU wing.

“Ah. Officer Merrick. Can I help you?”

“How’s she doing, Jason?”

“Very well, Mac. We’ve got her on her stomach to reduce pressure on her wound. Neurology is very satisfied with her recovery. So far, nothing but rock-solid sinus rhythm. The same goes for the others afflicted by the Russian Strelkavirus. Ronis’ experimental mRNA vaccine appears to be a bullseye. We’re incredibly pleased with Doctor Hanna Salenko's recovery. There’s a nurse from the Maternity Ward who speaks fluent Ukrainian. We’ve temporarily got her assigned to Salenko’s room.

“May I go in and see Jane?”

“Sure, Mac. Jane has a small iPad with her. Would you like me to move a chair next to her bed?”

“That’d be great, Jason.”

Mac rolled his tripod with the IV bag into Jane’s room. She sensed his arrival, turned her head, and flashed an affectionate smile. Jason dragged the visitor’s chair next to Jane’s bed, and Mac lowered himself onto the seat.

“How are you doing, Jane?”

Jane typed quickly on her iPad.

**“Mac. Everybody’s looking at my ass!”**

“Can you blame them? I mean, your bum is the Eighth Wonder of the World!”

Jane playfully poked Mac on his knee and started typing into her iPad.

**“The FBI Director, Ratzinger, visited my room and told me about the raid on Chicago Cyber Engineering. He admitted that they didn’t find anything nefarious. He said the President demanded immediate action on anybody who might have hired the Russian hit team.”**

“Here’s some good news. Yesterday, the Indonesian government took swift and decisive action against the VORTEX operation. Thanks to the information on the VORTEX Gulfstream jet, we located the base of operations on the southern tip of Binongko Island. The Russians bought a large parcel of land and erected what they claimed was an exclusive resort, complete with a private airstrip. The Governor in charge of Binongko Island was getting monthly payoffs from the VORTEX crew. On Friday, Indonesian Army and Navy units invaded the place, with a US Navy Seal Team as advisors. There was a gun battle, but for now, VORTEX is dead. However, we did not find General Oleg Novikov on Binongko Island. He might be hiding in the United States.

David Hanko told me that Morton and Lendina booked the Sinclair Ballroom South at the Waldorf Astoria for a news conference Monday at noon. The promised topic is FBI and Chicago Police harassment of their businesses.”

**“It’s best you and I stay out of that, Mac.**

**Any news about when we can move back into your mansion?”**

“Homeland Security is allowing us to return next Wednesday. They located every trace of the Russian Strelkavirus and neutralized it. The President ordered Federal Marshall protection for my sister and brother, so they returned to their homes yesterday.”

**“Mason visited me this morning. He said the FBI detained four people at the Detroit airport trying to fly to Russia yesterday. Their luggage contained some research on your mansion and the Merrick family. The Michigan federal courts denied bail.”**

“There’s even better news about that. David Hanko called me and said that the Navy Seal team that raided Binongko Island found travel receipts and other evidence identifying the prep team that flew to Chicago to plan the op. American, Mexican, and Canadian customs are on the lookout for these people. It was over a dozen people supporting the hit, Jane.”

CHAPTER XXX

Bisha Complains

Waldorf Astoria

The Sinclair South meeting venue at the Waldorf Astoria, named after the first American Nobel Laureate in Literature, Sinclair Lewis, was set up with sixty folding chairs for the news media. At the front, there was a table arranged with four seats for Morton, Lendina, Imer, and Thomas Appleton, their corporate lawyer. About forty-five members of the press showed up. One of the local television stations provided two cameras for pool coverage for the rest of Chicago’s media outlets.

Natalie Rumsfort admired the room’s crystal chandeliers and walls lined with silk, casting her gaze on the doorway, looking for her bodyguard, Jamarr. Her editor, Charles Randolf, insisted on an armed guard for this press conference. Jamarr entered the room and leaned against the back wall, winking at Natalie.

At noon, on the dot, Lendina, Imer, Lewis, and their lawyer strolled into the room, taking their places at the table. A fourth person followed the group, and fetched the mobile microphone, positioning himself at the center of the aisle. Lendina Bisha tapped her microphone and looked upon the press in attendance.

“Can everybody hear me?”

Hearing an affirmative from the back of the room, she pressed on.

“I have some announcements before we take questions. Earlier this morning, we filed a lawsuit in the United States District Court for the Southern District of Illinois against Special Agent in Charge D’Marcus Mason and the Federal Bureau of Investigation for defamation of our company, Chicago Cyber Engineering. Specifically, we are asking for damages of 60 million dollars.

Last Thursday, October 4th, Mason and a phalanx of FBI Agents conducted an unwarranted and unnecessary search of our facility in Hines, Illinois. They herded our employees into the building’s auditorium while illegally making copies of their cell phones and smartwatches. In addition, they made copies of our records and proprietary software before leaving. Agent Mason also cast aspersions that we may have had something to do with Thursday's attack on the Merrick mansion in Highland Park. These unfounded accusations jeopardize our ability to win new contracts.

Last year, Chicago Cyber Engineering did $650 million in gross sales, clearing $140 million in profits, from which we paid taxes to Chicago, Illinois, and the Federal Government. Our earnings are plowed right back into the Chicago economy via the several companies we founded and now operate. For example, the Ship of Hope Halfway House for Runaway Teenagers and Battered Women, CondoWatt, our company that manufactures EV charging stations for condominiums and apartment complexes, and other businesses we own provide gainful employment for over three thousand Illinois residents.

I have had warm relations with Anne and John Merrick. At the Chamber of Commerce Annual Dinner, Anne awarded me and my art gallery partner, Magda Galanis, a Distinguished Service Award. After the event, Magda and I shared drinks with the Merricks at the Peninsula Hotel’s Shanghai Terrace. To suggest that Imer and I would have anything to do with the Thursday attack on the Merrick home is hurtful and simply not true.

In business, a good reputation is the most critical selling point. For some reason, Special Agent in Charge D’Marcus Mason and the FBI seems hell-bent on destroying ours. That is why we are taking legal action to protect our good name.

If you have any questions, ask our CCE Project Manager Ian Crosschurch for the microphone.”

Most of the assembled press raised their hands, so Ian handed the microphone to a woman closest to him.

“Mrs. Bisha. Sally Vustig of NBC, Chicago. A Cooke County Grand Jury has indicted your brother-in-law, Luan Bisha, for the attempted murder of an undercover policeman and the murder of Officer DiOtis Williams last July 19th. Cooke County courts denied bail for Luan Bisha and an associate, Besim Morina, and they are currently awaiting trial in the Cooke County Jail. Surely, this situation would raise suspicion about your husband. Luan Bisha is his brother, right?”

The TV cameras showed Lendina listening to the question with a cold stare, but that expression quickly morphed into a wide smile.

“I think it best that my husband responds to your question, Ms. Vustig.”

“Ms. Vustig, I see my brother once a year at Christmas. He owns and operates a sheetrock company. I am not privy to any criminal activity in which he may be involved. He is, of course, innocent until proven guilty. Since I haven’t seen any of the government's evidence, it would be imprudent to comment further about his case.”

“Mr. Bisha, let’s cut to the chase. Are you a member of the newly reconstituted Albanian Crime Syndicate active in Chicago?”

“The answer is no, Ms. Vustig, and your questions are insulting. I graduated from the University of Chicago with a master’s degree in business and have used my education to create companies and employment for the betterment of the people of Chicago.”

“Mister Bisha, I’m Terrence Vertan of CBS Chicago. Your father, Kreshnik Bisha, was an Albanian crime family boss and is now serving a life sentence without parole at the Federal Big Sandy prison in Kentucky. Doesn’t that raise …”

“Let me interrupt, Mr. Vertan. I had little to no contact with my father while growing up. My mother died of cancer, so an aunt raised my brother and me. I was my High School Valedictorian, and the University of Chicago accepted me based on my grades and other academic accomplishments.”

“Mr. Vertan,” Thomas Appleton interjected, “you are practicing guilt by association. Mr. Bisha should be honored for his accomplishments, not pilloried for the sins of his father.

Crosschurch handed the microphone to Natalie Rumsfort, who stood up. Instantly, Lendina sharpened her gaze at Rumsfort, her pursed smile covering her gritting teeth.

“Mr. Bisha, I’m Natalie Rumsfort of the Chicago Sentinel. Where were you, your wife, and Doctor Morton last Thursday?”

“Something tells me, Ms. Rumsfort, that you already know the answer to your question.”

“Answer my question, Mr. Bisha.”

“I was on the island of Barbados. We take our senior staff on an executive retreat once a year to celebrate our company’s success.”

“I checked with the Sandy Lane Hotel’s manager, and you booked your group only two weeks before your arrival.”

“Well, you love your conspiracy theories, Ms. Rumsfort. The simple truth is that the Sandy Lane Hotel had a late cancellation and offered us an advantageous price to fill their rooms.”

“Seriously, Mr. Bisha? It’s not much of a stretch to suggest that you might be establishing an alibi.”

“Not at all, Ms. Rumsfort. Our records will show that we scheduled an executive retreat every year that we were profitable.”

“Very well, where were you and Mrs. Bisha married?”

“You want to know about our wedding, Ms. Rumsfort?” Lendina said, her voice emoting rising rage.

“Do I have to repeat myself? Where were you married?”

“In Albania!”

“At whose home?” Natalie said. The scene devolved into a staring contest.

“At the home of Skender Hasa, near Vaqarr, Albania,” Lendina said in a tone that combined sarcasm and condescension.

“Ah. Skender Hasa is a man Interpol believes is the worldwide leader of the Albanian Mafia Shqiptare.”

“Nonsense,” Imer said, “The Albanian authorities have never arrested Hasa, never charged him with a crime.”

“Maybe the Albanian Government is afraid to take action against a mob kingpin? OK, one more question. You returned to Chicago right after your marriage and purchased a $3.5 million condominium at 1300 Lakeshore Drive in a cash sale. Where did you get the money to purchase such valuable real estate?”

“Well, I worked for several years as a Certified Public Accountant,” Lendina said.

“You’re a freelance CPA, Mrs. Bisha. Indeed.com lists the average salary in Chicago at $95,268 per annum. Your husband was right out of college. Who gave you the money?”

“We have some wealthy friends, Ms. Rumsfort. Let’s give some other press members a chance to ask questions. Please give Mr. Crosschurch the microphone,” Imer Bisha said.

Natalie shrugged and surrendered the microphone to Ian. Other press members asked if the Bishas had anything to do with the drug lab busted near the Midway Airport, met with an instant denial from Lendina. Rumsfort left early with her bodyguard. She could view the rest of the press conference back at the Sentinel.

Anne Responds

Later Monday afternoon, Sally Vustig of NBC Chicago sat next to Anne Merrick’s desk at the Merrick, Dawson, and Brant building. Sally had two cameras for this interview, one for Anne and one for her. Millie Grainger pitched in and helped Crispin, one of the NBC camera operators, with the lighting and the WiFi connection to the local NBC studio.

“Anne,” Sally said, “we shan’t be going live for this interview. Instead, your comments will be part of our News at Five and later shows today.

“We’re ready, Sally,” Crispin said.

Crispin counted down from three with his fingers and waved his hand to start. Sally Vustig lit up her face with a beaming smile.

“This is Sally Vustig of NBC Chicago. We’re at the law offices of Merrick, Dawson, and Brant, one of Chicago’s most successful law firms. With me today is Mrs. Anne Merrick, CEO of the firm and a survivor of Russian assassins who invaded her home in Highland Park last Thursday. Anne, how are you and the rest of your family?”

“Good afternoon, Sally. I am fine. The hospital released me yesterday afternoon. They should release my husband John and my son Mac the day after tomorrow. Jane Doe 413, our Angel, will be hospitalized for several more days. She suffered a knife wound.”

“Anne, I don’t want to discuss the battle you and your family waged last Thursday. Our station has reported extensively on what happened that harrowing night. Instead, I’d like you to respond to the noon news conference by Lendina Bisha, Imer Bisha, and Dr. Lewis Morton. Did you watch that news conference?”

“Yes, I did.”

“The Bishas and Dr. Morton claimed they had nothing to do with the attack last Thursday, as they were vacationing on the Island of Barbados. They also claimed that you awarded Lendina Bisha a Distinguished Service Award at the Chamber of Commerce Burnham Award Dinner and sat down for drinks with them after the event. Is that true?

Anne leaned forward and stared at Vustig for a pregnant pause.

“It is true that I bestowed a Distinguished Service Award to Lendina Bisha and her art gallery partner Magda Galanis at the Burnham Award Dinner. It’s also true that my husband John and I sat down for drinks with the Bishas and Ms. Galanis at the Peninsula’s Shanghai Terrace. I would describe that conversation as cordial.”

“Anne, do you think the Bishas and Dr. Morton had anything to do with the attack on your home?”

Anne Merrick leaned back in her executive chair, her mind racing with the possible answers and their consequences. She decided to give a legal and safe response.

“Ms. Vustig, this is a law firm, and we deal with evidence. Without evidence, we don’t have a case. I do not have any evidence suggesting Doctor Morton and the Bishas had anything to do with the assault on my home.

I will investigate the terrorist act committed against us with the help of my law firm, my son, who is a Chicago policeman, and government agencies such as the FBI and the Justice Department. Together, we will work to uncover the identity of those responsible. When we identify the perpetrators, we will take legal action against those responsible.”

“Thank you for speaking with us today. This is Sally Vustig of NBC Chicago.”

As Millie helped Crispen and the other cameraman load their equipment into the cart in the hallway, Sally moved her chair closer to Anne’s desk.

“Anne, can we speak off the record?”

“Well, that depends.”

“Why won’t Jane Doe 413, the Chicago Angel, speak to the press?”

“For God’s sake, Sally. She can’t speak. Surely you know that.”

“Our station could edit her interview, cutting the parts where she types into her tablet computer.”

“Sally, Jane has made it clear to my husband and me that she does not want to speak to the press. Thus, we are preventing press access to her in my home or the FBI Building where she works.

Lustig had one more stop in the afternoon, the Chicago FBI Headquarters on West Roosevelt Road. The guards at the entrance called the Public Relations Department, and they promised to send out a statement in a few minutes.

Eventually, the PR Officer walked out to the entrance and handed Sally a press release, advising her that the statement would appear on their website in a few minutes. Lustig snickered at the brevity of the message.

*“Re the lawsuit filed this morning by Messrs. Bisha and Morton, the FBI never comments on ongoing investigations or litigations.”*

Sally Lustig thought, “Mason never shows his cards until he’s ready to pounce.”

Aftermath

One after another, the bosses of the New York, Seattle, Los Angeles, Miami, St. Louis, and Boston syndicates popped up on the Zoom screen. Arsen Murka, the North American mob boss, had a glum expression reminiscent of a wayward son who had just gambled the family’s fortune away.

“Well, Lendina, this Angel bitch has once again served up a shit sandwich and forced us to eat all of it. I spent $60 million on the Vortex solution, and we have nothing to show for it. I watched your news conference, and the members of the Chicago press cast plenty of aspersions on you and Imer’s credibility. Maybe we should close down our Chicago operation and lay low for a while?”

“Father, we have no sources inside the Chicago FBI. They’re untouchable. However, we have many sources beholden to us inside the Chicago Police. One of them reported a rumor that this Angel person, AKA Jane Doe 413, showed the FBI the rape tape of the gangbang that triggered this woman's revenge campaign. This Angel girl obtained it illegally by breaking into our computer systems, so the FBI can't use it.”

“Arsen, we could claim that the rape video is an Artificial Intelligence generated deep fake video,” Doctor Morton said.

“Oh please, Lewis,” Lendia said. “That Angel woman undoubtedly showed the FBI her breast mutilation. If I were the FBI, I’d believe everything she says.”

“I’d like to point out,” Imer added, “that our new drug processing system is up and running at the Hiawatha Storage location in Hickory Hills. We laid off all previous employees and management, so the operation is running smoothly with our staff. So, any suggestion that we shut down our Chicago operation will have a disastrous impact on the family’s drug business nationwide.”

All eyes were on Murtha. He exhaled slowly and stared at his desk for an uncomfortable number of seconds.

“Imer,” Murka said. “Listen to me very carefully. You are to drop any plans, operations, or ideas of retaliation against the Merrick family and this Angel bitch. If I get even a whiff of you planning revenge against these people, the bottom of Lake Michigan will be your next home. Did I make myself clear, Imer?”

“Perfectly, Boss.”

“Doctor Morton. I want you and Lendina to tap some of Chicago Cyber Engineering’s cash and schedule some splashy philanthropy grants to improve Imer and Lendina’s image. Make sure the press hears about these grants.

“One more thing, Imer. There are to be no more gangbangs, especially of civilians. If you and your family want a sex party, contact Lendina’s escort operation to arrange it. Look at the damage you have done, Imer, by constantly thinking with your dick. You’re on shaky ground, Bisha. We’re watching you. That’s all.” Arsen Murka signed off with a menacing stare.

CHAPTER XXX

The Class Ring

Getting Back to Normal

Two weeks after the VORTEX attack, Merrick’s driveway had two large trailers parked, supporting the ten Federal marshals assigned to protect the manor. Anne contacted Jankowicz Construction, a company with a recent project canceled due to financing problems, and they were happy to repair the mansion's damage. The stairwells required concrete work and painting, while the third floor had bullet damage, requiring painters and finish carpenters. While most of the gunfire was on the third floor and stairwells, the Russian hit team did not harm Jane’s bedroom or office.

To accommodate the extra Federal Marshalls, John had the beds in the guest house placed in short-term storage and leased several bunk beds. Anne hired a temporary cook to live in one of the mansion’s guest bedrooms, providing meals for the family and guards.

Anne shipped the Great Room’s bloodstained sofa back to the manufacturer in North Carolina to fix the upholstery where Jane had fired a test shot from one of the Russians’ weapons. A call from the White House shortened the turn-around time, and the repaired sofa was in transit back to Chicago.

Jane stayed in the hospital for three weeks. After her knife wound had healed sufficiently, Anne convinced Jane to allow Dr. Michael Hirschman, one of Chicago’s top plastic surgeons and an expert on scar revision, to operate on her left breast. Anne reasoned that while a surgeon cannot permanently remove a scar, Hirschman could make the mutilation less noticeable.

Jane had health insurance from her FBI employment, but her policy does not cover plastic surgery. Hirschman wanted to do the operation for free, but Anne and John Merrick insisted on paying cash. Jane, wanting to repay the Merricks monthly, argued unsuccessfully with Anne and John.

“You’re family, and we take care of our children,” was the refrain. Jane knew she wouldn’t win a debate with a house full of lawyers.

Upon Jane’s release from the hospital, Dr. Hirschman agreed to allow her to rehab at the Merrick mansion. Anne Merrick hired a nurse from a temp service to care for Jane for a couple of weeks. Eventually, Hirschman removed Jane’s stitches, and the swelling from her plastic surgery subsided.

Jane requested a meeting with Special Agent in Charge D’Marcus Mason and Agent Carolina Hendon, and they met privately in Jane’s third-floor office.

“Jane, how are you feeling?” Carolina said.

*“I am well. Dr. Hirschman removed my plastic surgery stitches, and the swelling has gone down nicely. I asked Anne Merrick to allow me to pay monthly for the cost, but she adamantly refused. She is a very determined woman.”*

“We are well aware of that, Jane. Anne has dressed me down several times, so she is not singling you out. What did you want to talk to us about?”

*“I want to design and build a device that I think will be useful to the FBI and, more immediately, to the Merrick family. I’m thinking of a realistic-looking high school class ring with a piezoelectric transducer, a tiny supercapacitor, and a computer that could connect to the nearest free WiFi and transmit its location back to the FBI.*

*In other words, you tap or push the ring on any hard surface, and if it’s near WiFi, it will signal the FBI where the person is, approximately.”*

Agent Hendon, could you explain, in layman’s terms, what she is proposing?”

“Sir, most WiFi systems are protected by a two-factor authentication system. You log on with a username and password, and it sends you a code via text message to complete the process. However, many WiFi locations don’t have this protection. McDonald’s restaurants provide free WiFi service that doesn’t require a password. Many other businesses offer free WiFi without authentication. The FCC has information about all these WiFi setups. Jane’s ring could connect to those sites and send the detected location back to FBI Headquarters.”

“Carolina, what is this pizza thing Jane mentioned?”

“Agent Mason, she meant piezoelectric transducer. It’s a disk that, if you squeeze it, generates electricity. Jane, what piezoelectric transducer do you intend to use?”

*“Acoustic guitars use a disk-like piezo transducer underneath the bridge to record the instrument’s sound. I can shave it down to ring sized.”*

“Again, Agent Hendon, what is a supercapacitor?”

“Capacitors are a common electronic component; they store electric charge. Supercapacitors store much more electricity for their size. Jane’s probably planning a tiny voltage regulator to use the stored charge to power the microcomputer doing the WiFi work.

Agent Mason, you must understand that this device has no battery that can run out. It simply converts mechanical energy to electricity.

Jane, did you breadboard this idea?”

*“Yes. I set up WiFi on a Raspberry Pi Super board similar to a McDonald's system – no login required. My trial circuit successfully read the WiFi and determined its location.”*

“Agent Mason, this is a good idea. I can envision a version placed inside the heel of a shoe. As you walk, it will find an unprotected WiFi and transmit its location back to FBI Headquarters.”

“Jane, what do you need to get started?” Agent Mason said.

*“I’ll need a state-of-the-art metallic 3-D printer to create a realistic class ring and hold the electronics. A GE Additive printer suitable for this project would cost $250,000.”*

“All right, I’ll lease or procure a GE Metal Printer for our Chicago FBI Headquarters. Let’s keep Jane’s project secret. Jane, you make prototypes for the Merrick family, yourself, and several for me and other FBI personnel. If you get a working prototype, I’ll see that the CIA has a look at it and use one of its manufacturing facilities to produce it in bulk.”

Don’t Know When To Quit

Imer Bisha took his place at the Chicago Cyber Engineering secure meeting room table. Dr. Morton was in New York City for a computer security symposium. Valmir Peco, newly appointed by Arsen Murka as Chicago’s new Kryetar or Underboss, took his place at the table. Two other mob employees joined the discussion.

“I want to discuss the situation with this Merrick family and the Angel Bitch,” Imer said. “As a family, we have never allowed an opponent or other gang to do so much damage to us without retaliation.”

“Imer,” Valmir said, “Arsen Murka made it clear that we should take no action against the Chicago Angel or the Merrick family. You want to ignore his directive?”

“Maybe it’s time to consider replacing Murka as the Boss of the North American family,” Imer said. “He’s seventy-four, starting to show signs of dementia, and spends a lot of time taking boner pills and hooking up with our escorts. Most of his ideas concerning getting back at this Angel bitch and the Merrick family have been spectacular failures. So, is it time to consider new leadership?”

Valmir, Yilka's replacement, stared at Imer for a few uncomfortable seconds. Widening his eyes, he spoke slower and more methodically.

“I wouldn’t be honest if I didn’t admit that I’ve thought of the very thing a time or two. However, let me say a few positive things about the boss, Arsen Murka. He has been very clever with his movements around New York City. He avoids city surveillance cameras and dresses in clothing that hides his face. It’s my understanding that the Feds don’t have a single photograph of him. Murka has been very generous to everybody in the family. I received a lavish Christmas bonus from him last year. You have to give him credit, Imer, for supporting all your new business endeavors.

“He may change his mind. There’s nothing wrong with planning a possible retaliation now.”

“OK, fair enough,” Valmir said. “What do you have in mind?”

Bisha used his tablet computer to cast a recent photograph of Jane Doe 413.

“It will be tough to get at this Angel bitch. She travels exclusively by helicopter with two or more Federal Marshalls guarding her. Likewise, John and Anne Merrick travel under heavy guard. Not so for Veronica Merrick, who flits around the Court Buildings in Chicago like a hummingbird. We could knock her out if we could catch her in a bathroom.”

“And how do you plan to do that with her guard waiting outside in the hallway?” Valmir said. “A single shout from her would bring the bodyguard in a flash.”

“With this little beauty,” Imer said, holding up what looked like a tiny perfume spritzer.”

“What’s that?”

“I did some trading with the Russian Mafia. This spray device is Belkavod, a new Russian bioweapon designed to incapacitate the victim immediately. It works instantly and renders the person unconscious for three hours. When they wake up, the victim is unharmed.”

“Then what?” Valmir said.

“We dump her in a maintenance cart and sneak her out of the building. I know a wealthy Sheik in Saudi Arabia who loves voluptuous blonds. We send her to his desert oasis, earn some money, and enjoy the knowledge that the Shiek will torture her for a few months before he grows tired of her and buries her in the sand."

“This won’t be cheap, Imer. We’ll have to use our chop shop to get a vehicle we can disguise as a Chicago city maintenance vehicle. We’ll also have to procure uniforms, carts, and other accouterments that city maintenance staff use.”

“I’ll provide the funds from my personal bank account,” Imer said. “Obviously, secrecy is paramount in this operation. No one must know what we’re up to, so mum’s the word.”

“OK, Boss. I’ll get started,” Velmir said as Imer Bisha headed for the door.

CHAPTER XXX

Entertaining Guests

Dinner with the Merricks

A month after the VORTEX attack, the Merrick mansion had returned to some semblance of normality. Anne started inviting guests that Jane knew, hoping to get her to socialize with people she loved and respected. Anne welcomed Colby and Tilly Cottrel for dinner; the only problem was Jane’s penchant for techno-speak with her former bosses. Anne looked at her son with a facial expression suggesting, “What are they talking about.”

While Anne knew Shelly DiMarco from their interactions with the Chicago Police, their Angel experience brought them together as friends. On afternoons when Shelly didn't have psychology classes and Jane was working from home, Anne occasionally invited Shelly to the mansion for lunch. Jane often complained about Agent Carolina Hendon's rigidity and her insistence that Jane should delegate some of her work instead of trying to do everything herself. Shelly was adept at helping Jane understand the complexities of the Washington mindset, particularly regarding the frustrations caused by a massive federal workforce with a top-heavy management structure. Shelly also pointed out that Chicago, being in the Midwest, is known for its independence.

The Sensei

A more stimulating guest for dinner one Saturday evening was Jane’s Sensei, Master Yong Wu of the Gold Dragon Wushu School. Since the Albanian syndicate was still a danger for Jane, Special Agent Alicia Simmons secretly made the overture to Master Wu and arranged transportation in an unmarked vehicle.

Master Yong Wu arrived with his wife, Clarice, and their three preadolescent children: daughters Liena and Mei, and son Bo. Anne hired their neighbor’s two teenage daughters to babysit the Wu children, organizing swimming and games to amuse them after dinner. John, Anne, Mac, and Jane guided Yong and Clarice to the Great Room for an after-dinner conversation.

“That was a lovely dinner, Anne,” Yong Wu said, “I occasionally order General Tso’s Chicken from my nearby restaurants, but did you know it’s a strictly American concoction? You would never find it in a restaurant in China.”

“Oh, Yong, stop it!” Clarise playfully poked her husband in the ribs. “Anne, it was a lovely dinner, and the children adored it.”

“We’re so happy to have you here, Master Wu,” John said. “In a roundabout way, we owe our lives to you. Your training of Jane enabled her to save our lives multiple times, and thus, we are in your debt.”

“You honor me with those words, John. The Wushu discipline emphasizes defending oneself and others from harm and evil. However, the credit must go to Jane. She is my most accomplished and successful student.”

The group pulled some chairs around the granite coffee table.

“Master Wu,” Mac said, “please tell us about the history of the Wushu discipline and how it is taught today?”

“Well, Wushu simply translates to ‘martial arts’ in English. Wushu is deeply connected to Chinese culture and history. Historians can trace Wushu’s origins back thousands of years. Its purpose in the early years centered on self-defense and warfare.

“As time passed, Wushu started integrating Chinese philosophy, spirituality, and aesthetics elements into the craft. The various dynasties and geographical regions all contributed to the Wushu discipline.

“It’s important to understand that in addition to learning to defend oneself and others, Wushu strives to improve physical fitness, discipline, and mental focus. We focus on morality, emphasizing such qualities as integrity, humility, respect, perseverance, and harmony.

“Today, Wushu is also a competitive sport. There are tournaments worldwide that demonstrate the beauty and precision of the Wushu movements. One of my former students operates the Wan Dojo, which specializes in preparing for these competitions. I concentrate on the self-defense necessary to survive in a dangerous and unjust world.

“In Chinese Wushu schools, students call the instructor Sifu or Shifu, which translates to Master in English. There are some schools where the instructor is known as Coach, but I prefer the title Master.”

“Master Wu,” Anne said, “can you speak about the dangerous and unjust world you believe we live in?”

“Happy to, Anne. However, you might perceive some of my comments concerning the wealth disparity in the United States as a criticism of you and your family. Let me say that I have often referred people who are having legal problems, such as divorce, spousal abuse, or eviction, to your Merrick, Dawson, and Brant Legal Aid office in Chinatown. Nonetheless, while you and your husband have done much to help the poverty-stricken in my Chinatown, it’s been in the news that your company is worth over a billion dollars, and we are sitting in a lavish mansion tonight.

“The control of the country by the rich has been inexorable since the Trump years. Being rich used to mean being a millionaire, but now we have multi-billionaires and in a few cases, trillionaires. The super-rich owning this country make more money than they can possibly spend.

“This leads to two things: grotesque profligate spending and mischief. We read every day about the hedge fund manager who owns seven homes, such as one overlooking Central Park in New York City, an oceanfront mansion in the Hamptons, a ski Chalet in Colorado, a vineyard in Tuscany, and so on. This person occupies only one of these homes at any given time. Added to this excess are the extravagant yachts, personal jet aircraft, and doting staff catering to their whims while many homeless souls sleep on city streets.

“We live in a society that is now a zero-sum game. Someone must have less to allow this. From my Chinatown to the South Side, an inordinate number of souls fret daily over their ability to feed and shelter their families.”

Jane raised her hand to enter the discussion, and all patiently waited for her to type her contribution.

*“America is now a greed-driven society. Humans have millenniums of experience teaching that working together to hunt and gather food is more successful than going it alone. Somehow, the billionaires who now own the government and the media have managed to vector most of the Gross Domestic Product to themselves. We no longer work together to better ourselves. Now, no matter how hard we work, it’s never enough. We’re not a Democracy anymore; we’re an Oligarchy.”*

“I agree with Jane,” Master Wu said. “The United States is a democracy in name only. The Senate is the least democratic in that a cabal of sparsely populated states rule the roost. The arcane filibuster rule guarantees that the Senate must have sixty votes to pass any law. Likewise, the Speaker of the House can refuse to bring a progressive bill to the House floor.

“The corruption of the Supreme Court that started twenty-five years ago has continued. That Court can overturn any law or create new ones. To use an old expression, ‘They know who buttered their bread.’

“Look what this has wrought: gerrymandering, reducing polling places in minority districts, and support for States creating Secret Police forces and Militias. These are all the ingredients for an autocratic government.

Jane raised her hand to join the discussion again.

*“We have all witnessed the rise of the humanoid robot, such as the Tesla Optimus or the Metabot. These devices should be a godsend, working in the sewers, cleaning the streets, mopping, and vacuuming buildings. Why aren’t these amazing inventions reducing our work week so we may have more leisure time, more time to educate ourselves, be with family, and learn new things?*

*“The answer must be that the monetary savings from the labor of these devices go exclusively to the rich. In one of those old Batman movies, the jewel thief Selina Kyle whispered in Bruce Wayne’s ear that a revolt was coming, and how could he live so large and leave so little for the rest of us?”*

“A nation built on greed cannot endure,” Master Wong said. “Eventually, we will have an American version of Bastille Day.”

“We must work together to avoid a Bastille Day, Master Wu,” Anne said. “The problem with the French Revolution was that the revolutionaries could not run a government, so eventually, a strongman arrived to take over. In that case, Napoleon's reign was disastrous for France. Sadly, the United States, in its current polarized configuration, has a plethora of potential Napoleons.

“My daughter Veronica is married to a hedge fund manager, Peter Fieldstone,” John said. “He’s not here, but I suspect he would defend himself by pointing out that his hedge fund invests in carbon-free, sustainable industries that don’t contribute to global warming. He’d also emphasize that wealth is a prime driver for innovation, imagination, and out-of-box thinking required to develop new products and industries.

“I’d also point out that Peter and Veronica own only one home, as does my son Ben and his wife, Wilhelmina. To be honest, of course, these homes are worth over a million dollars.

“Anne and I acquired this home, Master Wu, as part of a court settlement against a client who defaulted on his legal bills from our firm. We have improved the property as our law firm prospered. However, this is our only home, and the same applies to all our three children. We utilize hotels and B&Bs for our vacations.”

Master Wu glanced at Jane, then took several deep breaths before continuing.

“You must understand, John and Anne, that I intend no disrespect to you or your family. Applying the Wushu morality standards that I delineated earlier: integrity, humility, respect, perseverance, and harmony, I would see you in compliance with those virtues.”

“If I may join the conversation,” Clarice said, “my husband is very passionate, something that I love dearly about him. But I would like to express some positive things about our life here in Illinois.”

“Please do, Clarice,” Anne said, her eyes sparkling with anticipation.

“While we have a gun violence problem in our state, at least the state government doesn’t encourage violence like some Southern states do with their Stand Your Ground laws. In Florida and Texas, driving into the wrong driveway by accident or approaching the wrong vehicle in a parking lot can get you murdered. The killer goes Scott-free because he was afraid and ‘stood his ground.’

“The bullying tactics against minorities by police forces in other states don’t happen in Chicago, thanks to the efforts of Police Superintendent Green, who has made fair treatment of everybody his primary goal during his tenure. With Green’s influence, the Illinois Legislature passed a law dictating that a policeman dismissed for unlawful violence cannot hold another police or security job in the state. Most of these bad cops must leave Illinois to get law enforcement or security employment.

“The number of homeless in Chicago discourages me. The rich, whose attitude seems to be ‘Let them eat cake’ block proposals to build housing for the indigent population and maintain these facilities with humanoid robots,

“So, the question is: how can we, the six of us, change the direction in which the United States is moving—towards a Russian-style oligarchy? If I may be so bold, John and Anne, have you considered entering national politics, such as running for Senator or Governor?”

“I’d have to defer to my wife on that one, Clarice,” John said. “My skill is swaying juries, thinking on my feet without a script. Anne has that same skill but is also very adept at reading prepared text from a teleprompter. Since State Attorney General Della Baxter is planning to run for Governor next year, it would be better for Anne to run for Senator.”

The conversation paused as all eyes turned to Anne Merrick. Her facial expression morphed from surprise to a more demure smile. Jane could sense Anne’s mind at work, weighing the pros and cons to deliver the best answer.

“I suppose I should be flattered, Clarice. But let’s not get ahead of our skis here. We still have an Albanian mob out there plotting our demise. To go on a campaign trail would provide too many opportunities to assassinate us.

“I will admit some interest in politics, but my son Mac, the Chicago Police, and the FBI must first identify, charge, and incarcerate this Albanian Shqiptare criminal syndicate. Then we can talk about getting more righteous and moral people into the government.”

“A fascinating and uplifting conversation,” Master Wu said. “Let’s stop on this high note and check how the children are doing.”

CHAPTER XXX

The Tracking Device

Show and Tell

Jane requested a meeting with Special Agent in Charge D’Marcus Mason and Agent Carolina Hendon, and they met privately in Mason’s office.

“Jane, how are you feeling?” Carolina said.

“I am well. Dr. Hirschman, who did my scar revision operation, removed my plastic surgery stitches, and the swelling has gone down nicely. I asked Anne Merrick to allow me to pay monthly for the cost, but she adamantly refused. She is a very determined woman.”

“We are well aware of that, Jane. Anne has dressed me down several times, so she is not singling you out. What did you want to talk to us about?”

“I want to design and build a device that I think will be useful to the FBI and, more immediately, to the Merrick family. I’m thinking of a realistic-looking high school class ring with a piezoelectric transducer, a tiny supercapacitor, and a computer that could connect to the nearest free WiFi and transmit its location back to the FBI.

In other words, you tap or push the ring on any hard surface, and if it’s near WiFi, it will signal the FBI where the person is. Approximately, of course.”

Agent Hendon, could you explain, in layman’s terms, what she is proposing?”

“Sir, most WiFi systems are protected by a two-factor authentication system. You log on with a username and password, and it sends you a code via text message to complete the process. However, many WiFi locations don’t have this protection. Mcdonald's restaurants provide free WiFi service that doesn’t require a password. Many other businesses offer free WiFi without authentication. The FCC has information about all these WiFi setups. Jane’s ring could connect to those sites and send the detected location back to FBI Headquarters.”

“Carolina, what is this pizza thing Jane mentioned?”

“Agent Mason, she meant piezoelectric transducer. It’s a disk that, if you squeeze it, generates electricity. Jane, what piezoelectric transducer do you intend to use?”

“Acoustic guitars use a disk-like piezo transducer underneath the bridge to record the instrument’s sound. I can shave it down to ring-sized.”

“Again, Agent Hendon, what is a supercapacitor?”

“Capacitors are a common electronic component; they store electric charge. Supercapacitors store much more electricity for their size. Jane’s probably planning a tiny voltage regulator to use the stored charge to power the microcomputer doing the WiFi work.

Agent Mason, you must understand that this device has no battery that can run out. It simply converts mechanical energy to electricity.

Jane, did you breadboard this idea?”

“Yes. I set up WiFi similar to a Mcdonald's system on a Raspberry Pi board – no login required. My trial circuit successfully read the WiFi and determined its location.”

“Agent Mason, this is a good idea. I can envision a version placed inside the heel of a shoe. As you walk, it will find an unprotected WiFi and transmit its location back to FBI Headquarters.”

“Jane, what do you need to get started?” Agent Mason said.

“I’ll need a state-of-the-art metallic 3-D printer to create a realistic class ring and hold the electronics. A GE Additive printer suitable for this project would cost $250,000.”

“All right, I’ll authorize procurement of the GE Metal Printer to be installed at our Chicago FBI Headquarters. Let’s keep Jane’s project secret. Jane, you make prototypes for the Merrick family, yourself, and several for myself and other FBI personnel. If you get a working prototype, I’ll see that the CIA has a look at it and use one of its manufacturing facilities to produce it in bulk.

Special Agent in Charge D’Marcus looked somewhat perplexed as Jane finished her presentation on the class ring tracking device. Looking across the table at the Department’s electronics expert, Pietrina Cerrone, his icy stare intensified.

“Pietrina, can you explain in simple language what Jane just described? Understand that my background is in Law and Police work.”

“Sir, Jane has described the design of a tracking device disguised as a high school class ring. Her invention doesn’t have a battery. Instead, a piezoelectric strip converts pressure, such as pushing the ring’s band against the arm of a chair, into electricity, which it then stores in a tiny supercapacitor. This harvested energy powers a low-power microcomputer that looks for WiFi signals. If it detects the WiFi signal, it checks its on-chip database to see if it has the login details. Using that information, it does a quick transmission back to FBI Headquarters identifying the approximate location of the class ring.”

Looking at the room’s flat-screen display showing the always smiling Agent Carolina Hendon conferencing in from Washington, Agent Mason was still trying to grasp the significance of Jane’s invention.

“Agent Hendon, we have an app that, when we call any of our agents, will reveal their GPS coordinates even if they don’t answer their phones. Isn’t that good enough?”

“Agent Mason, if the bad guys want to put an essential witness on ice, they’d first get the target’s iPhone and slip it into a Faraday Bag. If we keep Jane’s invention secret, the Class Ring tracker will give us a general location in a city environment, accurate to maybe 200 feet. Jane has built 20 prototypes; we have six here in Washington. I’ve run tests here, and it works pretty well.

“My programming team has assisted Jane with the on-chip software and the support app. I’ve got the CIA Special Electronics Group designing equipment to mass produce this device. Secrecy is paramount here, Agent Mason. In conclusion, this is just the out-of-box innovation we have come to expect from Jane.”

Special Agent in Charge D’Marcus Mason turned his head to look at Jane. She responded by tilting her head slightly and flashing her megawatt smile.

"Jane, ensure that you fit yourself and the Merrick family with these rings; we’ll replace them with the fancier versions when available.